

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.

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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?

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