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IS DEMOCRACY POSSIBLE?

Bruce Gilley

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The global spread of democracy over the last generation or so has been accompanied by the global spread of criticisms of democracy. In a sense, this is unsurprising: Popular ideas tend to generate their own opposition. Democracy's current popularity—almost universally valued, institutionalized in more than three-fifths of the world's states, and demanded by large movements in many among the remaining two-fifths—makes it an ideal target for critique. As a result, in recent years, a slowly accelerating wave of skeptical and at times even hostile thought has arisen to challenge democracy's claim to be the best form of government. This wave is distinct from the inchoate illiberal ideologies that autocrats in China, Russia, Iran, or Cuba like to promote. Unlike those ideologies, it is a carefully argued, social-scientific, and respectable critique of democracy that has been developed largely by Western scholars. Almost unbeknownst to the legions of democracy-builders or to the nearly four billion democratic citizens worldwide, the belief in democracy has begun to crumble inside some of the world's finest minds and institutions.

Some of this dissent is healthy. Assuming a feasible democratic ideal, criticism of democracy as practiced in the world's 121 electoral democracies (the vast majority of which do not belong to the traditional "West") directs attention to shortcomings and can spur corrective action. Now that democracy is the typical form of government, consideration of the "varieties of democracy" and how they can be improved is a progressive endeavor. A steady stream of new books describes the many improvements possible, from involving citizens in "deliberative" efforts to make public policy to tinkering with electoral rules.[1]

In other instances, however, this dissent is destructive because it aims

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not to improve democracy, but to eliminate it altogether. Lacking any comparative or historical context, antidemocratic thought easily spills into a disdain for *all* existing democracies. This disdain feeds doubts within established democracies while strengthening antidemocrats in autocratic countries.

Since it comes at a time when democracy has, for the first time ever, become humanity's dominant form of political organization, this new wave of antidemocratic thought is best described as *dissent* rather than *reaction*.[2] As such, it has drawn a sympathetic hearing from those predisposed to seek the progressive change of any entrenched practice. Democracy and its defenders are described as "hegemons" in the marketplace of ideas. Styling themselves as dissidents, these critics claim to be asking "subversive questions" about democracy which, if left unaddressed, will threaten "our very existence."[3] They see themselves as underdogs, or "realists" challenging the untenable "romanticism" of democracy's defenders. They encourage citizens to disengage from democracy and put their faith in undemocratic alternatives—to make an "exit" from the political realm rather than to exercise "voice" more effectively, to borrow Albert O. Hirschman's famous terms.[4] The disastrous results of such disenchantment can be read in the historical record of the period between the two world wars of the last century, and are hinted at by the "democratic recession" that has stalked the early years of the current century.

As David Spitz wrote in his 1949 classic *Patterns of Anti-Democratic Thought,* critiques of democracy have long come in two varieties.[5] The first questions democracy's *feasibility,* while the second questions its *desirability* (see Figure below). Dissenting claims about the desirability of democracy are often grounded in personal dissatisfaction with democratic outcomes: Rightists decry the debasement of virtue or the purloining of property, for example, while leftists denounce the repression of women or the poor, or the degree to which private property is protected. This is all fairly easy to dismiss as routine complaining so long as those outcomes remain within some limits, which they usually do. Democracies tend to produce polities that are stabler, wealthier, fairer, more innovative, and better at respecting rights than any available alternatives.[6]

Dissenting claims that democracy is infeasible are more corrosive, however. They threaten to weaken the very ideal of democracy—the notion that citizens, situated as political equals, can exercise common control over political power. Democracy, the prophets of infeasibility contend, is based upon a Great Lie,[7] or several Great Lies. The sooner we wake up to this, they add, the sooner we will be able to move on to some better age, untrammeled by democratic delusions. When compared to the promised benefits of these alternatives—more prosperous economies, scientific policies—actually existing democracy can appear shabby indeed.

