

"Democracy" is an odd word!

An Essay on the Prevention of Genocides

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What is odd about "democracy" is not its meaning but rather its current usage. That usage often has little connection with its intrinsic meaning. Rather it seems to vary with local situations.

In much of the West it is used sarcastically when people disapprove of the way it seems to work in their own country. When people deplore the enormous inequalities in their own society, when they comment on the amount of money it takes to run for public office, or when they criticize the power of corporations and their pressure groups, then they use it sarcastically to indicate how badly their "so-called democracy" works.¹

When discussing other countries, people use the word as a form of commendation with regard to countries whose government they approve of. Its absence is a critique of countries whose regime is perceived as undesirable. In either case the actual form of government in office is not particularly relevant.

Whether applied to one's own country or to other countries, the use of the term "democracy" has a heavy moralistic loading that is constantly used in political discourse and reinforced by the mass media. What seems to get lost in that discourse is its rational meaning and its significance in distinguishing between different forms of government. That distinction is crucial in the analysis of gross human rights violations, including massacres and genocides.

Much of the extant literature (Fein, Harff, Rummel) has posited a causal connection between the absence of democracy and the frequency of genocides. This finding ignores the tautology of this formulation since countries that engage in genocide are not likely to be classed as democracies. What should be investigated are the processes and conditions by which an authoritarian state may become democratic, or the circumstances under which a democracy becomes an autocracy.

Democracies are not immune to vast inequalities within their populations -- inequalities on every possible dimension, from economic, to political, to social, etc. areas. But in spite of these very obvious inequalities, democracies increasingly subscribe to a variety of instruments specifying human rights whose aim it is to level the playing field. This does not mean that they always implement these rights in practice or succeed when trying to do so. But the violations of such rights can become subject to judicial process and/or censure by a variety of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Amnesty International being perhaps the most widely spread and best known among them. What this means in practice is that inequalities in democracies are inevitable conditions of life, but are subject to modification via a number of individual and/or collective efforts. The most important of the latter is the implementation and adherence to the rule of law.

A very important aspect of such inequalities in democratic societies is that the bases of such inequalities are to a greater or lesser degree tolerated and accepted as legitimate expressions of the variety and complexity of the human condition. Being tolerated or even accepted as legitimate does not, however, mean agreement on the merits of such bases of inequality. Thus, differences of political orientation, religious identification, or kinship practices, for instance, may create heated debates, vociferous protests, or dramatic demonstrations. What is important about such differences of opinion is that in democratic societies such expressions of dissatisfaction with the status quo are defined as legitimate.

Non-democratic societies -- whether they are dictatorships, autocracies, or feudal fiefdoms -- do not tolerate such expressions of differences. People are forced to remain in the economic, political, and social positions into which they were born and in which they will die. When the standard of living in such un-democratic societies is high the population may well accept the rule of the governing group without rancor. But that situation is quite rare. The more usual arrangement reserves all wealth and privileges to a very small elite. Expressions of dissatisfaction arising in the mass of the population are defined as threats to the regime and are ruthlessly suppressed.

The problem that arises is two-fold. On the one hand, totally homogeneous societies without differences of any kind do not exist.² That means that there are always bases of differentiation present that potentially may lead to friction. On the other hand, such a theoretical model of a totally homogeneous society would be undermined by modern technologies of communication that make it impossible to isolate a people from news and ideas about the rest of the world. Many regimes have attempted to enforce such isolation with greater or lesser success. The less such moves are successful the more people find out about living conditions in other places. The inevitable comparisons may lead to opposition to their own regime and/or to hostility towards other powers.

One difference between democratic and undemocratic countries is that the former are usually more developed and richer. (For the purposes of the argument I am presenting as polar opposites what in reality is a continuum.) This wealth has led not only to a higher standard of living but also to a better quality of life as measured by a variety of non-economic measures. In addition, they have, in the second half of the twentieth century, become more open and tolerant to a variety of ideas and life styles. With their sense of superiority these democracies have not only offered loans and technical assistance to poorer countries, but have also insisted on exporting their ideas and life styles. While many of these are controversial at home, they often lead to serious conflict when exported. A few illustrations will suffice to make the point.

The idea that human rights extend to everybody – even if only in theory – is anathema in many societies where hierarchical inequalities are seen as the god-given order of things. Where traditional arrangements are seen as sacred there can be no question of tolerating alternatives. Therefore, many of the most serious conflicts arise where religiously sanctioned ideas and behaviours are seen as threatened. These may involve the role of women, dietary restrictions, kinship relations, ethnic differences, the division of labour, etc. The most difficult area is that of religion because each one has a monopoly on truth. It is even in democracies difficult to tolerate multiple religions as equally valid. In many undemocratic countries only the official religion matters and other religions or variations of the same religion are neither recognized nor tolerated. In many such countries the Western notion of the separation of church and state is defined as heresy.

