

From Democracy to Hyperdemocracy
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Some years ago I began to notice that during question period following public speeches, otherwise rational human beings who were clearly arguing for opposing points of view were increasingly inclined to cite “democracy” in their defence. This was very disturbing, as everyone could see that this venerable word was only being introduced because certain debaters were hoping to make it impossible for opponents to reject a claim without also rejecting democracy – something they knew to be a grievous heresy these days.

So there it was. Before my very eyes, “democracy” was becoming a word of ill-repute - something picked up and used vigorously for the advantages of the moment, then dropped without further consideration. I soon began to wonder how this cheapening of the word might be linked to the cheapening of the underlying concept, and how this in turn might be connected to another question. Namely, why do we Westerners, who have historically celebrated a self-reliant individualism within our local communities, and just as defiantly deplored state collectivism, now celebrate both of these things in a new and paradoxical form of democracy someone has aptly described as “libertarian socialism”? This is a very recent conception of democracy, barely a half-century old, under which individuals have come to believe they have all the rights and states have all the duties.

What has struck this writer at least, is that despite its inherent contradictions, this arguably anti-democratic form has not only become widely accepted as normal, but the radicals who have worked so hard to bring it about did so in something best described as the “language of democracy.” This language has four key terms: “freedom,” “equality,” “rights,” and “choice”, that become especially insidious whenever they are emptied of all traditional content and limitation. For example, our ancient body of common law limits free speech through slander and libel provisions; society is laced with rational inequalities such as different laws and standards for different ages, genders, and abilities; the rights of some are always limited by the obligations they impose on society; and all choices are vigorously limited and constrained by laws, customs, and the rights of others. Once pried loose from their history, so to speak, these four words easily fall to the service of political radicals who use them to form a kind of camouflage or code that must be deciphered carefully before we have any hope of understanding what is being attempted, as distinct from what is being expressed.

The contradictions inherent in the term “libertarian socialism” alone tell us that we are living vulnerably in an intellectually confused time, for a people undisturbed by the manifest incoherence of its own political philosophy is obviously ripe for manipulation. Accordingly, it no longer makes sense to use the terms “democracy” and “freedom” interchangeably, as we have always done. When people felt strong in their communities, were more fiercely

independent, and even longed to be free of overbearing government, the two words indeed seemed the same because people thought it natural to use the former to acquire and defend the latter. But the words are used quite differently now. Although ostensibly a free people, we tend to use the word “democracy” for the opposite reason: to demand increased government services, security, and regulation as a right. But this ultimately turns democracy against freedom because every tax, service and regulation constitutes some kind of limit on our personal action and responsibility. For this reason it is time to separate the terms and determine their true nature.

Once we do this, what becomes immediately apparent is that democratic instruments are really only value-neutral tools used to decide the distribution of policy and power. Just as a shovel can be used to dig a foundation for a house, or to beat someone to death, the tools, and especially the language of democracy, can be used to create a virtuous, free, and good society, or an oppressive, and very bad one. In quiet moments I worry that we North Americans have been flirting with the latter category for some time, and that the refinement and vigour of any society have little to do with democracy, or with the act of digging, and everything to do with the underlying moral and political culture, or what is dug. This is merely to restate a warning from the powerfully insightful thinker Irving Babbitt, who early in the last century, in his book *Democracy and Leadership*, warned that civilization can only be created by an act of the will, but if we decide to let it drift, the direction is inevitably downward.

When it comes to directing civilization, there are only two mutually incompatible methods available. You must use either the state’s coercive power, or the voluntary authority of civil society. In other words, you can shape a country by using the direct force of law as deployed through the agencies of the state, or by using the myriad indirect moral and social forces that are to be found naturally in the various spontaneous groupings of civil society. But you cannot successfully use both, because the two means rest on opposing principles. The state must control, but civil society must be free to self-regulate, and accordingly may easily undermine the power and control of the state at any time. That is why all centralizing states, although they may pay lip-service to the grandeur of a free society, inevitably engage it in a struggle for control.

Nevertheless, even though these two options are so clearly different in character and consequence, they are very easily confused. The real-world meaning of the difference between them hits home most deeply when we learn that in the dreadful twentieth century there were close to three times as many citizens killed by their own governments as there were soldiers killed by each other in all that century’s terrible wars. This is simply astonishing, and it tells us that although governments may routinely nourish and protect their citizens, they may just as routinely kill them for what outsiders consider very flimsy reasons.