In many cases, critics of democracy's feasibility are moved by dis-

satisfaction with democracy's outcomes. A government that does not rule *for* the people must not be a government *by* the people. Critics of both right and left are prone to rationalize their discontent with democratic outcomes by mounting sophisticated critiques of the process itself (at least until those outcomes come back into line with their own views, at which point the procedural constraints on the "silent majority" are said to have magically vanished). But this tactical shift to the question of democratic feasibility is harder to unmask as mere ire at democratic results.

As a general rule, feasibility critics on the right focus on the unwillingness or inability of citizens to take up the heavy burdens of self-rule, or on the logical problems of translating individual preferences into public choices. Critics on the left focus on differences in power and resources, or on elites' efforts to fool or mystify the people. Critics on the right, in other words, are suspicious about all citizens while critics on the left are suspicious about only some of them. The historical trend has been for such criticisms to migrate from the right (Plato through Burke) to the left (Marx through Chomsky). But in the past decade, the critiques traditionally offered from the right have enjoyed a resurgence, and indeed something of a boom.

More interestingly still, these right-wing critiques are now often voiced by figures who align themselves with the left. This is surprising because those on the right never claim to be anything but elitist, whereas those on the left pretend to be the true representatives of "the people." In *Reflections on the Revolution in France,* Burke commented wryly on "the consistency of those democratists who, when they are not on their guard, treat the humbler part of the community with the greatest contempt, whilst, at the same time, they pretend to make them the depositories of all power." But in many ways, it is the ability of these right-wing critiques to appeal to the misanthropic tendencies of left-wing intellectuals that makes them so potent.

For this reason, I want to focus here on the feasibility critiques of the right. This is not to deny the influence (and far less the continued production) of traditional leftist feasibility critiques—if anything, the academy continues to publish and lavish attention on these far more.[8] My approach, rather, is to focus on the unexpected resurgence of what was once deemed a reactionary, antidemocratic intellectual tide, now reborn as a current of dissent.

Unpublic Choice

Feasibility critiques of the right long aimed a good deal of analytical throw weight at the aggregate level of democratic policy making, often under the rubric of "public-choice theory." Accepting the assumption of rational and informed citizens, public-choice theory asks whether it is possible to take a set of individual preferences or judgments and translate them into a public policy that reflects those views.

Figure—Varieties of Antidemocratic Thought

	Democracy is not ***possible*** because of…	Democracy is not ***desirable*** because it causes…	So it should be replaced by…
Say critics on the ***Left***	Propaganda Power differences Social exclusion Agenda control	Repression Inequality Westernization	Mass-party rule Worker rule Direct citizen rule
Say critics on the ***Right***	Citizen stupidity Citizen ignorance Aggregation problems	Instability Mob rule Inefficiency	Markets Experts/Guardians Free association Weighted voting

In 1785, the Marquis de Condorcet noticed that when public preferences are fairly evenly spread across three choices, the option that wins the most votes might be inferior to another one in the minds of most voters—Margaret Thatcher's Conservative victory over a divided opposition in 1983 is a commonly cited example. In modern times, political scientists such as William H. Riker have had a field day devising examples where "majority rule" however conceived does not lead to a "popular" outcome (or in the jargon of the field, a "Condorcet winner"). Democracy, the reasoning goes, is thereby exposed as meaningless, and struggles for it as misconceived. Riker wanted democracy, which he derided as "populism," replaced with rule by virtuous philosopher-guardians, who were supposed to spearhead a system that he misleadingly called "liberalism."[9] Right-wing East Asian critics of democracy from Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew to China's neo-Confucianist Kang Xiaoguang are heirs to Riker's elitism. So are such Western critics of "illiberal democracy" as journalist Fareed Zakaria and political scientist Jack Snyder.

Not everyone who studies the problems of public choice concludes that democracy is a sham, of course. Indeed, most of the important work in this field has been done by scholars searching for ways to minimize rather than eliminate the difficulties that can arise when many individuals try to arrive at a single decision. Yet the challenges of public choice have driven many to despair, giving rise to the conclusion that democracy is impossible and should therefore be abandoned.