So far, the argument is not too original. Others have made similar observations. But it remains to be explained why some of these conflicts rise to levels of brutality that our Western sensibility finds hard to understand. Such brutality is usually leveled at the out-group, but often includes the self in the form of self-immolation, suicide bombers, and other forms of self-sacrifice that are defined as heroism.

There are undoubtedly many causes that contribute to such phenomena. One of the major causes of such forms of behaviour is rooted in the living conditions of the masses and the promises of religion. Throughout history the majority of people have lived under conditions of poverty, deprivation, exploitation, and oppression. Their situation was characterized not only by misery but also by hopelessness. Their rulers had no intention of allowing opportunities for improvements because these were defined as detracting from their own powers and resources. Caught in such situations devoid of satisfactions in the present nor hopes for the future, people placed no great value on life on earth. Instead they turned to religion.

What made religion attractive is that it promised something better after life in this earth. The specific nature of this improvement after death varied from one religion to another, but it always promised a state profoundly to be desired. Thus, the miserable existence on earth was contrasted with joining the ancestors, or reincarnation into another life form, or the coming of the messiah, or bliss in heaven, etc. But whatever the specific promises of religions, they devalued life on earth to such an extent that it made death something to be invited and aspired to. Thus, the hopelessness of earthly existence was replaced by the certainty of improvements in the afterlife. To achieve this certainty people willingly participated in wars, performed all kinds of life threatening acts, and totally discounted their own lives in order to assure themselves of later rewards.

Most religions arrogate to themselves the exclusive possession of truth and access to God. They tend to treat adherents of other religions as heretics or pagans who at best are relegated to an inferior status. This distinction is enshrined in law in those states that have adopted an official state religion. There are, of course, a great variety of ways in which several religions in the same polity can accommodate to each other. In extreme cases, fundamentalists will deny the right to exist to all who do not adhere to their particular position or interpretation of their belief system. That kind of fanatical conviction has in the past caused extremes of violence and massacres and continues to do so in the present.

Only in the second half of the twentieth century has this dramatically changed, albeit only in a relatively small part of the world. There the ideas of civil liberties, human rights, the rule of law, combined with dramatic increases in wealth have made life worth living. Wealth has spread beyond the elites. It has raised the standard of living of most of the population in addition to improving public health, education, and social services. People not only found their own life worth living as long as possible, but they also developed plans for their own and their children's future.

Countries where such increases in wealth and interest in extending life on earth are occurring are most unlikely to engage in

massacres and genocides. Thus, significant increases in the wealth of the peoples in the poorer parts of the world are most likely to result in dramatic decreases in gross human rights violations, massacres, and genocides. This is likely to be true no matter what other causative influences are at work.

The multi-national corporations are caught in short-term perspectives to maximize immediate profits and ignore the more reliable benefits of long-term planning. In addition, they have adopted what surely must be considered an anti-capitalistic position by considering the poor only as a drain on the public treasury. True capitalists, acting out of enlightened self-interest, would consider the enriching of the poor as an enormous expansion of their market -- an idea first implemented by Henry Ford when he greatly increased the pay of his workers because otherwise they would not be able to buy his cars.

This is not the place to explore the intricacies of so-called free market policies and international trade. They clearly are becoming subjects of spreading controversy. What is important in the context of preventing gross human rights violations and genocides is the growing involvement of an informed and committed public. It seems clear that the governing elites are primarily motivated by power and greed. Thus, the future lies in the raising of the consciousness of and the growing awareness of the public in the free part of the world. The great surprise is that these processes are in fact taking place in spite of the efforts of those in power to suppress their manifestation. Recent history has shown that it is possible to mobilize public opinion in support of the environment, of wildlife, of aid to the sick and the poor. Organization in support of the bill of human rights are already active. It does not seem utopian to anticipate that when a wealthier public's outrage and support for such organizations reaches critical levels, gross human rights violations and genocides will dramatically decline.

A final note of optimism: I happen to believe that the increasing rate of abstention in elections is not a sign of indifference, but rather a sign of unwillingness to support the choices offered. Rather than apathy it implies protest. Increasing wealth allows people to spend less energy on their own survival and focus more attention on larger issues. The increasing number of people who are willing to support protest movements by joining them, supporting them with donations, or enrolling as members seems to support that interpretation.

1 In November 2000 both Canada and the USA held elections with surprisingly similar results. In Canada, the government was elected with a huge majority of the seats in parliament based on about 25% of the votes of eligible voters. In the USA a president was elected with a miniscule majority after a contest where even a nomination required millions of dollars. The winner had received about a quarter of the votes of the eligible voters. Whatever else this may prove, it does demonstrate the solidity of infrastructures based on the rule of law.

2 Therefore the study of an egalitarian society is only a theoretical possibility. Even if it were possible to eliminate all social and economic bases of differentiation, there would remain the physical ones, such as age, sex, and various characteristics of the body.



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