Social groups, however, present no such mortal danger. They must rely on persuasion, and moral reward and stigma to get their way. The state may order you to pay unreasonable taxes,

jail you for activism, or hang you for crimes. But it is simply unimaginable for any agency of civil society even to speak this way. Access to legal power is the bottom line, and today neither the church, the family, a political party, nor any other voluntarily-formed organization of civil society has such access.

On the other hand, everyone knows that even though our parents, our teachers, our minister, our boss, or our team captain, and so on, cannot jail us if we disobey them, we nevertheless may find ourselves in painful moral or social handcuffs for doing so. This sort of omnipresent authority, to which most of us happily subscribe as members of particular communities, is held over us in varying degrees most of our lives. We may be compelled by external law to obey power; but we compel ourselves by an inner impulse or law to obey authority. They are very different. The first is a force we cannot resist, the second a force to which we give ongoing assent or refusal, and then deal with the consequences.

In the past, the difference between power and persuasion was obvious to everyone. But in our modern embrace of indiscriminate liberty this distinction has been lost, with the result that today our tendency is to think of all forms of authority as equally oppressive and capable of generating the same emotional temperature. This confusion has a very unhappy result because it supplies restless political radicals who purport to defend the people, with an endless array of complaints against even the common moral and social bonds that the vast majority obviously accept and support. Most harmful of all, they do not see that to destroy such bonds is to destroy the people's best defence against real power. For history shows repeatedly that the moment states sense resistance from entire communities, they tend at first to back away. Then, they aggressively seek to reorganize civil society in a way that will slowly transfer the allegiance and dependency individuals feel for society, to the state itself. In a sense, they outbid society for the allegiance of its citizens... with their own money. In modern states, this has resulted in a slow but relentless decomposition or atomization of society. When this is done for explicit ideological reasons, the transformation may be achieved extremely quickly, as has been the case with Sweden and Canada. When it is done primarily for reasons of bureaucratic efficiency or when the political climate at the top is increasingly radical but the constitutional configuration on which it operates is fragmented, as under American federalism, then the transformation is much slower - but in the end just as destructive of civil society.

It happens that the left has always understood the difference between these two methods for establishing a political order, and it always seeks to use the more powerful state as a proxy for its will, against which it tolerates no opposition from what it sees - quite correctly - as directly competitive forms of social, religious, and family authority. These it naturally seeks to dilute, eliminate, or replace as it sets about transferring citizen allegiance to more comforting and secure government programs and services. In this respect, the naïve motive of simple bureaucratic efficiency, and centralization for reasons of ideological purity, may dovetail powerfully.

Real conservatives, in contrast, generally abhor overweening government, but welcome plenty of social and moral authority in all its customary and traditional forms. That is because they value a free but binding civil order over the coercive orderings of the state. Foremost among the many institutions they esteem and defend are religion and the family, and everything associated with them, and aside from the true conservative's personal interest in these institutions, he is also aware that they serve as inexpensive –and importantly, non-coercive - forms of crowd control. The result of these very different perceptions and preferences, is that in their strategic effort to repulse the left's persistent reaching for state power, conservatives have always sought to fortify the many alternative forms of social and moral authority that are natural to human communities.

And this is where the confusion begins, as so many who call themselves conservatives today do so simply because they happen to favour free markets. However, it doesn't take long to see that this sort of conservative usually has very little interest in, and may even openly disdain the natural forms of civil authority. In this respect he is more like a modern liberal or a libertarian. To preserve this distinction, such people sometimes call themselves "fiscal" conservatives to indicate that they will fight for freedom in the economic arena, and they believe all moral and social matters "should be left up to the individual." In other words, along with their modern liberal counterparts they embrace all the ideals of the autonomous, freely-choosing individual, and only part company with liberalism when it favours the broad use of state powers to correct society or to make things artificially equal. Simply put, these conservatives want the state to stay out of all transactions of private life, especially economic ones, and they proudly imagine their "free-market individualism" to be the best argument and defence against state power.

Alas, it has turned out to be the worst.