In his important 2003 work *Defending Democracy,* Gerry Mackie considers classic "problems of public choice" and finds that upon closer examination they are better described not as problems inherent in the decision-making process itself, but rather as dilemmas of competing

values or preferences that reflect the complexities of the real world in which people and groups must make their choices and take their chances.[10] Moreover, determines Mackie, few of the problems touted by public-choice theory actually erupt in practice. Logical *possibilities* conjured by the academic mind are *not* in the same as empirical *probabilities* in real-world democracies. While outcomes never align perfectly with the common will, they are seldom much at odds with it either, at least in well-functioning democracies. Agenda-setting and manipulation, for instance, are rare in real-world politics because all players tend to be well aware of—and on guard against—such tactics. When manipulations do occur, fairly simple institutional fixes that improve rather than reject democracy are capable of solving the problem.

In practical terms, public-choice critiques have the serious drawback of lacking a revolutionary edge. No one is ever going to rush to the antidemocratic barricades shouting "Down with strategic voting, cycling majorities, and multidimensional issue spaces!" Whether because they are false or because they are unprovocative, or quite likely for both reasons, these critiques stand more as academic curiosities than as real threats to actually existing democracy.

The Ignorant Public

More recently, right-wing critics of democracy's feasibility have returned to an older concern, the quality of citizens themselves. In particular, the hottest claim today is that citizens are too ignorant, irrational, or both to rule themselves. Democracy is impossible because the *demos* is defective. "Idiocracy" and "dumbocracy" are the favorite terms of abuse. In Thailand, middle-class protestors who backed the 2006 military coup and now agitate for weighted-voting rules that would disenfranchise most of their country's rural dwellers and hand vast powers to unelected experts are willing to say openly that "it's too easy to manipulate poor people."[11]

The public-ignorance critique, which has been led in the United States by the Texas-based journal *Critical Review,* says that citizens lack even the minimal information needed to make intelligent choices.[12] Commentators in this tradition like to make sport of citizens' ignorance regarding basic political facts such as the identity of their local legislative representative or where a certain country is located on the map. The argument is not that citizens should be better informed so that democracy will work better, but that *any* imaginable level of citizen information is still too low for democracy to be possible in our day and age. The U.S. jurist and legal scholar Richard Posner, for example, argues in his 2003 book *Law, Pragmatism, and Democracy* that since people are and always will be "basically ignorant" about politics, U.S. democracy should never aspire to be anything other than a means of rotating elites.[13] Similarly, George

Mason University law professor Ilya Somin says that ignorance makes claims of democracy untenable because citizens are unable to choose the policies or leaders that best fit their interests.[14]

Highly educated and amply informed people still disagree on many basic issues. Complaints about "public ignorance" may mask an inability of critics to come to terms with the fact of complex moral and empirical disagreement.

Like many antidemocratic critiques, the public-ignorance critique has a long pedigree—in this case going all the way back to Plato. Its more enduring modern formulation began with Phillip Converse, who in a 1964 paper called "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics" argued that most people have only half-baked attitudes subject to easy manipulation by informational assault. Frustrated that citizens did not offer consistent answers to survey questions, an exasperated Converse would eventually conclude that "what needs repair is not the [survey] item but the population."[15]

As Converse's descent into unintentional self-parody hints, the public-ignorance critique has a paradoxical quality. People may well count it as one of the blessings of life in a free and stable society that they face no urgent need to learn about politics. Moreover, in a truly democratic society where each person's voice counts equally, the impact of a single voice is so slight as to make investing in political learning seem irrational. The democratic reply to this is that fairness demands that beneficiaries of a free society devote *sufficient* attention to politics to ensure that leaders and policies continue to aim at the common good, somehow conceived.

The word "sufficient" is key: How much and what kind of information do citizens need in order to do their civic duty? And what exactly does it mean for citizens to "exercise" political power in an era in which government has grown in size and complexity such that even heads of state can be at best only generally aware of what occurs within the states they head?

