

HOW DEMOCRACIES DIE

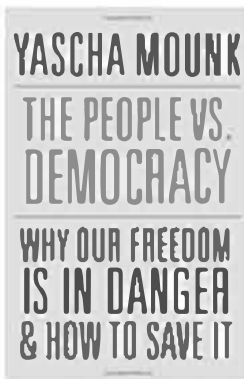
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***The People vs.
Democracy: Why Our
Freedom Is in Danger
& How to Save It***

Yascha Mounk

Harvard University Press



How Democracies Die

Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt

Crown Publishing



For some time, thinking people who feel responsibility for the fate of our planet have been asking whether democracy, as it has long been understood and valued, is stumbling towards impotence, or outright irrelevance. Opinions differ about the sources of this mounting global unease. Some observers claim to know its root causes, or treat it as a passing aberration. Others find themselves perplexed by the disorder that comes mixed with promise. As if to prove Machiavelli's observation that the road to hell is easy, since it is downhill and followed with eyes shut, still others simply do not care. Yet there is general agreement that rot and decay are spreading within states that call themselves democracies. Things are not going well.

A measure of our darkening times is the way American political scientists, once the trumpeters of good news about the global triumph of democracy, are now speaking in mournful tones about the fading of the democratic

dream. Yascha Mounk writes that liberal democracy did “more to spread peace and prosperity than any other in the history of humanity”. He writes in the spirit of lament for a time when the most powerful liberal democracy, the United States of America, functioned as a “shining city upon a hill” (as President Reagan said in a farewell from the Oval Office). Now, by contrast, this model is suffering an “existential crisis”. The type of government that uniquely mixed “individual rights” (liberalism) and “popular rule” (democracy) and that “long characterized most governments in North America and Western Europe” is “coming apart at its seams”.

What drives this disintegration? Mounk, a lecturer at Harvard University, sides with the spirit and substance of liberalism (“protecting individual rights” through the rule of law) against democracy and its populist fetish of government based on popular will. His critique warns of the dangers of democracy without rights: in a growing number of countries, including the United States, “individual rights and the rule of law are now under concerted attack from populist strongmen”.

Mounk is surely right about the trends, but his diagnosis of the current malaise relies too heavily on a simple tale about the tragic estrangement of the once happily married couple liberalism and democracy. Elsewhere in the book, sensibly, he identifies the many real-world forces that are stoking discontent inside democracies: a drift towards technocracy; a deep disaffection with politicians’ poor narratives and leadership skills; the hollowing out of mass-membership political parties; the collapse of cartel party systems that once served as instruments for integrating and reconciling social differences. So (we can add) are dragnet surveillance, militarised policing, rising incarceration rates, and state clampdowns on public assembly, which together make democracies feel more repressive. The long war on terrorism adds to the pressures on civil liberties, strengthening the hand of garrison states that are neither liberal nor democratic. And local institutions, such as parliaments, are being swallowed by cross-border chains of corporate and governmental power wholly unaccountable to citizens.

All these forces of disaffection have economic drivers, but Mounk's analysis has trouble making the connections. The market power of corporations goes missing in his rather nineteenth-century definition of liberalism as "basic values like freedom of speech, the separation of powers, or the protection of individual rights". He knows well that four decades of privatisation have resulted almost everywhere in predatory banks, widening gaps between rich and poor, and the emergence of a substantial "precarariat" of under-employed and part-time workers in poorly paid jobs with little long-term security. Most observers associate these trends with what is widely called neoliberalism, a label that acknowledges the strong affinities that modern liberalism has with private property, markets and the ethos of possessive individualism. Yet Mounk's liberalism is too purist to acknowledge these affinities. It has a casuist quality: he seems unable to call things by their proper name. To do so would scramble his neat thesis of the unfinished historic struggle between the demons of democracy and the angels of liberalism.

Mounk is understandably preoccupied with the diabolical

dynamics inside the United States, but is oblivious to the equally worrying devilish forces operating at the global level. Something else is happening that is bigger, and more harmful to democracy, as Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt emphasise in their provocatively titled *How Democracies Die*. They analyse the reasons for the breakdown of democracy in states as different as Turkey, Venezuela, Argentina and Russia. "We must learn from other countries to see the warning signs – and recognize the false alarms," they write. Their point is that the sufferings of democracy are not only an American problem. Democracy is confronted by a new world disorder that is emerging from "the collapse of the Soviet Union, the crisis of the EU, the rise of China, and the growing aggressiveness of Russia".

Levitsky and Ziblatt, both Harvard professors, have little to say about the renewed belligerence of American power during recent decades and whether its global empire is bad for democracy. Like most other Americans who no longer read Gore Vidal, they seem to think talk of empire is not cool. Levitsky and Ziblatt do ask whether we are witnessing "the decline and fall of one of the

world's oldest and most successful democracies", yet they leave the question unanswered. Nevertheless, they remind us, valuably, that democracies can die slow deaths "at the hands not of generals but of elected leaders". They say many interesting things about extreme political polarisation, which has a murderous impact on democracy, and the importance of "institutional forbearance" in preventing abuses of power. And their analysis makes one thing clear: despite the haughty talk of the end of history, the once popular presumption (championed by Francis Fukuyama and other American liberal scholars and politicians) that "liberal democracy" would enjoy a global triumph has collapsed. Instead, our world is witnessing the growth of new types of anti-democratic regime – "laboratories of authoritarianism", whose surprising levels of public support and resilience in the face of serious economic, environmental and social problems suggest they are more durable than outside observers suppose.

Levitsky and Ziblatt are wrong to call these alternatives

to power-sharing democracy "autocracies", "dictatorships" and "authoritarianism". China, Iran, Russia and Saudi Arabia are not the opposite of democracy. They are phantom democracies. Their crafty rulers are busily experimenting with a wide range of locally made democratic tools designed to win the trust and loyalty of their subjects. Examples include the injection of accountability mechanisms into state bureaucracy, the toleration of independent public-opinion leaders, the growing reliance on opinion polls and "democratic style" among state officials and corporate executives, and the calculated use of digitally networked media as early warning devices. These methods seem to favour rule from above. They help explain why 21st-century authoritarian regimes are globally significant political laboratories: the testing grounds for a new type of top-down popular government claiming to be superior to constitutional democracies, which once seemed so sure of themselves and are now struggling to survive in a dangerously uncertain world.

John Keane