

THE PROBLEM OF CONTEMPORARY DEMOCRACY

Robert Corfe

The crisis of contemporary politics stems from the transformation of society and the world of work over the past 60 years, and the failure of parliamentary parties across the political spectrum to keep abreast of these dramatic changes. Political ideologies or those essential theories, which alone form a connecting link between governments and the people whom they rule, or between representatives and their electorates, have failed to progress in tandem with the real or practical world. The great ideologies, or competing theories of good government or justice have become locked into a time-warp of the past. This is a situation already acknowledged by percipient opinion-formers, and it is fully understood by activists of all leading groups – although for obvious reasons they are reluctant to raise it publicly as a discussion topic. It is a problem which has only manifested its existence over the past few decades. It is, therefore, an unprecedented issue which calls for urgent resolution. How has it come about and what is the answer?

It is no mysterious phenomenon. It springs directly from the practical “breakdown” or failure of our democratic system to perform the traditional function to which it was accustomed. Existing politics throughout the modern industrialised world have for two hundred years been dependent on the practical interactions of the left/right divide, and now the justification for such a system is coming to an end. Its rationale is no longer capable of advancing progress. It can no longer deliver the social and other benefits for which it originally came into existence. And yet we still live in a world where the non-existence of the left/right divide continues to make politics unthinkable. This perhaps is the greatest conundrum confronting humankind in the 21st century.

The Hegelian dialectic of progress of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, which Marx interpreted in the materialistic terms of the class struggle,

has long since been accepted across the entire political spectrum as the basis of progress, and as a sound platform for democratic activity. And this is especially the case with confrontational or two-party representative systems, as in Britain or America, which look askance or even a sneer at the participatory systems on the Continent or elsewhere, as not being “properly workable” or “exerting definitive power,” and too liable to indecision, weakness, and the kind of corruption which stems from excessive compromise.

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The Mother of Parliaments is still looked-up to by the nations of the world as the ideal democratic system, with its cross-benches and knockabout style – so different from the “mealy-mouthed muddle and confusion” of the circular-formed chamber. The British or original parliamentary system (and anyway, the latter contention is far from true) is admired for its directness and abrasive candour kept in balance by equable manners and the toleration of difference, as contrasted with the often exclusive parochialism so frequently found in multi-party systems. But the confrontational system is now bankrupt as a mode in advancing the progress of society, or even in maintaining efficient government on a day-to-day basis, since its grounds for confrontation have become a lie, and have degenerated

into a game of pretence and hypocrisy. And this has never been more clearly demonstrated than during the Wednesday Question time sessions of the British House of Commons.

But worse than this has occurred: for the very topics of parliamentary debate have become peripheral to causal problems underlying the real unrecognised issues of our age. These real issues, meanwhile, are questions of little interest to our politicians or elected representatives, since supposedly they have “little mileage,” or are matters which are off their “radar screen,” as they fail to fit within their age-old ideological party frameworks. The same dated framework and discredited intellectual mindset applies equally to those states governed by multi-party or participatory systems of democracy.

Over the past few years innumerable articles have appeared in our leading journals and broadsheets by prominent opinion-formers decrying the barrenness of contemporary political thought, and pondering in mystified wonder how such an intellectual wasteland could exist in a world facing ever-greater crises on many fronts. All these opinion-formers, it seems, are too obtuse to observe and draw conclusions from the consequences of the socio-economic transformation which has changed the advanced industrial world over the past 60 years. The cause for our present ills, if not the answer to their resolution, stares us in the face.

It might even be argued that the task of democratic struggle has already fulfilled the greater part of its purpose in resolving the great questions of social justice and egalitarianism. Furthermore, by those on the left, it might be demonstrated that the leading industrialised economies, in both East and West, are now approaching that crucial historical point when the “proletariat” will take over the means of production, distribution, and the means of exchange, and overthrow the hated forces of oppression. Such a millenarian epoch, however, may come to pass but in a guise far different from the Marxist vision, and the “proletariat” of today’s reality may seem to contradict all the aspirations and appearances so dear to the predictions of traditional Marxism or the followers of socialist ideology. All this, of course, only helps to throw our progressive intellectuals into confusion when confronted by the world of actuality. The truth is that they cannot believe – or refuse to accept – the plain facts as they exist.

Few prognostications of the future are realised as originally imagined or described, and those that materialise most closely, as envisaged by their intelligent inventors, are manifested so differently from the original idea as almost to be unrecognisable. There has emerged in the 21st century a highly heterogeneous class – i.e. heterogeneous in terms of culture, race, religion, attitudes, and in every other aspect – except for one highly significant characteristic. And that single characteristic concerns the underlying economic interests of that class – and when all is said and done, economic interests are the only true defining interests of a class.