In the first place, "gotcha" survey questions ask about irrelevancies. Citizens need to know—and often do know—whether or not their local roads are being repaired, their neighbors harassed by police, or their taxes rising. Citizens, in other words, can and do carry out their democratic mandates, even if they cannot list all the constitutional powers that subnational governments enjoy in their country.[16] From this perspective, being "well-informed" may be easier than antidemocratic critics allow.

In addition, being "well-informed" is not the same as agreeing with the views of some academics. In an era of multibillion-dollar media industries all jostling to be seen as "fair" and "objective," not to mention research universities and policy think tanks generating extensive research, valid information is not in short supply. Even the "attack ads" so often decried

as a feature of U.S. politics often contain valuable information, as John Geer has pointed out.[17] Highly educated and amply informed people still disagree on many basic issues. Complaints about "public ignorance" may mask an inability of critics to come to terms with the fact of complex moral and empirical disagreement.

Somin, for example, argues that "collusive politicians" in the United States secretly band together to maintain public ignorance of the fact that since U.S. blacks tend to die younger than their white, Asian, and Hispanic compatriots, the country's Social Security program amounts to "a major hidden redistribution from black workers to white retirees."[18] Yet no major black political leader argues that blacks should pay lower Social Security taxes (nor for that matter, does any major male politician argue that men should pay lower rates because women tend to outlive them). Again, well-informed people may simply differ on the appropriate policies that should follow in response to a given set of facts. Elsewhere, Somin argues that ideologies are no substitute for factual knowledge because there might be "a factual or analytical error in the ideology in question"—as if the world's great and enduring ideologies could be snuffed out by hiring a few graduate students to do some fact-checking.[19]

A few years ago, Larry Bartels of Princeton claimed that public support for tax cuts that U.S. president George W. Bush had persuaded Congress to enact in 2001 was based on pure ignorance.[20] Revisiting this claim, Arthur Lupia and colleagues found that Bartels had introduced a sleight of hand: He had built into his analysis the assumption that most informed voters should oppose the tax cuts. Bartels began with his own idea of what people "should" think, and then declared them "ignorant" when they failed to conform to his expectations. Imputing what informed voters "should" think is one of the more scandalous misuses of the academic bully-pulpit. "Citizens have reasons for the opinions and interests they have," wrote Lupia and colleagues in their response to Bartels. "We may or may not agree with them. However, we, as social scientists, can contribute more by offering reliable explanations of these reasons than we can by judging them prematurely."[21] More generally, Lupia has argued, the public-ignorance critique is less about gathering evidence of what people do not know than it is about masking an elitist dislike for the substance of what most people believe.[22]

Even where citizens patently *do* lack the information needed to make rational choices linked to their self-identified interests, they may be able to rely on the opinions of people who make it their business to be well-informed. Experts, groups focused on particular issues, and political leaders can all act as "shortcuts" that allow citizens to become quickly informed by proxy, in essence delegating the job to trusted others. Robert Erickson, the coauthor of a book that shows how U.S. democracy works well in tracking public opinion, argues that even if people should happen to become better informed, U.S. public policies would not change

much.[23] Signals, in other words, are effective substitutes for personal learning.[24]

Where ignorance persists, it is still not clear that this means democracy is a failure. A well-known finding is that if 95 percent of the population is ignorant and votes randomly, the better-informed 5 percent will still be the deciding voters, leading to the best choice most of the time thanks to the "wisdom of crowds" described in James Surowiecki's 2004 book of the same title. In a two-party system such as the one found in the United States, that better-informed (and therefore "swing") vote can be critical to electoral success.

The public-ignorance thesis, then, is either false or else true but not threatening to democracy. As such, this critique does not come close to challenging the democratic tenet that citizens "exercise" collective political power in the sense of taking actions that reflect credible facts about the political world. Claims of public ignorance are certainly more provocative than those of unpublic choice. But they quickly reveal problems of disagreement more than ignorance.