For society (as distinct from the state) is nothing if not a consequence of myriad individual and private matters and transactions, in the very practical sense that all things moral, and all transactions whether moral or economic obviously involve more than one person, and so in their very expression they become public, and no longer private. That is why to speak of all things individual and private as off limits to others must be seen as an attempt to quarantine the very concept of society. It is to assume that the moral code and authority of society, all civility, manners, and decorum, simply do not exist, have no reality, and cannot affect us personally unless we ourselves choose them into existence. The result is a political landscape in which there is only the state and autonomous individuals, and nothing between. It is by taking this sort of refuge in an assumed sanctity of the individual that this kind of conservative runs straight into the arms of the nanny state. That is because even when it is not ideologically driven, the modern state simply finds it more efficient to dissolve, or to preserve in form but legally disempower in substance, the myriad kinds of voluntary authority it considers so annoying and obstructive. In so doing, it is happy to replace them with a mass of autonomous individuals silly enough to crow

with a kind of deluded moral superiority that their conduct is nobody's business but their own. This is the stuff of political control. And in a nutshell, it is also the psychological condition-precursor for the transition from organic democracy, to hyper democracy.

For all its failings, the older organic style was deeply rooted in the idea that sovereignty must be located in the whole community, in the bonds of civil society from which both government and the individual spring - the first to serve that society, and the second to nurture and protect it. Perhaps G.K. Chesterton put it simplest when he said that the "first principle" of democracy is our understanding that "the essential things in men are the things they hold in common, not the things they hold separately." Which is to say that not long ago democracy was held to have a group meaning, and not an individual one.

In order to protect civil society from government excesses, those living under this earlier form clung for dear life to the distinction between "power" and "authority" outlined above. Authority for them was inherent in the very nature of free institutions, especially in the natural family. We need to be free precisely so that we may bind ourselves voluntarily to some social or moral or familial order of our choosing. But outside all this, like some sort of monster lurked the power of an alien *Imperium* known as government, or the state, or a monarch, or despot, as the case might be; an unavoidable necessity, perhaps, but always something deemed parasitical by nature, potentially dangerous, and therefore to be closely controlled and limited.

But what a difference now. Our modern hyper democracy rests on a contrary assumption never seen before in human history. Namely, that sovereignty and democratic right are no longer located in the people, in the whole community, but have descended to autonomous individuals. Once this belief settles in, the natural result is an avalanche of newly-invented democratic rights and claims advanced by individuals or groups of them with like interests. Most of these attacks are aimed like guns not at an alien government the people wish to keep at bay, as in the past, but rather against the traditions, institutions and moral authority of their own civil society – which is to say, at ourselves and the bonds of community. In this scenario, the new *imperium* itself ends up providing the ammunition and firing the guns at society by proxy through its courts, tribunals, and officials.

Here is one man's story about how this strange thing has happened, step by step. Organic democracy of the society-first, Christian-based sort, so cherished in the Western world through the middle of the last century, was a child of the Reformation, and it unquestioningly assumed a fallen and corruptible humanity. As God is good, who else could be responsible for evil but Man? That's why this may accurately be called a "Sinful Man" model. It rests on the conviction – one pretty much supported by the evidence of human history – that absent the necessary institutional impediments and moral controls, most people will tend to fall into selfishness, corruption, weakness, and even, some of us, into real evil. Such a belief system relies on three

interdependent understandings. That there must be a ruling and perfect God above, the natural law within, and a firm moral community rooted in the Classical and Christian virtues and the Ten Commandments. Concepts of government flow accordingly. And government of any type, but especially the impulsive democratic aspect under such a system, must be guarded, checked, and balanced, because obviously only a carefully filtered expression of the will of any mass of corruptible people ought to be allowed. For it is just common sense that only the wisest people, or the natural aristocracy of such a society ought to legislate, just as only a Captain and officers and not the deckhands ought to guide a ship. This was the underlying ideological basis of the American and Canadian political systems, rooted as they were in this specific understanding of human nature.

