

CAN DEMOCRACY SURVIVE THE SIREN CALL OF AUTHORITY?

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As we look out upon the world today, one of the most pressing questions is “Does democracy have a future?” In our own particularly paternalistic and condescending ways, we have looked out at the rest of the world from Europe and the United States since the end of the Second World War and believed that we had developed a political system that was so obviously superior to anything else available that it was inevitable that it would someday be the norm everywhere in the world. When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, this optimism became a kind of triumphalism. History was said to be over. Freedom would become the rule. Everyone, everywhere was thought to be on the road to democracy.

I have lived and worked in Africa, Asia, and Europe, but I was born in the United States and have spent the bulk of my adult life there, so I may have experienced this moment of triumphalism differently than Europeans have. Perhaps when one looks at the world from within the hegemon, the world looks different than it does from elsewhere. But I think that the growing movement toward an expanded European community after the collapse of the Soviet Union made the prospects for the future of democracy seem similar on both sides of the Atlantic. Perhaps Europe would have a more humane democracy than the United States, with a more generous welfare state and a less bellicose posture, but we saw ourselves as two versions of what democratic society makes possible.

Despots the world over must have laughed at our naivety. But we pressed forward in earnest. Within a few years of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the internet exploded onto the world stage and this only served to heighten the belief that democracy was inevitable everywhere, sooner rather than later. Technology zealots argued that the advent of the World Wide Web meant more voices would be heard and that this would allow a more reasoned, robust democracy to emerge. The power of elites to control political discourse had been disrupted!

But now, well into the new millennium, we have lost our naïve self-confidence. The despots of the world have re-emerged as powerful threats. But this is not why we have begun to worry about our future. The annexation of Crimea by Russia has shaken us, for instance, but this has only caused us to question our faith in the inevitability of democratic self-governance *outside* the small circle of liberal democracies. The real problem now is that we look *inward* at ourselves and worry for the future of democracy within Europe and North America.



The rise of far-right parties across Europe in the last decade is frightening and recalls in our collective memories the times in the last century when democratic societies elected fascist governments that dismantled democracy. Likewise, the ability of demagogues in Britain to drive a vote for Brexit on uninformed, misleading propaganda is unsettling. Everywhere across Europe, far-right parties are rising in the polls. The rise of an openly authoritarian figure in the American presidential contest is unprecedented. In both Europe and North America, we see that stagnant middle class incomes, growing inequality, and the destruction of jobs by new technologies have caused fear: fear of immigrants, fear of change, and fear of the future.

This fear has raised voters' interest in populists, nationalists and far-right parties; and therein lies the source of our own fear for the future of democracy. Can democracy survive the siren call of authority?

Faced with this question, I have been thrown back repeatedly on the poetry of Walt Whitman and Czesław Miłosz. Whitman embodies the nearly mystical American faith in democracy, the belief that every individual has full dignity and importance, that the democratic body of the nation is the beautiful body of *all* those people. Miłosz stands at another place in imagining the possibilities of the individual and the body politic, a wary vision shaped from having experienced both the Warsaw Ghetto during the Nazi invasion of Poland and the rise of the totalitarian, Soviet-dominated Polish state after the war. Whitman had been a battlefield nurse in the American Civil War and understood full well the passions around slavery that had driven that most destructive war in American history; but he remained optimistic and embraced the passions of the democratic nation. Miłosz was skeptical of passion and was unswayed by romantic notions of the state and the nation.

Somehow these two poets provide a mixture of hope and caution. On the one hand, democracy's future depends on a passion for others and a deep belief in human equality; on the other hand, democracy may be destroyed by selfish, frightened passions.

My two selections are the opening inscription from Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, a short poem entitled, "One's-Self I Sing" and Miłosz's "Child of Europe". Nothing can substitute for the full range of Whitman's book, but this opening inscription points to his main idea clearly and beautifully. Miłosz's poem encapsulated as well as any the range of horror he had seen, and the clear-eyed vision that it gave him.

Walt Whitman (1867)

ONE'S-SELF I SING

One's-self I sing—a simple, separate Person;
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-masse.