The Irrational Public

This leaves the claim that citizens are irrational, or cognitively incompetent, as the final charge of infeasibility from the right that could doom the democratic project. Such a charge verges most nearly on the misanthropic since it concerns inherent rather than remediable defects in the *demos*. In new democracies, we are told, citizens are too tribal or too easily swayed by demagogues to exercise self-rule. In established democracies, citizens simply refuse to act logically. If this is so, the "miracle of aggregation" that underpins the wisdom of crowds must fail because citizens are not merely ignorant and given to believing random things, but are actively irrational and persistently believe things that make no sense. The rational and well-informed 5 percent is swamped by the crazed 95 percent.

The most recent and public example of this line of argument is Bryan D. Caplan's 2007 book *The Myth of the Rational Voter*. Columnist Nicholas D. Kristof of the *New York Times* called it "the best political book this year," while the *Economist* called it "a treat."[25] It is probably the most widely read antidemocratic work of the post–Cold War era.It has found a wide audience beyond the United States. Its enthusiastic readers include elites in China who have long been fond of arguing that their country's peasants are both ignorant and irrational.[26]

Caplan, who is a professor of economics at George Mason University, argues that citizens systematically vote for economic policies which make them worse off (and that politicians duly heed their wishes), not because citizens are ill-informed but because they are irrational (or "boneheaded" as he wrote in one essay based on the book).[27] As evidence, Caplan cites

studies in which voters are systematically at odds with economists concerning the correct economic policies in areas such as trade, regulation, employment, and taxes.

It is far from clear that the mistakes which Caplan purports to identify are in fact errors. For instance, Caplan believes that voters irrationally support minimum-wage laws despite the role that such laws play in worsening the plight of the poor by making jobs more scarce. Although economists generally concur that minimum-wage laws decrease employment, there is no agreement on the *magnitude* of such decreases, which many studies show to be minimal.[28] If so, then citizens who are also concerned about worker dignity and overall income distribution (taking into account unemployment benefits) may quite rationally decide to support minimum-wage laws. In this case, Caplan's claim of irrationality is glossing over an area where the rational truth is far from evident. The same goes for his arguments about corporate regulation and trade barriers.

Caplan is right that voters do make some patently irrational mistakes. But their impact is limited, especially in the United States. Caplan struggles to unearth the ravages that democracy should, by his telling, have wreaked upon American economic policy. His results do not impress. He notes, for example, that most U.S. citizens believed that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) would worsen their living standards, yet President Bill Clinton signed it into law anyway (not exactly an example of a politician slavishly following irrational citizens). When regulation becomes inefficient it is usually reformed, whatever its popularity. Irrational tax breaks for the ethanol industry are being challenged by state governments in the United States. Democracy is self-correcting in a way that alternatives are not. Caplan notes the "pessimism bias" of people thinking things are worse than they really are. But the same logic applies to his own pessimism about the depredations of democracy.

Perhaps the greatest weakness of Caplan's critique, however, concerns the meaning that he assigns to rationality. Economists often operate on the presumption that some narrowly defined material self-interest is the only rational basis of choice (a view with its roots in the political economy of the Scottish Enlightenment and later, Marxism). Yet emotion, community, fairness, freedom, and dignity are typically no less important, especially in wealthier societies such as the United States where increased material well-being often has a steeply declining utility.Caplan, then, forgets or dislikes the variety of human motives, especially in wealthy, postindustrial societies. As with claims of citizen ignorance, being rational is not the same thing as agreeing with the views of certain intellectuals. The rationality critics have not thought hard enough about what it means for a pluralistic society to be truly democratic, or more accurately for a democratic society to be truly pluralistic.

All three lines of right-wing feasibility critique can thus be refuted. Democracy, or rule by the people, can be defended as the first-best system—

rule for the people. But these critiques will persist and in some instances may be proven all too true. After all, people can easily be uninformed or boneheaded, and sometimes democratic outcomes satisfy no one. Democracy's defenders can then fall back to the Churchill trench, resisting not this or that critique of the democratic ideal, but instead denying the superiority of any proposed alternative. Can this battle be won as well?