But there has always been an alternative, and equally ancient force operating in the West, making the very opposite case. Beginning with a whisper, and growing to a shout these days, it has always protested with a kind of moral outrage against the idea that human beings are inherently corrupt, or sinful. These voices say, “No! In our essence we are pure and perfectible, just as God made us!” Its assumption is that it has never been we, ourselves, who are corrupt, but our messy and imperfect societies, governments, and political representatives. In this attitude we spy that old Garden of Eden vision of an innocent humanity before the Fall. This forms the other half of the deep structure debate between the two formerly religious, but now deeply secular visions of humanity so in evidence in debates over opposing democratic principles even today. This more recent vision, then, forms an opposing “Sinless Man” model of society that cannot be reconciled with its alternative, and so wherever we find it operating as a belief system, we also find “the people” insisting that methods of government must be introduced that allow for more, and more direct expression of their ostensibly faultless will. In effect, they want both society and government to serve their natures, and once this is achieved, all human institutions, it is believed, will become good, just like them. Hence the urgent expectation today is that under such a system just about everything must be controlled directly by the pure will of the people as it exists at any moment, even electronically, if possible, and this will must be unchecked, unmediated, and free from all corrupting restraint. Down with all those who tell us what to do! Why not simply tell ourselves what to do?

It so happens there have been lots of Sinless Man political visions of this sort in our history, mostly of the religious type. But the first modern secular one erupted as a threatening political force only at the end of the Eighteenth century in one distinct form, and soon thereafter, in the middle of the nineteenth century, and in reaction to it, in an opposing form. The first was what we might call a “democracy of the One”, and the second a “democracy of the Many.” The original high priests of these two irreconcilable alternatives, were Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and John Stuart Mill, and I have argued in *The Trouble With Democracy*^[1] that each of them, despite their anti-religious protestations, ended up producing their own deeply mystical concepts of democracy dressed up with secular, rational-sounding labels.

In his *Social Contract*, Rousseau argued (as did his later Canadian acolyte, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau), for the expression of an intangible “General Will” of the people as the purest form of democracy. He imagined a mystical corporate body of all citizens whose individual wills were dissolved into One. We all know the nightmare of totalitarian democracy to which this belief led in the French Revolution (and then in the twentieth century, when this style rose again with a vengeance in the political thinking of Marx, Hitler, and many others). But it was due largely to that first disastrous and embarrassing historical debacle of democracy in France, so warmly embraced in theory by enthusiastic democrats everywhere - and then so abhorred in its terrifying practice - that the long search began for a new and non-collectivist form of democratic polity.

It didn't take long. By the middle of the nineteenth-century, John Stuart Mill had formulated the clearest recipe for an alternative in his little booklet, *On Liberty*. He imagined a polity of millions of authentic, very well-educated, and freely-choosing autonomous selves surprisingly like himself making their way to perfection under a secular and ostensibly neutral rule of law. This form remains the leading democratic ideal of the West, especially in the Anglo-Saxon nations, but it has always existed in a tension with the prior collectivist form. Indeed, the twentieth-century was a kind of terrible battleground for these two conflicting democratic solutions, or ideals. And we know what resulted. The democracy of the One, sometimes called totalitarian democracy, was defeated on the battlefield, but soon afterward many of its collectivist ideals and policies were adopted everywhere, carefully dressed up in our contemporary language for a democracy of the Many, or hyper democracy.

One conclusion that seems inescapable to close observers of the history of democracy is that both these forms are potentially dangerous to the good life because they corrode all natural and spontaneous community, they break down the moral interdependence and authority essential to an ordinary, which is to say a free, civil society. In fact both forms end up specifically targeting civil society as the enemy of democratic freedom. Rousseau's democracy of the One did so by openly attacking it in principle, and from above, in the name of the people. To him, the various forms of moral, social, and religious bonding that produce the interlocking forms of authority normal to free societies were the immediate enemy of the state because any one of them could obstruct its power by defying the General Will of the people.

Mill's alternative democracy of the Many, however, and however much more gradually, soon began its own corrosive and covert attack on civil society from below, this time in the name of “individual rights.” We can see why. Once we begin to believe that democratic right is inherent in the individual, rather than in society, we assume each one of us to have a kind of implicit licence to attack any form of authority that we believe is impeding our “freedom” and “democracy.”

So it seems that both of these expressions of the Sinless Man Model have used the language of democracy, each in its own way, to attack civil society, although from very different motives. And this is easy for them to do because, as I say, this is a language with no fixed content. Its terms are purely abstract, and in order to have a desired effect in the real world they must always be given a particular meaning by some juridical body. That is why so many individuals claiming something on the grounds of a passionately felt but abstract democratic right, prefer in their effort to obtain it to avoid the democratic process altogether. They run to courts and tribunals instead.

