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**The disappointment of democracy**

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*Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.* (Winston S Churchill, Hansard, 11 November 1947).

Indeed, Churchill was wrong in saying no one pretends that democracy is perfect. His pronouncement full of English irony acknowledges that there are many failings of democracy. And its lesson must be that we should not be taken in by claims for its perfection. However, reservations about democracy do not sit well with the familiar triumphalism of the dominating view in Western democracies, where there is an ideological need to portray democracy as the ideal state of man in society. Such rhetorical claims for democracy have increasingly created an ideal, no less. This occurred in the course of its becoming an ideological weapon in the cold war with ‘communism’ (first Russia, and now China). So today we are left with the expectation that all good comes from democracy. However, nothing is perfection and yet we tend to yearn for it. Due to this, the reality of democracy can feel disappointing. Rhetoric and reality are not friends.

In this paper, it is claimed that amongst the discontents of civilisation, a disappointment arising from democracy itself is at times inevitable. An attempt will be made to pinpoint various disappointments with our current notion of democracy, and the implication that a vigilance for failures is a necessary antidote to idealisation. A selection of the disappointments will be discussed with the plea that modern democracy certainly needs systems of accountability much more than empty promises of freedom.

**Democracy as freedom or accountability**

The rhetorical equation of idealises democracy with freedom leads to quite unreal expectations if not questioned. And unreal expectations can only fail, and deliver a disappointment. As perfect freedom for all, democracy is patently illogical since the basic gift of human beings is that we have developed a civilisation not comparable to any other biological species. Civilisation depends utterly on cooperation with each other. It does not mean the freedom from the pressure of other people, rather a give-and-take. It is inevitable that democracy cannot deliver on the promises of the rhetoric. We do need others and we co-operate with them, so we do not just take our freedom but we are taken from. Civilisation relies on people adjusting to each other, leaders demanding acquiescence from followers, and thus being dependent on followers etc. It relies on most people most of the time accepting authority from elsewhere, from outside themselves.

It cannot equate with the freedom promised, the defence of ‘freedom’, has powered conservative thinking that democracy can release all restraint on everybody. The sovereign individual has the right to make his own choices. Such exaggeration appears seductive, and can become exaggerated. In the book, *The Sovereign Individual*, by the ex-Editor of *The Times*, William Rees-Mogg, father of our present Leader of the House of Commons, we can read, for instance: “The government’s capacity to tax ultimately depends on the same vulnerabilities [in the ordinary individual] as do private shakedowns and extortion” (Davidson and Rees-Mogg 1997, p. 154). Taxing is wrong because it removes the freedom of choice of the owner of money. The imposition on the rich to provide health or education for everyone curtails the freedom of successful entrepreneurs. Obstructing them makes democracy suspect, even unacceptable. As a result, increasing inequality, with feudal levels of poverty, are quite acceptable.

That indifference in the fabric of our contemporary culture is known as neoliberalism, and harks back to 18th Century Britain and the Dickensian 19th Century. The ‘State’ is now hated as a result of the belief that it infringes our imaginary rights to use our money as we wish, especially to invest in entrepreneurial ventures. At present the balance is decidedly in favour of the individual freedom from restrictions rather than solidarity of the individual with his community. The extreme constriction on the lives of so many in poverty, and their needs for collegial respect and even assistance in times of need, has receded into the distance. Despair for the many without entrepreneurial gifts develops, and anger overtakes them, at the very same time as the media glorifies celebrities living lives to be admired by all.

The rhetoric and the media express the principle that having a wish automatically gets you what you want. In reality, democracy allows only one wish – expressed in a vote every few years. There is indeed a freedom to vote. It was a freedom won slowly, but now universal suffrage exists in Western society. However, such a very restricted view of democracy is impractical without an informed assessment of what government has achieved and has not – of which more below.

Voting is not ‘getting’, not necessarily. And in fact, only a proportion win the vote – the majority is not everyone. There is then a proportion which is less than the majority who do not win and have to cope with having no freedom to receive what they want. They are disappointed. Actually, a significant number of people have to be disappointed, which does not square with the idealising promise in Western cultures.

That relentless demand for the ideal may be encouraged by the shopping mall, and by TV advertising where every individual can choose for himself. The result is that the consumer culture becomes the pattern for political voting.

