

Hypocrisy and Democracy

The gap between ideals and perceived reality is widening

By John Keane

We are living in times marked by the return of an old problem with deep roots: disillusionment with representative democracy. The new coolness towards democracy is admittedly hard to measure, spatially uneven and driven by such forces as global market uncertainty, religious tensions and rising public disappointment with poorly performing governments. Especially since 2001, disaffection with democracy has been deepened by the failure to promote democracy by means of war, and by the reassertion of state authority against 'terrorism', often using questionable legal and police methods.

According to the new critics of democracy, whose voices can be heard in places like Caracas, Belgrade, Shanghai and London, confidence in parties, politicians, parliaments, the core institutions of representative democracy, is waning. The critics point to research that shows public unease about organised lobbying and big-money politics; and they stress that growing numbers of poor and immigrant people feel left out of the democratic equation.

The new foes of democracy point to recent major setbacks for democrats in Russia, Kenya, Pakistan and Burma. They sneer at the manner in which so-called democracy promotion has tangibly failed in Iraq and Afghanistan. The new critics also point out that western democracies, for the sake of expediency, are now regularly turning a blind eye towards unfair elections and generally abandoning policies of democratisation, in effect making an undeclared shift in favour of authoritarian regimes that have oil and gas reserves, or serve as vital allies in matters like military hardware, the drug trade or strategic proximity to China and Russia.

For the new critics of democracy, all these trends are proof that talk of the 'end of history' and 'third waves' of democracy is fraudulent. But there the agreement among the critics ends; the new grumbling against democracy shows few signs of crystallising into a concerted and coherent attack on democracy, as last happened during the 1920s. People who curse politicians and refuse them a vote, or nationalist speeches by demagogues, are one thing; taking to the streets and killing innocents, or boarding an underground train with a rucksack packed with explosives, are quite another. In between these extremes, the grumblers come in various shapes and sizes.

There are desktop philosophers, gunmen, outspoken literary agitators and hard-line militant activists, none of them much in agreement about what needs to be done. Some critics like Jean-Claude Milner accuse democracy of genocide. Others call for a return to religiosity, or to Carl Schmitt or Karl Marx; sometimes they draw the conclusion that democracy is a tool of American imperialism, that it is doomed by the sinister forces of globalisation. Still others dream of building a new post-democratic empire guided by the vision of the 'harmonious society' (Hu Jintao). Most of them, worryingly, claim to be true friends of the people.

All these differences must admittedly feature in any account of the new foes of democracy, but social scientists should pay attention to their claims and motives, if only because there is truth in the old adage that 'the enemy is us'. Carefully analysed, these opponents draw our attention to the chronic gap between the ideals and realities of representative democracy and, hence, to the connected problems of disappointment and hypocrisy – and their power potentially to undo democracy, in unexpected ways.

Hypocrisy (*Heuchelei*) is the soil in which antipathy towards democracy always takes root. In historical terms, democratic institutions and ways of life

Zusammenfassung

Ihrem Wesen nach muss Demokratie Enttäuschungen produzieren: Sie ist nie perfekt, bleibt immer verletzlich. Wenn die Kluft zwischen dem hehren Anspruch der Demokratie und der als Realität wahrgenommenen Politik zu groß wird, kann Kritik an der „Heuchelei“ zum Antrieb auch extremer antidemokratischer Aktivitäten werden. Diese Entwicklung ist besonders seit dem 11. September 2001 weltweit zu beobachten.

have been vulnerable to a wide variety of forces. Scholars such as Juan Linz have commonly cited factors like defeat in war, unbridgeable class antagonisms, governmental paralysis and devastating natural disasters. These factors, whatever their explanatory power, never operate as automatic catalysts of change; they have no anti-democratic power in themselves. They only dissolve support for democracy insofar as they sap people's confidence, or reinforce their unbelief in democratic ways of being. But for this to happen, people must feel let down or put off by democracy; and that means they must have a gut sense that the gulf between the promises of democracy and its actual performance is so wide that democracy itself is a ruinous sham. This is another way of saying that anti-democratic sentiments feed upon the perceived gaps between ideals and so-called reality, especially when democrats themselves are blind to such gaps, or try to cover them up, for instance through the use of lying and other forms of deception.

Hypocrisy is the word normally used to describe such gaps. The word hypocrite is an expression of contempt for those who fail to practise what they preach. When used in the vernacular, people normally know nothing of its origins in the world of ancient Greek drama, where the noun *hypokrisis* referred to 'feigning, dissembling', 'acting out' and 'play acting'. It was primarily a *descriptive* term applied to speaking in dialogue, playing a part on stage, using the art of histrionics; the *hypokrites* is an actor, a player who legitimately dissembles on the stage, but only on the stage. That is why, during the 4th century BCE, the well-known orator Demosthenes poured scorn on his bitter rival Aeschines, saying that he was a rank character whose untrustworthiness stemmed from the fact that he had been a successful stage actor before taking up politics, and now found it impossible to restrain his skill at dissembling and impersonating others, this time in the *ekklēsia*.