As this new class represents the 90%+ majority in any advanced industrial economy, it must therefore present a huge potential threat to the status quo. Its political power, if organised, must therefore be immense. Its possible threat to the financial-industrial establishment and the rigid conservatism of the political system cannot but be overwhelming. On the other hand, its heterogeneity may be seen

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as a divisive factor which defies any attempt at unity or movement towards a course of common cooperation. This new class may be denominated the middle-middle majority, comprising those who have emerged from the cloth-capped proletariat to enjoy a more affluent life-style, to those who have sunk from rare privilege and affluence, to a more modest but comfortable livelihood within two generations, and all those who exist between these two given points.

At first sight, such a mixture of all and sundry could hardly be described as comprising a class of any kind by any stretch of the imagination. Moreover, a glance at their political opinions might further indicate a state of longstanding division and conflict. Whilst many of the upwardly mobile may be assumed to have sufficient compassion for their antecedents to be sympathetic to the left, those who have fallen from a greater height, may be assumed to have a sufficient memory of the past to desire a reversal of their fate.

Both such political tendencies howsoever they may be commonly held, would reflect a reactionary view of the world, both sentimental and unreal. Fortunately, in the enlightened industrial world, the Majority are forward-looking rather than backward-looking, not necessarily through conscious choice, but through the need in facing the facts of survival. Homo sapiens is necessarily adaptable in a social context, and will change through human necessity in harmonising with those around them in maximising their better chances in life.

Whilst those who have bettered their material circumstances, through a mix of personal effort and changing socio-economic conditions, whilst retaining a mindset harking back to an ancestral past may be described as “genetically” fixed within a class-based framework; so likewise may those dreamy sentimentalists who boast about the social status of their parents or grandparents. In the contemporary or real world both such attitudes from the opposite ends of society may be described as pathological in the sense of escapism and failure to meet with their own best needs in present circumstances. Both fail to maximise their opportunities as individuals – or are liable to do so – in the socio-economic world as they find it. Whilst those from a privileged past are often ridiculed by their friends, or sniggered at behind their backs, if not dismissed as “degenerate” because of their fall from grace; those from a proletarian background may simply be dismissed in failing to keep abreast with changes in a progressing world.

These two mindsets, or their variations, may still appear as recurring types amongst political activists within our outdated confrontational parliamentary system, but when they do emerge in their true colours,

they are usually despised even by the majority of their colleagues, the latter who nonetheless attempt to maintain a level-headedness within this failing system. Such persons, as we have described, represent a small minority, but are visible beyond their number from the very fact of their eccentricity or outrageousness.

More common, but hardly less reprehensible, however, are those who have reacted against their past in a more pointed manner in an attempt to repudiate everything which their forebears represented. The most common type falling into such a category is Essex man or woman, i.e. those with usually strong right wing or Thatcherite views, who have given a bad name to the essential value of individualism through callousness or disdain for the disadvantaged and downtrodden. These are people often obsessed with money-making above other priorities, and are unconcerned with how money is made, or the abuses of usury.

They often regard their parents or grandparents with mildly bemused disdain, as those who are “out of touch” with the world, and whose values or opinions are of little consequence for the future. As advocates of meritocracy they were often keen supporters of the New Tory party in the 1980s and 90s, in pursuing an economics which refused to recognise the concept of “society.” At the opposite end of the spectrum are those from a privileged background, who filled with disgust at the bourgeois values of their antecedents, labelled themselves as the new “proletariat” and joined the intelligentsia of the left in promoting class struggle as the only “practical” path towards a more just and egalitarian society. Both these latter types are no less deluded in their grasp of reality than the older type conservatives of both left and right described on previous pages.

The vast majority of people, say 90%, do not fall into any of the four categories outlined above. Instead, they are disillusioned with all parties, and whilst holding their own highly individualistic views, many will nonetheless cast a vote from time to time, either in an attempt to oust a particular party, or because any change in itself is regarded as a good, or because a particular phrase or politician of the moment happens to take their fancy. The majority in the industrialised world are moderate and liberal in their views, and sufficiently pragmatic in their day-to-day lives to meet the world on the terms which the latter dictates. Hence the majority are determinists and few would admit the ability of exerting sufficient free will in fulfilling their deepest aspirations. In the sphere of political or democratic activity this reflects a deep misgiving not only with government but with the financial-industrial infrastructure, the latter dictating its own terms to the former.

Throughout the industrialised world today electoral politics has become a negative rather than a positive activity. That is, we may be empowered to express our disdain for policies and politicians we despise, but we are denied the possibility for expressing our political desires or needs. This is a highly unsatisfactory situation which calls for a scientific explanation. We cannot simply blame our politicians, although the circumstances in which we presently find ourselves may only succeed in calling forth those with second rate minds, or those who are so deficiently percipient we can hardly trust their judgement. In other words, it is argued that those in positions of great power lacking in sufficient knowledge and expertise, or intellectual

understanding, are also those who fail as human personalities through no real fault of their own. They are rather victims of their own tragedy or circumstances, and that is the fate of today’s political elite. The breakdown of democratic government is due to the unseen movement of the tectonic plates shifting the socio-economic system in all directions and affecting every sector of society.