So now it is time to explain how, as a result of this long conflict between the two main secular democratic “solutions” tried in the West to date, we have come to rest – quite contentedly, it seems - in our libertarian socialism. For we seem to have ended up neither with Rousseau’s single *corporate body* of the whole self-perfecting people (something we have come to associate with that awful totalitarian business); nor with Mill’s mass of free and autonomous, self-perfecting *individuals* (something we think of as a too-libertarian ideal, and maybe a recipe for anarchy).

Instead, we have produced a synthesis, a new phenomenon I call hyper democracy that centers on a quite paradoxical concept and symbol; namely, that of a *corporate individual*. This suggests that Rousseau has quietly swallowed up Mill. And in a sense that is true. But in effect both have merged into a new and different entity altogether.

The defining features of this new fictional person or, to speak more truly, this quite mystical person now set up as a symbolic control device, are determined, as it happens, not by any democracy of “the people” (an older entity long-since dissolved into constituent individuals), but by the officials and fellow-travellers of the democratic-egalitarian state in their capacities as judges, tribunalists, commissioners, academics, and influential media, who have a stake - often a serious career stake - in determining and then struggling to protect the moral and legal attributes of this newly created symbolic individual who now stands for us all. The long and short of this novel situation is that today, whenever we hear the word “democracy” used to defend individual rights, or the rights of society, we had better question very closely what is meant.

Here is a chart from *The Trouble With Democracy* illustrating just a few of the deep-structure differences in meaning that two people alluding to “society,” the “individual,” or “democracy” may have in such a discussion.

<i>Under Organic Democracy</i>	<i>Under Hyperdemocracy</i>
<i>Conception of Democratic Polity</i>	
Democracy = The people, past, present, and future	Democracy = The people, Now

<i>The Key Value</i>	
Freedom in Community	Equality of autonomous citizens
<i>The Goal of Life</i>	
Virtue, living a good life	Happiness, enjoying Life
<i>Group Interaction</i>	
Highest respect for social and moral obligations	Highest respect for personal choices
<i>Relation of Rights and Obligations</i>	
Obligations and duties primary, rights secondary	Rights primary, obligations and duties secondary
<i>Political vs. Social Unit</i>	
Family the fundamental social unit, the individual the political unit	The individual the fundamental social as well as political unit
<i>The Source of Goodness</i>	
Goodness comes from correcting self	Goodness comes from correcting society
<i>The Democratic Vision</i>	
Democratic politics guided by civic responsibilities: community prior to individual	Democratic politics guided by choosing individual ends: individual prior to community

Within this framework we can see that any two people who make conflicting claims concerning their democratic rights will eventually have them weighed and judged according to the attitude-filtering influence of our new corporate-individual symbol, the legal attributes of which constitute our contemporary political and moral orthodoxy. This orthodoxy, a paradox in itself – for how can an individual be also a collectivity? - is tested hundreds of times each year in the courts, tribunals, and media of North America, and also in the court of public opinion - something largely shaped by these same institutions.

On April 17th, 2002, in one of its many efforts to strengthen this new corporate symbol, the Government of Canada (which each year has that nation's largest advertising and promotion account) ran full-page advertisements in every major daily crowing about the 20th anniversary of Canada's "Charter of Rights and Freedoms." In the middle of the Ad were these words:

*"Freedom of opinion. Freedom of expression. Freedom of religion. Freedom of association.
Freedom of thought.
The Charter. It's ours. It's us."*

Leaving aside for the moment the question whether anyone can produce a reasonable distinction between a "thought," and an "opinion," we can move straight to the heart of the matter, and ask: Is this statement actually true?

For millions of unobservant people it may seem true. But for millions of others, it amounts to

a kind of flattering national lie. It may be a truth or a lie according to where your ideas fit within the orthodoxy I have described that reigns supreme in most Western democracies today. Individual and democratic rights flow accordingly.