*Disappointment and unconscious dynamics*

The necessary fact of disappointment for some, or many, in a voting system is easily ignored. If it is dismissed or underestimated at the conscious level, it will inevitably lead to anxiety or resentment in some hidden form. The losers in a vote are expected to abide by the result without demur, as the will of the majority. That means of course without *conscious* demur. But there are serious possibilities of unconscious dynamics carrying the bitterness in other, equally unseen directions. Then, disappointment can emerge from hiding as a collective angst.

*Accountability*

For instance, the Declaration of Independence of the 13 States was about freedom from Britain. The Declaration nowhere mentions the word ‘democracy’. A key clause is: “That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends [life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness], it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government” (written by Thomas Jefferson 1776). In other words, government has to be held accountable, according to agreed principles. The real purpose of democracy is that it be a system of accountability. And not of individual freedoms. From ancient Athens, Pericles' rivalry with Cimon was not for the freedom of the demos. It was about an accountability they fought out in a court of law. Declaring independence and freedom has become confused with democracy. In reality (and in practice) democracy means an authority which is answerable to those who they make decisions for. This was the core element of England’s own ‘declaration of independence’, the Magna Carta, when similarly the ruling elite took steps to oversee King John’s management of the monarch’s taxes and financial affairs.

Taking authority means taking on responsibilities, and in a democracy that means being held responsible – or accountable. Ultimately, democratic voting signs off on the accountability of a government. There is no perfection to be found in running the country, and mistakes will always be made. A relatively forgiving accountability is necessary, together with a necessary transparency. People do make mistakes, even when in authority – ‘to err is human’. Accountability means the openness of authorities to being questioned, to having their decisions re-examined by anyone else (Przeworski et al 1999). It is a big request, to which authorities are not always willing to acquiesce. A government’s achievement has to be subjected to a critical review, but may feel like being found out for failures. Many governments, understandably may prefer a simple periodic voting system which can downplay a detailed reviewing system.

Democracy is therefore a very limited freedom – the freedom to vote for or against an elected person or government on the basis of their performance and future programme. This is certainly an improvement on shall we say a mediaeval system where assassination was a common method of dealing with leaders who lost the approval of some significant power in their land: allowing losers to go on living is an improvement, and a more civilised method of accountability.

*Democracy and protest*

The logic however is that if democracy is ideal then any reconsideration or accountability must puncture the ideal of perfection. There is a temptation therefore for protests and protestors to be identified as insurgency and terrorists. When it comes to an ideal then in extreme it becomes a religious form of good versus bad; any criticism of God must be devilish.

*Mistakes, guilt and forgiveness*

A complex issue exists between any authority that fails, and those who are disadvantaged by the failures. The idea of a ‘forgiveness’ for mistakes is very foreign – or at least unspoken – in political systems. This perhaps quite unconscious dimension links authority with guilt. Those in authority have to take responsibility for their decisions and that includes the responsibility for imperfect decisions, which will inevitably happen. The painful feeling of guilt is internally damaging and potentially punitive. There is a sense in which voting is a kind of jury system.

It can be a considerable relief for many in an electorate to assign blame to authorities who disappoint them. We all have our super-egos to appease, and one means is to become someone else’s judge. But the reverse too – some authorities can assign culpability to their populace. A blame game is such a human aptitude and can flare up as an infectious dispute between couples and groups and parties, up to the international level of cold wars and hot ones.

Informed accountability could if well conducted have the objective of gauging the mistakes and successes, and assessing a balance that could allow a level of mistakes. Of course, such an accountability will always be subjected to influences from unconscious sources, including the need for a scapegoating blame, and for ideologies, as well as rank self-interest. Such an aim seems a long way off, and it is consigned to the shadows by the idealising rhetoric of freedom for everyone.

**Democracy and inequality**

A second confusion is that democracy enshrines equality for all within a nation. When there is inequality, there is another source of disappointment. Democracy has not delivered on yet another promise. So, inequality – inequality of money and power – introduces all sorts of complications, jealousy, envy, incompetent elites, hidden guilt, self-justifying self-interest and more. But these disadvantages cannot be an argument for a complete equality. Equality in every respect will never be achieved. But the impossibility of full equality is not an argument for the unrestrained promotion of inequality. Inequality for the sake of it has had a massive impact on Western societies which has taken us back to Mediaeval levels. Like freedom, inequality is a distraction from accountability.