Those who adopt "rightist" critiques of democracy typically call first for a reduction or elimination of democratic participation. If citizens are the problem, out of the judgment seat they must go. Public-choice critic Russell Hardin argues that "[t]he more of these issues we can get off the collective agenda, the better for making collective choice coherent."[29] Public-ignorance critic Jeffrey Friedman writes that "[i]f the public doesn't know what it's doing politically, why should it have the power to do so much?"[30] And public-irrationality critic Caplan wants to "reduce or eliminate efforts to increase voter turnout" since that would discourage the uneducated and the poor from voting.[31]

Democracy's Divided Opposition

It is notable that this first step of departicipation is the polar *opposite* of the prescription demanded by left-wing critics of electoral democracy. They want citizens to be *more* empowered, to "take back power" from nefarious actors such as lobbyists, corporations, political operatives, and the media.[32] This is a reminder that even when it is up against the ropes, democracy often remains standing because its opposition is so divided.

Is departicipation even feasible in a democratic age? Given the popularity of democracy, is it not more cost-effective to educate and inform rather than try to disempower citizens? The legitimacy and thus stability of even the "correct" policies delivered by other means of rule might be gravely undermined if unceremoniously taken out of the hands of voters. Given that most of these critics see democracy as a means to an end, the danger of these ends being undermined by popular discontent is a serious problem. Many critics recognize this, and argue that departicipation should come only through democratic consent. But why would supposedly ignorant, irrational citizens do the putatively well-informed, rational thing by disempowering themselves?

Let us suppose for the sake of argument that it would be relatively easy to convince democratic citizens that it is a good idea for them to back voluntarily away from the exercise of political power. The sober arguments of these critics are exactly attempts at such persuasion, and they have certainly found a sympathetic audience that could broaden. Will the alternatives be less bad than democracy?

In place of democracy, these critics usually propose some combination of three things: markets, experts, and freely formed associations. A fourth proposal—giving the better educated or the wealthier more voting power—

is less often heard these days, although arguably the appeal to experts is its close cousin. And it does crop up, as current events in Thailand show.

In many realms of social choice, there is little doubt that experts, markets, and free associations work better than democracy. Indeed, that is why most democratic countries already leave so much in the hands of precisely these three forces. It is no small irony that the country on which the vast majority of democracy's right-wing feasibility critics have based their views, the United States, is the one where those prescriptions have been taken most seriously. The U.S. economy is one of the most liberalized in the world and delegates many complex decisions (some prodemocratic critics say too many) to institutions such as the Federal Reserve Board and the Supreme Court. Parties and governments with reputations to protect make sure they get key policies right even by ignoring public opinion (on issues such as NAFTA). Price controls have been unheard of since Richard Nixon, and free-trade agreements are nearly sacrosanct. In many ways, then, these critics are preaching to the choir. Their message would be more controversial, and possibly more germane, in "overmobilized" democracies such as France or the Philippines.

But markets, experts, and free association are not infallible. Indeed the ongoing debate in most democracies is when to adopt them and when to nullify them. Markets in particular are easiest to judge because they are subject to many of the same problems that critics attribute to democracy. The delegation of U.S. health care to markets, for instance, leads to "public" choices that no one prefers, and is plagued by problems of citizen misinformation (especially about the likelihood and costs of care options) and irrationality (overinsuring or underinsuring). In highly marketized Hong Kong, public decisions are made by a small group of property developers, prompting an ongoing struggle for democratic control there.