For example, as an individual you indeed have freedom of opinion. But you had better express only the politically correct, or orthodox ones. If you attempt to publicly critique, or to win a law case against such things as welfare laws that weaken marriage and society, or the dominion over parliament by judges, or public pandering to homosexual behaviour, or divisive immigration policy, or a criminal-friendly justice system, or government-rationed medicare, or any number of other officially unpopular opinions, you will lose badly. And if you dare to act publicly in ways that offend certain orthodox standards, especially as regards race, so-called sexual orientation, gender, or culture, you have a good chance of being vilified, scolded, and maybe even fined and ordered into a “re-education” program of a kind formerly seen only in countries such as communist China, Cambodia, or Cuba.

The same is true for something called freedom of religion. As an individual you have freedom of religion - as long as you keep your religion private and publicly support only the secular and egalitarian ideals and programs of the state, even though in school, at work, or in public, these may grievously offend your true religious beliefs. In other words, you have freedom of religious belief as long as you do not act upon it. If those beliefs, which may be also those of millions of fellow citizens in a very large faith community conflict with some secular and ostensibly democratic “right” or “freedom” the state holds more holy, then you will most certainly not win your case.

In conclusion, it seems apparent that if we want to restore democracy by reversing the current trend, that is, by making democracy properly corporate again, we had better start speaking a new political language in defence of more venerable ideals. For example, whenever we hear such words as “freedom,” or “choice,” we must insist on a full discussion of the social and moral obligations and duties we owe to each other, and to society. When we hear the word “equality,” we must ask for much more emphasis on such things as merit, earned reward, and just deserts, for it is simply wrong to make unequal things equal by force of the state. When we hear a reference to individual “rights,” we must say: fine, but what about the rights of a decent and ordered civil society, which is our first, last and only defence against government power? When we hear the word “freedom” we should remember Lord Acton’s dictum that we need freedom, not to do what we want, but what we ought. And alas, when we hear the word “democracy,” we must now ask for the precise meaning intended before agreeing to participate in another dialogue of the deaf.

For the one thing most clear is that a century and a half spent narrowing the focus of democracy until it refers only to the rights of a certain carefully defined and controlled symbolic

type of secular and purely autonomous individual, has resulted in a weird hollowing out of our communities, a keenly felt loss of the traditional wholeness and natural authority of civil society. This has left us in a very weakened condition, and vulnerable to ever-increasing state control. For no longer do we have as a buffer, free communities distinguished by the presence of responsible souls proudly living together as independently as possible from the will and the wiles of the state, but rather a troubling collection of disconnected individuals ever more reliant upon that same state for regulations and services we used to provide for ourselves and for each other. We are disconnected because we simply do not care any longer about this decline in our condition, nor whether we share common standards for ourselves or our children. At such a point, we don't have true neighbours any more - and we don't much care about that, either. This result was not unexpected. We were amply warned by many wise people that as things do have to be directed by some power, the state would step into the vacuum left by the absence of shared moral standards and the authority of civil society, and it would do so gladly with boundlessly generous offers to guide and direct, provide and decide, shape, and control.

So the question in concerned minds today is whether the corrosive effects of such a decayed form of democracy can be reversed and its highest and best meaning restored. If there is any hope of this, surely the first step is to stop asking so incessantly only what it is we are permitted to do as individuals, and begin reflecting on what is best for us as a people, that is, not as a collection of autonomous selves, but rather as a living and free society. Such an understanding about how we *ought* to live together, as distinct from how we *want* to live only as individuals, implies an ongoing willingness to sacrifice a bit of our self-interest whenever necessary. Once having accepted this requirement of any true democracy, we then need to stop seeing the state as an expression of society, but rather as a servant of it. And once we have articulated them we need to ceaselessly inform the state as to the meaning of our standards as a society, and what precise distance we want the state to keep from ourselves and the authority of our living communities as we express through them our social and moral being. Only then will be able to reclaim our once flourishing democracy as a true voice of the people, rather than as a cheap barter-house for individual wills. A proper sense of responsible individualism must always be cherished, of course, but only in its right place, and not as a replacement for the well-considered authority of a decent civil society. For although the primary internal function of a well-bonded society is indeed to provide guidelines for essential social and moral control, that is, for how we are to live together, its primary external function is to shelter us from excesses of power. For it is into civil society, and not into the state that we enter and grow as people, and it is civil society, and not the state from which we take and to which we give the meaning of our common life.

^[1]William D. Gairdner, *The Trouble With Democracy* (Toronto: Stoddart, 2001)