One long-standing argument for the benefits of inequality dates from the 18th century. Indifference to poverty and the damage of sustained impoverishment to human lives is still justified on the basis of this antique argument. Adam Smith’s (1776) idea of the ‘invisible hand’ promoted the entrepreneurial society as inevitable, justified by the ‘trickle-down’ argument – as the richer spend their money on the products and services the poor can provide so the wealth is distributed amongst the poor. So, having a wealthy class will benefit the poorer labourers as a secondary effect. This argument was dominant in the rhetoric favouring tax cuts for the wealthy in the Reaganomics of the 1990s. But there is no evidence that such policy has benefitted the poor. The trickle-down effect has little economic impact (Persky et al 2004, Dabla-Norris et al 2015, Hope and Limberg 2020). But such research does not provoke thought; it does not work against idealisation.

If the wealthy impoverish the impoverished, they are morally guilty by most standards. So, they need arguments such as the rhetoric of ‘trickle-down’ in order to hide the guilt that would come from a reasoned judgement about inequality. And the wealthy do have the means to fund media justifications of their own ideologies. The arguments of trickle-down and the invisible hand are the let-out arguments which spare the elite from the evidence of research and accountability. There is an effective (unconscious) dynamic system to hide the real consequences.

Of course, economics has moved on since the 18th century. For instance, one alternative to the invisible hand would be a visible one – Keynesian economics would promote the State as the investor through deficit spending. The national budget could directly promote industry, and jobs and the rehabilitation of the impoverished when necessary. Its effectiveness was partially confirmed by Roosevelt’s New Deal in the 1930s depression in the USA. However, that view was disputed in the 1970s by claims an even better effect could be achieved by an expansion of the money supply. It is a sophisticated argument by which those on the wealthier rungs of the ladder could soak up the extra money and (hopefully) trickle it down. This is the debate enhancing the idea of the entrepreneurial freedom of individuals (through tax cuts) and against the State’s direction of investment. Today, the policy of managing the money supply is now a dominant one enhancing the freedom of individuals.

**Democracy and corruption**

The emphasis on money joined with the idealisation of freedom now justifies the freedom to accumulate money, for the apparent good of all. In effect, it promotes only the freedom for some. And inevitable the impossibility for others – a disappointment for those with less inherited wealthy and privilege, those with less talent, or opportunity, and so on.

Money has entered the system of values in society – the more you have the more benefit to everyone else. Therefore anyone should accumulate money. With the economic arguments brief recounted above money has acquired a moral value beyond simple wealth. Banking facilities and financial institutions have responded to this by focusing on money with, it seems other values taking a secondary place. London for instance is a major centre for laundering the finances from corruption and the illicit drug trade (Burgis 2016). Ethical values and money values appear to be on a collision course. When one considers the laundering of so-called ‘dirty’ money, one has to recognise that its moral value can trump the ordinary human values of morality, notably honesty and fairness. So, if the value of making money has superseded the other, more ethical values then it is entirely reasonable for financiers to follow the dominant value. Can one reasonably condemn individuals for corruption when the context of cultural values places money as the highest moral good?

It is of course very different in private life with relatives, friends and acquaintances. There, ordinary human values of honesty, consideration, loyalty and fairness, etc, still dominate. So from one point of view the values of bankers, financiers, hedge fund managers and their colleagues are reasonable, but from another cultural angle it is corruption. This is a fault-line in contemporary culture. Should the value of money ever win in a contest with honesty? And should it win a contest over consideration of others (drug dealing for instance), or over unfair bargaining against the poor in the Western nations or the poor countries (systematic impoverishment)?

If democracy means freedom, then such value judgements are an individual’s business. But if democracy is about accountability then human values should not be replaced. The fact that corruption on the scale that is evidently increasing rapidly, implies that accountability is disappointingly failing in some sectors of society.

If it is genuinely the case that freedom to make money is a super-ordinate value in some sectors, then we might go back to the thesis that emerged in the meticulous study by Edward Gibbon of the decline and fall of Rome (Gibbon 1776-1781). Gibbon’s conclusions were that Rome succumbed as a result of the decline in ‘civic virtue’. It might be argued that the ascendant valuation of money today relegates normal human values to a secondary position, and is an equivalent decline of virtue in public life. In a nutshell, private accumulation of wealth has become a loss of civic virtue.

**Underlying unconscious dynamics and anxieties**

The overvaluation of freedom of the individual and in particular of their freedom to make money gives democracy an awkward and impractical shape. Some people have a special need to set scaffolding around their self-esteem to build it up, and money can supply that if its high social and moral value is culturally pervasive. In the end, it is only a superficial support to the ego, but such superficiality is likely to fend off a disappointment (consciously). However, it is likely to continue in a hidden way to drive the build-up of money as a moral value. That self-sustaining set of attitudes points towards hidden motives, promoted by unconscious pressures. It then takes a psychoanalytic sensibility to give some picture of the unconscious cultural narrative that has captured people collectively.

