

The Non- and Anti-Democratic in Post-Modernity

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Is, or has, democracy a universal value? Is it based on natural law, which Hugo Grotius (1583–1645) once believed to be indispensable among people and nations with different cultures and interests? If so, we can easily trace the moral foundation of democracy. If not, we may be obliged to admit power politics as the only effective or convenient means to political solutions. Nowadays international law seldom means universal law. Instead, it only means a diplomatic and strategic agreement generally on the basis of national interest and power. Only positive laws seem to be relevant to any rule for mankind in general. Hence democracy is treated as a kind of institution or political legal system, not as a humane mental attitude.

Is or has democracy more than a set of rules based on free election or the principle of majority rule? If democracy could be regarded as the probable and minimum consensus appealing to any people, we should defend it by every means. However, today, no one would be fully confident of its value, generally regarding it as useful and rational, not as an absolutely just principle.

We are requested to distinguish two aspects of democracy: political institution in opposition to despotism, and political belief against any kind of slavery and subordination.

Who will profit from democracy?

The title, 'The Non- and Anti-Democratic', requires some explanation. In fact, those who are anti-populists, hating the notion of the common people or rabble, and those who have aristocratic minds, will dislike democratic procedures. But, at the same time, I do not mean here by 'non-democracy' or 'anti-democracy' a tyrannical state or autocracy, the military-industry complex, one party rule, actions in God's name, etc., all of which are evidently anti-democratic. The meaning of 'post-modernity' I will suggest in the course of my paper.

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Who will profit from democracy? Historically, have common people achieved real gains from democracy? Ambitious and evil dictators and politicians have had the benefit of democracy because their dictatorship and power are authorized by it. We must remember the Hitler administration was chosen by the people through the general election in 1933, though no one would call it democratic. Formally, his successful achievement of power was through democratic means and his government could be called a legitimately elected one. Not only Hitler, but also other notorious leaders have been authorized by general elections and the principle of majority rule, in so far as we admit electoral rules to be fair. Hence such people were able to achieve power thanks to democracy.

What then was the problem with the Nazi movement of Hitler? The concept of 'nationalism fallen into amorality' (Meinecke, 1955: 41–42) and its encroachment on human values are indeed problematic. In any case it is true that many contemporaries in Germany and abroad supported Hitler with enthusiasm. And some people, even many intellectuals, applauded and enjoyed the phenomenon as if he were a savior. Can we say that Hitler deceived us in the same way as a swindler?

Here, I summarize two points: one problem is that Hitler was a psychologically abnormal man and so talented as to charm and tempt people, and another, the worse fact that even some intellectuals at that time supported him, Carl Schmitt, Albert Speer and Heidegger being among them. Or, if not passionate supporters, they could overlook Hitler's presence, let alone the existence of his notorious secret police, and avoided criticism. Almost no one predicted the disaster to come when Hitler first appeared on the scene. But, considering the great German tradition of learned men such as Goethe and Schiller, besides the soundness of judgement nurtured in German culture, it is a great wonder why most intellectuals failed to perceive the danger of his mentality (Hallowell, 1946, 1954). Friedrich Meinecke (1862–1954) refers to him and those around him as 'terribles simplificateurs' (Meinecke, 1955: 10).¹

The problem of the intellectuals

My concern is why intellectuals in the past failed to criticize and condemn the danger of fascism and totalitarianism. Dictators and colonialists can easily be accused, but could fascism be other than good if people are happy under the regime?

The generality of intellectuals may hate both fascism and democracy. The former is brutal, barbarous, militant and foolish; the latter depends on a mass society, characterized by servile admiration of wicked heroes and leaders. But some intellectuals can feel sympathetic to both regimes. Adherents of strong leaders have discourses at their command to show their loyalty. Intellectuals are good at devising rhetorical discourses in order to justify the hollow beliefs of themselves or their masters. Justification through words is their natural ability.

A society dependent on mass media, where everything is allowed

Due to the development of every kind of media, extreme discourses pervade every contemporary scene, commercial or political, a fact that is one of the characteristics of post-modernity. Targeted discourse facilitates the admission of aberrant ideas which, because of simple popularity, may be credited with high status. Those who are skilful in discourse will achieve their social standing in a society in which anything goes, the only measure of which is quantification in terms of sales. High sales justify the most vulgar and meanest books and forms of intellectual expression. Just as successful advertising raises the value of merchandise, so exaggerated discourse enhances aberrant ideas to persuade readers and listeners that they are of outstanding quality.

Authentic aesthetic attitudes were intolerant of mass culture, as developments in art depended on aristocratic patronage. David Hume (1711–1776) writes in his 'Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences': 'a thing that concerns the mass is usually rough and coarse in texture and quality, while that affecting the few is always delicate and refined' (Hume, 1985: 124). In other words, genuine taste in the fine arts is non- and anti-democratic.

However, we live in a world of mass aestheticization, in areas ranging from publicity or beauty treatment to such political events as a presidential campaign or national elections. The democratization of beauty together with unlimited freedom of expression seems to lead to the anything-goes society. The media and the internet, in particular, have allowed the anything-goes society to emerge. Lack of judgement and the absence of sound criticism mislead an audience composed of the common people.