Here, in the attack by Demosthenes on Aeschines, are the first hints of the powerfully negative connotations of the word hypocrisy, which in the European region came to bear the cross of Christianity. The Gospel according to St Matthew chided hypocrisy and hypocrites in ways that were utterly foreign to the Greeks. 'Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess'. Absorbed into the Christian tradition, hypocrisy became a barbed word for judging bad people. Christian virtue and despise of hypocrisy became conjoined twins, so not surprisingly it was not long before the sceptics and outright opponents of Christianity laid into its own two-faced duplicities, with great effect. Cesare Ripa's remarkable book of emblems, *Iconologia* (first published in Rome in 1593) contains an early example: hypocrisy is portrayed as a veiled woman, rosary beads and a mass book in hand, dressed in a cape spun from sheep's wool, but with the legs and feet of a wolf, reluctantly offering money to a beggar in the public square.

The charge of hypocrisy levelled against Christians and Christianity later morphed into secular derision and biting satire, both of which continue to play a vital public role in healthy democracies. It is therefore a strange and striking fact that there is no well-developed theoretical understanding of the relationship between hypocrisy and democracy, even though, as Hannah Arendt once noted, hypocrisy, the vice of vices, has typically been at the root of every modern revolt against modern ways of life. 'If we inquire historically into the causes that are likely to transform the *engagés* into the *enragés*,' she wrote in 1969, in an essay on violence, 'it is not injustice that ranks first but hypocrisy.'

Arendt had a point, but it cries out for elaboration. The sting of hypocrisy is arguably much more painful in the body politic of representative democracy than it ever was in the world of Christianity, if only because Christians who indulged the vice of hypocrisy had a safety net: the promise of atonement for their sins, through elaborate expiation rites, such as confessing to a priest, or asking forgiveness through prayer. Things are different with democracy. Except for public heckling, bad media coverage and humiliating electoral defeat, it has no equivalent expiation rite, backed by faith in a Higher Being. Demo-

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cracy has no merciful God, which therefore makes its leaders, leading institutions and citizens peculiarly vulnerable to the corrosive powers of hypocrisy.

There is another sense in which that is true. It is a commonplace that democracy is a peculiar political form defined by the fact that transitions to democracy always remain transitions. Democracy is never fully realised; it is always to some extent unconsolidated and defective. Democracy rests on the premise that although perfection always proves impossible to reach, steps towards self-correction, innovation and improvement are still possible. It wants to be more than it is; democracy is always the democracy to come, as Derrida rightly said. But it is also true that this self-inscribed lack makes democracy peculiarly vulnerable to its own failures and, thus, to the charge of hypocrisy.

Exactly this dynamic is revealed in a penetrating new survey of democracy in Latin America, edited by Waldo Ansaldi. The authors show that while just over half of the adult population in Latin America thinks that 'democracy is preferable to any other form of government', less than a third are satisfied with how democracy currently works in their country. Many citizens understandably blame their fiscally weak and corrupted states for failing to promote economic development or to deal with rising inequality, criminality, violence and drug trafficking. So that when asked who governs in their respective countries, nearly three-quarters of Latin Americans today believe that they are 'governed by certain powerful interests looking after themselves'. Hence the disturbing news from this study confirms the point that hypocrisy is the acid of democracy: whereas just over half of Latin American citizens favour democracy, nearly 45 percent say they would support an authoritarian government if that was to 'resolve the economic problems of the country.'

The Latin American ambivalence towards democracy may be extreme; but it is unexceptional. All democracies regularly produce disappointment among their citizens. Indeed, when you think about it, the whole modern vision of representative democracy contains within it a principle of disappointment. From the end of the eighteenth century, representative government was praised as an effective new method of apportioning blame for poor political performance – a new way of ensuring the rotation of leadership, guided by merit and humility. It was thought of as a new form of humble government, a way of creating space for dissenting political minorities and levelling competition for power, which in turn enabled elected representatives to test their political competence and leadership skills, in the presence of others equipped with the power to trip them up and throw them out of office, if and when they failed, as surely they would in the end.

The founding principle of representative democracy was as simple as it was powerful: 'the people' make their periodic appearance in elections in order to judge, sometimes harshly, the performance of their representatives. That is the whole point of elections, which are a means of disciplining representatives who have disappointed their electors, who are then entitled to throw harsh words and paper rocks at them. If representatives were always virtuous, impartial, competent and responsive, then elections would lose their purpose.

It is true that democracies, by virtue of their mechanisms for rotating power holders and checking and balancing power, have built-in mechanisms for dealing with hypocrites and felt hypocrisy. We throw scoundrels out from office, onto the streets, taunts at their back. But there are also moments when the perceived gap between promise and performance becomes abysmal, so intolerable to certain people that they draw the conclusion that democracy is a rotting fruit. It is at that point, as in our times, that opponents of democracy are made, and begin to flex their muscles.

References

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