The value of money needs, like all mistakes, to be understood in its unconscious and its self-sustaining qualities. Similarly, the prejudices based on gender, race and religion are likely to be forever prevalent. Human beings notice these kinds of difference, and inevitably we make value judgements. Without judgement, we are out of touch with reality. Humans will make judgements according to unconscious principles as well as conscious ones. The unconscious aspects of the politics of diversity has certainly been exposed (Davids 19\*\*, 20\*\*, Hinshelwood 20\*\*) but cannot be further detailed here. We may have to say that, similar to equality in wealth, it may never be possible to achieve bias-free politics, only a vigilant minimisation rather than an exploitation.

*Freedom as a defence*

The possibility, for which there is some evidence, is that the bitterness of disappointment is not necessarily owned by those who most feel it. Because the idealisation of freedom leads to an unacknowledged bitterness for many, it can be ignored by those who win the vote. If not acknowledged such feelings can later emerge in unrecognised forms. One typical method is a group dynamic in which resentment is disowned and projected into other segments of the community, often those with more overt claims for resentment. For instance, those poor and exploited and not free to choose their position in society may be further used in a kind of psychosocial exploitation. They can be used to express the projected disappointment resentment and bitterness for others in society.

That kind of displacement into other people, groups and issues is hard to follow of course. For instance, the impoverished, those deeply disappointed with themselves, with their place in society, and the endless reductions in public provision, can turn their ire towards other races. Another instance might be the intellectual class disappointed by the referendum on British membership of the EU in 2016 in the UK. Such rational people (of whom I would count myself as one) have a deep respect for the process of voting and have to deal with their emotional state in the face of a mandate they don’t or can’t agree with. They too can divest themselves of their painful feelings by condemning the gullible people who are so irrational as to believe and promote over-simplification, lying, and so on.

What could be a better means of coping than to split off that emotionalism and find the disappointment in disgruntled elements in other segments of society. Thus, the prejudiced and hate-carrying members of society are good emotional receptacles. They can then act out impulses on behalf, not only of themselves, but also on behalf of rational people who repudiate their own more angry emotionalism.

*Wealth as a defence*

The other distorting and defensive ideology in current Western culture is that of inequality and its pale rationalisation in the trickle-down effect. The rationalisation is conscious and shallow, impervious to evidence and reason because people can use it cover their unconscious pain of guilt and shame at their own responsibility for impoverishing and exploiting others.

However, wealth does not only lead to guilt. It can have a profoundly stabilising effect on the wealthy man or woman. In a culture where individuality is highly prized, then this can combine with the ideology of what the highest value is. The cultural expectation of the most valuable individual can be the possessing and controlling the largest amount of wealth. Such a view is not consciously reasoned out but can nevertheless be powerfully felt unconsciously by those pained by self-doubt. The boost given by wealthy to their own self-worth is an important defence. This is expressed, in the West, in the view that ‘having’ something has taken over from the sense of ‘being’ someone (Fromm 1976).This may be very different from other cultures where ‘being’ is connected much more with a sense of belonging to family or culture or group. In the West, property belonging to the self can provide a major boost for many fragile people. In the end, their despair about themselves undermines the importance of a benign civic society.

It is not just that money, gender, race, etc are important distinctions that are given implicit and unconscious valuation to be used as props for to a fragile and unstable sense of self. But in a culture devoted to the individual these differing valuations can be used in this underground, unconscious zone to combat the self-uncertainty through designating different others as having lower value.

**Participation, representation, sortition**

Democracies are affected by other unconscious concerns, not least are the relations with authority. Authorities who make decisions for us are always significant, and constitute the central idea of democratic institutions. In part, our deepest experience of authority is evolved from the relations with parents. The capacity, as can be seen in the process of development, is to use authorities in important ways that preserve the sense of self. But, importantly, it is in large part without conscious awareness.