Of Physiology from top to toe I sing;
Not physiognomy alone, nor brain alone, is worthy for the muse—I say
the Form complete is worthier far;
The Female equally with the Male I sing.

Of Life immense in passion, pulse, and power,
Cheerful—for freest action form'd, under the laws divine,
The Modern Man I sing.

Czesław Miłosz (1946)

CHILD OF EUROPE

1

We, whose lungs fill with the sweetness of day.
Who in May admire trees flowering
Are better than those who perished.

We, who taste of exotic dishes,
And enjoy fully the delights of love,
Are better than those who were buried.

We, from the fiery furnaces, from behind barbed wires
On which the winds of endless autumns howled,
We, who remember battles where the wounded air roared in
paroxysms of pain.
We, saved by our own cunning and knowledge.

By sending others to the more exposed positions
Urging them loudly to fight on
Ourselves withdrawing in certainty of the cause lost.

Having the choice of our own death and that of a friend
We chose his, coldly thinking: Let it be done quickly.

We sealed gas chamber doors, stole bread
Knowing the next day would be harder to bear than the day before.

As befits human beings, we explored good and evil.
Our malignant wisdom has no like on this planet.

Accept it as proven that we are better than they,
The gullible, hot-blooded weaklings, careless with their lives.

2

Treasure your legacy of skills, child of Europe.
Inheritor of Gothic cathedrals, of baroque churches.
Of synagogues filled with the wailing of a wronged people.
Successor of Descartes, Spinoza, inheritor of the word 'honor',
Posthumous child of Leonidas
Treasure the skills acquired in the hour of terror.
You have a clever mind which sees instantly
The good and bad of any situation.
You have an elegant, skeptical mind which enjoys pleasures
Quite unknown to primitive races.

Guided by this mind you cannot fail to see
The soundness of the advice we give you:
Let the sweetness of day fill your lungs
For this we have strict but wise rules.

3

There can be no question of force triumphant
We live in the age of victorious justice.

Do not mention force, or you will be accused
Of upholding fallen doctrines in secret.

He who has power, has it by historical logic.
Respectfully bow to that logic.

Let your lips, proposing a hypothesis
Not know about the hand faking the experiment.

Let your hand, faking the experiment
No know about the lips proposing a hypothesis.

Learn to predict a fire with unerring precision
Then burn the house down to fulfill the prediction.

4

Grow your tree of falsehood from a single grain of truth.
Do not follow those who lie in contempt of reality.

Let your lie be even more logical than the truth itself
So the weary travelers may find repose in the lie.

After the Day of the Lie gather in select circles
Shaking with laughter when our real deeds are mentioned.

Dispensing flattery called: perspicacious thinking.
Dispensing flattery called: a great talent.

We, the last who can still draw joy from cynicism.
We, whose cunning is not unlike despair.

A new, humorless generation is now arising
It takes in deadly earnest all we received with laughter.

5

Let your words speak not through their meanings
But through them against whom they are used.

Fashion your weapon from ambiguous words.
Consign clear words to lexical limbo.

Judge no words before the clerks have checked
In their card index by whom they were spoken.

The voice of passion is better than the voice of reason.
The passionless cannot change history.

6

Love no country: countries soon disappear
Love no city: cities are soon rubble.

Throw away keepsakes, or from your desk
A choking, poisonous fume will exude.

Do not love people: people soon perish.
Or they are wronged and call for your help.

Do not gaze into the pools of the past.
Their corroded surface will mirror
A face different from the one you expected.

7

He who invokes history is always secure.
The dead will not rise to witness against him.

You can accuse them of any deeds you like.
Their reply will always be silence.

Their empty faces swim out of the deep dark.
You can fill them with any feature desired.

Proud of dominion over people long vanished,
Change the past into your own, better likeness.

8

The laughter born of the love of truth
Is now the laughter of the enemies of the people.

Gone is the age of satire. We no longer need mock.
The sensible monarch with false courtly phrases.

Stern as befits the servants of a cause,
We will permit ourselves sycophantic humor.

Tight-lipped, guided by reasons only
Cautiously let us step into the era of the unchained fire.