Every epoch of history, for some unknown reason, seems to summon the leaders it deserves, so that in times of stability, prosperity, and success, wise and benevolent leaders emerge to exert an almost omnipotent power; whilst in times of economic failure or rampant chaos and destruction, the stupid and corrupt are always there in positions of leadership. We may rest assured that amongst the sullen politically inactive 90%+ majority of the industrialised economies of the world, there already exists, lying hidden in every nation state, many with the imaginative potential or force of character of a Cavour, a Bismarck, an Atatürk, or a Lee Kuan Yew, to save their peoples in their hour of need.

But such individuals lie dormant and politically inactive for the sound reason that they remain contemptuous of contemporary political life; and instead of soiling their hands or demeaning their reputations through involvement with political parties with discredited and outdated ideologies, they would prefer to put their energies into the spheres of commerce or academia. Hence, they possess an innate intelligence and social awareness which puts the thought of a political career beyond the pale. All this reflects the age-old truth that success breeds success, whilst failure only generates failure, but it raises the assertion from the level of the individual to that of the social system.

These, then, are the major issues facing democracy today throughout the industrialised world.

Robert Corfe is not only a prolific writer on political and socio-economic topics, but is experienced in party political life both locally and on the national level. His successful journalistic career dates from the 1960s, and through extensive study, he has acquired considerable knowledge of the social sciences, history and philosophy. After a long business career in senior management in a manufacturing environment, promoting home-based productivity, and later as a management consultant, he founded the Campaign For Industry in 1987 to confront the damaging tendencies of international finance. Lord Gregson of Stockport was elected President of the association, and for over a decade Corfe wrote many pamphlets on the problems of industry and the question of more widely distributing the assets of wealth. His ten years in Scandinavia, in addition to business travels throughout the world, have given him a broad perspective of the needs of all humanity.

DEMOCRACY AS COLLECTIVE AGENCY

Josiah Ober

Today the word democracy means “majority rule”, a mechanism for aggregating the preferences of individuals holding equal votes. This definition fits modern political institutions. Yet it fails to capture either the original meaning or the potential of democracy as a dynamic system for organizing complex forms of cooperation. The Greek term, *demokratia*, coined in Athens in the late sixth or early fifth century BCE, is a compound of *demos* and *kratos*. Although, in classical Greek, *demos* can indeed mean majority (the non-elite many) and *kratos* can mean rule (domination over others), comparison with other Greek terms for political regime (*aristokratia*, *oligarchia*, etc.) shows that, in the compound *demokratia*, *kratos* meant capacity to do things, and *demos* meant the whole of the citizenry. The original meaning of democracy was “the people’s capacity to do things.” The word expressed the fact of joint agency; it asserted that an extensive “we” could act together to change the world.

Democracy began as a political slogan, akin to “Yes, we can!”

Majority voting is one way that “we, the people” may change things, but classical Athenian democracy was focused less on aggregating preferences than on aggregating – and then aligning and codifying – useful knowledge. Democratic Athenian institutions were devised in the wake of a revolution and refined over six generations. If democracy had failed to deliver the goods, Athens would not have survived in the competitive world of the city-states. While the Athenians made mistakes, they flourished over time because their collective agency was well-informed by distinctive democratic knowledge-management practices. Because the citizen-crowd manifested more wisdom than madness, democratic Athens became the preeminent Greek city-state – rich, powerful, and able to survive crises that doomed its rivals. The emergence of democracy as a system of knowledge organization that enabled ordinary people to do things together transformed Greece and provoked the emergence of political philosophy as a critical enterprise.



The School of Athens Raffaello Sanzio, 1509

We ought never worship uncritically at the altar of antiquity. Classical Athenians deserve censure for imperial arrogance, chattel slavery, and unfair treatment of women and foreigners. Yet, as our world confronts crises of both knowledge and politics, Athens’ expansive conception of democracy demands our attention.

Democracy was once a means of doing important things together, by sharing what was known among diverse persons, across domains of region, class, and enterprise. Is there any reason that tomorrow’s democracy must remain stuck at the cramped level of a mechanism for counting votes?

Josiah Ober is Mitsotakis Professor of Political Science and Classics at Stanford University. His most recent book is *Democracy and Knowledge: Innovation and Learning in Classical Athens* (Princeton University Press, 2009); his current project, a collaboration with other researchers at Stanford and elsewhere, seeks to explain the emergence of diverse forms of cooperation, among humans and other social animals.