*Unconscious authority*

Unlike parental authority, people in democracies can participate in choosing the authorities, whether they decide to participate in voting or not. Nevertheless, the chosen representatives are given authority of a parental kind. Authority is thus loved as if a parental protection, as well as feared for the threat of condemnation. Each of us as individuals carries within us that sense of authority, often expressed in a self-confidence. In groups, we also see authority exemplified in others. And we can exemplify authority for others with our own confidence. These aspects of ourselves draw a great deal on unconscious sources. Freud himself regarded this internal form as derived from the Oedipus complex which itself was a general template for the development of human subjects and for personal authority derived from loved-but-hated parents. That relationship is complex: we identify with them, and at the same time murder or are murdered by them. Such relations and conflicts are played out by each of us in our own varying ways in the world of politics, and the debates it provides. Careful reasoning fights against this undergrowth of complex feelings. And we need other minds to debate with in order to find our way through.

The various individuals’ experiences at this unconscious level will match or not match with the actual situation in political life and political process. Familiar idealisations and guilt may emerge in the guise of reasoned conscious debate, but underpinned by unconscious certainty that obstructs the debate and may hold to a rigid position.

Alternatively, it may be a great relief to externalise all authority, requiring someone else to decide the really important issues. That process offers an escape from responsibility, and our democratic system of representatives invite an escape in practice. Responsibility may need to be escaped for various reasons, in particular it threatens to deliver guilt if things go wrong as they sometimes will. Then, for some people, the guilt can be very internally punishing (often unconsciously), and felt in terms of cruel criticism. The easy temptation is to grant authority to someone else so that blame and grievance can adhere to them rather than to oneself. One variation in the unconscious dumping of responsibility and guilt onto others is not to vote for representatives at all. Then responsibility for politics and the governance can be denied.

An even more promising and prevalent method of coping with authority is to recognise oneself publicly as a victim of the government or of the system. This locates responsibility and guilt very firmly in place – with those who have power. Even a demand that the powerful relinquish power puts the power in the hands of those who are required to relinquish it. It can be very hard to distinguish true victims of an authority, from some who feels that being victimised is preferable to feeling responsible.

*Giving responsibility*

Most democracies are representative, although there are other forms. A participatory democracy, in contrast, relies on everyone to contribute to all decisions, via referendums for instance. It is however unwieldy as a general method of decision-making for large groups or nations. Even with occasional referendums there are difficulties, particularly for getting a wide-enough spread of reliable information and for deliberation on the issues. All decisions rely completely on accurate information distributed and digested by all the constituents.

It has recently emerged with some surprise that there is a degree of resistance to information and to uncertainty as a necessary condition which must pervade debate and discussion. It is necessary to see other points of view which inevitably arouses challenge to one’s own. The perverse attraction of improbable conspiracy theories has drawn a mass following of people with hidden and unconscious bitterness and existential threats. Exposing their destructive fear and intentions located at an unconscious level, has hardly yet been contemplated. It may in many cases result from the rhetoric that promises freedom only to result in a disappointing lack of it. But, such a hypothesis regarding the unconscious emergence of frustration in the social media requires research.

A further experiment in democracy is to gather a random assignment of representatives. Called sortition, it resembles the appointing of a jury in a law court. These constitute ‘citizens assemblies’ and provide an opportunity for properly presented points of view in the debate, with a summary of evidence for each side. They tend to be largish groups of say 100, in order to capture a sample representation. However, it is known that very powerful dynamics of insecurity arise in groups as large as this (Kreeger 1976\*\*). Processes of identity and its loss can make it difficult to think and debate even if assemblies are well run.

**In conclusion**

Freedom and in particular the current freedom to accumulate money has taken over as a fundamental but erroneous actor in democratic governance. Strong rhetoric to that effect sustains such cultural distortions and does so probably for the guilt-free benefit of the wealthy classes. It is a cultural achievement to have created such a loyalty to this contemporary notion of democracy.

An attempt has been made to unpick the argument for democracy as freedom. Our dependence on each other is the solid brickwork of civilisations, and gives the lie to democracy as freedom from the encroachment of others. That rhetoric promises inevitable disappointment, and it gives cover for various forms of exploitation, and of the corruption of social values.

A number of ways in which the rhetoric of freedom in the guise of democracy disappoints, damages and corrupts civil and social life in Western culture have been discussed. The conclusion must therefore be a strong plea for changing our focus of attention. Instead, it is claimed that accountability is really the core. Accountability too has many problems, and they are little addressed publicly, especially as the distracting rhetoric of freedom consigns accountability to the shadows. The necessity for, and the problems of, an adequate, informed system of accountability needs to be foregrounded urgently for the rescue of Western civic and socio-political life. But more than anything we should keep in mind that like human beings themselves, there is no perfection to be idealised. We need always to be open to its imperfections and the disappointments and grievances that it inevitably gives rise too, and to assess such failures in balanced ways.

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