Experts and their political judgements, meanwhile, have come under sustained critique as being boneheaded themselves of late.[33] Experts appear to be no better than nonexperts at coming up with "correct" policies, and are subject to their own "spirals of conviction" about the right thing to do. Worse still, mistakes made by experts with unrestrained power tend to have higher social, environmental, and economic costs. Hapless citizens of many developing countries have suffered one wave after another of rule by economists, often with only wreckage to show for it. As Machiavelli wrote in his *Discourses:* "The defect[s] with which writers usually charge the multitude may also be charged to individual men, and particularly to princes . . . [In fact] the people are more prudent, more stable and more judicious than princes." As public-ignorance critic Friedman, after contemplating the problems with experts, ruefully concedes: "If the actual alternative to rule by the ignorant is rule by the doctrinaire, then modern democracy poses a true Hobson's choice."[34]

Rule by free association, finally, can yield some truly democratic results, as one finds in the autonomous cultural spaces that minorities

have created in many democratic countries. But the problem of political inequality inherent in such unstructured decision making can easily create a problem shared with markets and experts, an overweighting of the interests of the powerful. Free association–based land-use zoning in Houston, Texas, caused widely acknowledged environmental, economic, and social harm. The free association of fundamentalist Christian communities in Arizona, Utah, and Texas led to the spread of coercive polygamy.

Democracy is possible for the simple reason that it is the one form of government which evolves constantly to ensure that it is possible. It is a self-correcting system in a way that others are not.

None of these comparisons are easy, of course, and it may be that there is indeed greater scope for markets, experts, and free association in most democracies. But once one enters into this comparison, democracy is unlikely to be pushed aside completely, and indeed might *expand* its remit in a country such as the United States. It is surprising how rarely feasibility critics of the right point to any other country as an example of how things could work better. Caplan's flippant dismissal of comparative analysis ("It beats life in the Middle Ages") ignores the many nondemocracies that might serve as examples of his advice. Does it beat life in Singapore today, or the United States of the nineteenth century? Antidemocrats of the right typically want to avoid having to attack Churchill's trench, often arguing that the question of what might beat democracy is "far too complex to be settled here."[35] Yet allowing the debate to be held on these terms is already a concession to the critiques of democracy as a first-best system. The least they can do is accept a vigorous debate on the alternatives.

It is hard to avoid concluding that, given the unalterable facts of pluralism and social complexity, democracy as actually practiced in most of the world's democracies is the first-best and therefore unbeatable means of political organization. It need not be defended as merely less bad than existing alternatives that might yet prove superior. The enduring challenge posed by democracy, then, is not just to strive to fulfill the radical implications of political equality and public control of politics, but to do so in the full knowledge that serious alternatives are wanting. This latter condition may be the most challenging of all, because it affords room for democracies to slip into complacency.

In some obtuse way, then, even the unfair and invalid cavilings of democracy critics such as those discussed here may play a constructive role. There is an almost functionalist sense in which democracies that are hampered by their inherent superiority produce critiques such as these just to keep themselves on their toes, shadow-boxing in the absence of any real challenger. To be forced to reckon again with the alternatives

is to be reminded of why so many different peoples in so many different contexts have chosen democracy. If this functionalist logic is valid, then one would suppose that the virulence (and cleverness) of feasibility critiques will increase in proportion to the strength of a country's democratic commitment. The reason that these criticisms have multiplied with such fecundity in the United States may be that it is where the democratic ideal is strongest, and therefore the dangers of complacency greatest. It is also the place where, in any comparative sense, taking into account its huge and diverse population of 300 million, democracy works "pretty good."[36] By grilling U.S. democracy about its peccadilloes, these critics end up saving it from backsliding. In an ironic way, then, they are democracy's benefactors. Unfortunately, the possible benefits for established democracies might be outweighed by the damage done to new and struggling ones, where authoritarian rule is still a very serious alternative.

It takes tolerance, a feel for context, and most of all a full understanding of the varieties of human motivation to see why feasibility critics of the right are so frighteningly wrong in their analysis of democracy. Democracy is possible not just because no one has quite worked out the details of the promised alternatives. Rather, it is possible for the simple reason that it is the one form of government which evolves constantly to ensure that it is possible. It is a self-correcting system in a way that others are not. And the reason, ultimately, is that the *demos* has chosen to make it that way—people decide to be democratic. In the final analysis, that is the most compelling evidence for the continuing possibility of democracy.

NOTES

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