The aesthetic which always appeals to sensation and representation holds the primary position and the principle of beautification comes before all else. The aesthetic tendency characterizes another phase of post-modernity. The two phases of post-modernity, i.e. excessive discourse and the aesthetic, are based on a spurious democracy.

Against the neo-conservative mentality

Aesthetics are always welcomed by the less intellectual powerful politicians, being devoid of the polite attitude of patience necessary to attain compromise or agreement through dialogue and discussion.

Historically, numerous political slogans have a positive ring, e.g. family, peace, love, friendship, community, etc., and democracy is another such. These words sound superficially positive and beautiful. However, just as Romanticism claims that not only the beautiful but also the ugly should require our attention, we must beware of these fine-sounding terms, which sometimes imply ideologically misleading illusions. By democracy, everything to be admired is meant: freedom of speech, human rights, respect for the individual, universal justice, etc. Sometimes in history brutal actions and wars have been justified under the fine-sounding name of democracy.

A so-called neo-conservative ideologue boasts that his school has surpassed Kant,

arguing that Kant's aporia that it is difficult to realize eternal peace without breaching human freedom will be solved by the United States government's foreign policy of offering security to a country from without through overwhelming military power. In fact, the United States solved the Kantian paradox for the Europeans.

Kant had argued that the only solution to the immoral horrors of the Hobbesian world was the creation of a world government. But he also feared that the 'state of universal peace' made possible by world government would be an even greater threat to human freedom than the Hobbesian international order, inasmuch as such a government, with its monopoly of power, would become 'the most horrible despotism'. How nations could achieve perpetual peace without destroying human freedom was a problem Kant could not solve. But for Europe the problem was solved by the United States. By providing security from outside, the United States rendered it unnecessary for Europe's supranational government to provide it. Europeans did not need power to achieve peace, and they do not need power to preserve it. (Kagan, 2003: 57)

American neo-conservatism cannot be a philosophical idea, but only a strategy or rhetoric, not based on some lofty ideal, such as the above statement suggests, but merely as a disguised self-interest or national interest, inventing a cause to justify the military power of the strongest. The greatest difference between Kant and the neo-conservatives lies in the fact that Kant as a disciple of European humanism and the Enlightenment adhered to the ideal of humanity, while neo-conservatism fails to do so.

Neo-conservative ideologues are interesting because most are intellectuals, some being students of Leo Strauss (1899–1973), a competent Classical scholar.

Strauss was a champion of the 'noble lie' – the idea that it is practically a duty to lie to the masses because only a small elite is intellectually fit to know the truth. Politicians must conceal their views, said Strauss, for two reasons: to spare the people's feelings and to protect the elite from possible reprisals. < . . . > As Byron's Don Juan puts it: 'And, after all what is a lie? 'Tis but the truth in masquerade' (Mary Wakefield, *Daily Telegraph*, January 9, quoted in Weinstein, 2004: 203).

Former Defense Policy Board Chairman Richard Perle, fulminated publicly for the [Iraq] war in moral terms, while openly declaring that 'In the words of Leo Strauss: "Moral virtue only exists in popular opinion where it serves the purpose of controlling the unintelligent majority"' (Weinstein, 2004: 203). In short, did they learn from Leo Strauss that even the dirtiest means are made justified by the sacred end? 'Strauss viewed intellectuals as somehow akin to the sophists of the ancient city: men less concerned with the quest for wisdom than with the prestige or power that accompany well-stated ideas' (Weinstein, 2004: 204).

In fact, Strauss appreciates the role of the wise man in his commentary on Xenophon's *On Tyranny*, but the problem lies in his claim that the wise man is satisfied with the approval of a small minority, which, according to Kojève (1950: 154), is the characteristic attitude of 'conquering people'.

Genuine artists and wise men may both oppose democracy, but the difference should be noticed. The relationship of tyranny and wisdom should not be the same as with that of popular art and fine art, as politics differs from aesthetics. What is at issue here is again the role of intellectuals who tend not to be wise but to be political sophists, with a deceptively democratic attitude.

Democracy for humanity through transcendental aesthetic experience

The problem relating to neo-conservatism lies in the fact that the idea of humanity is lacking in their thought, which constitutes the decisive difference between Kant and neo-conservatism. By humanity, Kant meant the responsibility of inheriting the human cultural heritage as well as the idea of a universal order common to the human race.

The final question would then be how the idea of humanity could be engendered within mankind. Here, the meaning of aesthetics, and, in particular, aesthetic experience, will find its place. The aesthetic experience in this instance should lead intuitively to the transcendental. The pyramid evokes not the skill of the ancient Egyptian but rather of the great ancestor of humankind. Fra Angelico's *Annunciatio* (Museo di San Marco, Florence) assures us not of the greatness of the Italian people at the time of the Renaissance, but rather of the marvellous illumination of humanity represented by the painter himself. We should reject the non-democratic simply because it is not beautiful.

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Notes

1. Plessner (1959) attributes German fascism to the historical context of Germany, but my point of view is different in this paper.

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