Is There a Difference Between a Democracy and a Western-style Democracy?

Democracy has got to be the most overworked and under-defined word in the English language these days - in fact, in any language, given that memes spread across the planet faster than the speed of light. The more ruthless and rash the United States becomes in its determination to rule the world, relying increasingly on the power of words, the greater the urgency of unmasking its use of the word ‘democracy’ as a farce.

According to the conventional ‘wisdom’, if all citizens above a certain age - usually eighteen or twenty-one - are entitled to vote for representatives in a country’s law-making bodies, they are living in a democracy. But if the US were really serious about defending democracy, it would not claim that Cuba, for example, or Russia, fail the test. These two countries, together with a long list of other nations, are not considered members of the ‘club of democratic nations’. In the case of Cuba, there is only one political party, and in the case of Russia, the President wields too much power and elections are suspicious. Yet, as reported by Medea Benjamin at Cuba has pioneered decentralized democracy, and Putin has long enjoyed an approval rating in the eighties!

In reality, democracy is less about elections than about who actually writes the laws. Russia is not a beltway sanctioned democracy because when situations require it, Putin tells the elected members of the Duma what laws to pass, which could be regarded as a dicatatorship in the West. The United States is a democracy because our President can’t do that: but is it preferable for lobbyists to tell the Congress what laws to pass, while ‘think tanks’ take over the job of writing them from our elected representatives? Is a country that relies on military might, intervening wherever its commercial needs are not being satisfied to impose ‘regime change’ a democracy, when a large majority of its citizens oppose such policies? Is it a democracy when most of the assets are in the hands of a small minority? Or when only half the population has access to medical care?

Across the world, kids are taught that countries should be democratic, and as they grow up they judge their own and other countries by the accepted definition of the words: ‘free and fair elections’, a ‘free’ press, the ‘rule of law’ implemented via a system of ‘checks and balances’, meaning that the judiciary is independent of both the executive and the legislative branches of government. But countries can boast all of these achievements, and not really be democratic, in the sense of responding to the needs of the majority of its citizens.

The word ‘democracy’, which, as every school child knows, was coined by the Greeks over two thousand years ago, means ‘the people’ hold the power. In actual fact, only male citizens, not women or slaves, could express their opinions publicly and vote in ancient Athens, yet politicians the world over claims that if every citizen has a vote, the system is democratic. During the eighteenth century Enlightenment, in a world (i.e., Europe) in which population growth made direct participation impossible, autocracies became constitutional monarchies, a relatively benign form of rule from above, of which Great Britain is the poster-child: although she appoints the Prime Minister, the Queen has no power, but can only hope for the best. Other constitutional monarchies include the Scandinavian countries, which are social democracies that are sometimes ruled by conservatives. The Scandinavian constitutional monarchies are considered to be the most advanced countries in the world.
An important requirement for a regime to be considered democratic is that it is entirely in the hands of ‘civilians’ who tell the military what to do. If a military man gets himself elected in a ‘free and fair election’ (for example, President Al Sisi of Egypt), he is not a dictator, even though his former military buddies can be expected to spring into action at the slightest threat to his rule.

Non-constitutional monarchies such as Saudi Arabia and the other countries of the Persian Gulf do not even pretend to be democratic. They are not among the long list of ‘our dictators’ such as those of Africa - or until recently, Myanmar - or, going a bit further back, the caudillos that ruled America’s ‘back yard’ until an enduring Cuban revolution persuaded the rest of the continent to resist American oversight. The Persian gulf monarchies occupy a unique niche located on vast reserves of oil. American officialdom never refers them as ‘democracies’, and stations planes and ships on their soil to protect their feudal rulers when their people, such as Yemenis or Bahrainis, rise up demanding democracy.

What about the countries of Eastern Europe, held for decades under Soviet, shall we say, guardianship? Now they’re ‘free’ and you won’t find anywhere a bunch of people more committed to the American definition of democracy. The Poles, in particular, are so committed to American style democracy that they are itching to go to war with ‘Putin’s Russia’. The Baltic nations are so committed to democracy that everyone is target practicing while Neo-Nazis parade through the streets, in a page from Nuland’s Ukraine.

Currently, Ukraine is the big democracy story. Victoria Nuland, former Bill Clinton aide and still, as she was under Hillary Clinton, Assistant Secretary of State for Eastern European Affairs, almost single-handedly fomented a coup against the President of Ukraine, Victor Yanukovich, who had been elected in 2010 in internationally recognized ‘free and fair’ elections. The majority of Ukrainians who demonstrated in the Maidan for weeks in 2013-14 simply wanted to live in a ‘more democratic’ country, while Nuland’s goal was to chop off a piece of Russia’s ‘near abroad’. Battles of thugs who, according one of their leaders, Dimity Yaros, http://Exclusive: Leader of Far-Right Ukrainian Militant Group Talks Revolution With TIME, had been training for the job for months in Western Ukraine (the part that borders on Poland which borders on the Baltic states...) were brought in to settle the matter.

When the Ukrainians found themselves living under a much worse regime than the one they had helped to overthrow, those in the East, many of whom, as a result of history and geography were mainly ethnic Russians, were appalled: the Ukrainian Nazis the new leaders used as their shock troops were the descendants of those who had helped the Germans kill thousands of their forebears during the second world war. When Yaros and his buddies, as well as former presidential candidate Yulia Timoshenko, unabashedly called for the elimination of ‘Jews and Russians’, eastern Ukrainians refused to participate in the presidential election, organizing referenda in Donetsk and Lugansk that created two breakaway entities known as Novorossiya. Kiev responded with military force to kill them or force them to move to Russia, abandoning Ukraine’s vast stores of coal and most of its industry to the Kiev regime.

It would have been unthinkable for Vladimir Putin not to support the breakaway republics, as they are called, given the Soviet Union’s World War II losses to Nazi Germany, estimated at 26,000,000 (compared to 70,000,000 for all of Europe and fewer than 500,000 for the United States). And yet, that measured support is presented as an aggression by the country that carried out the coup in Kiev! America’s leaders promote ‘democracy’, and ‘regime change’ in the same breath, and far too many voters fail to see the contradiction. Apparently, ‘democracy’ is about what happens inside a country, not whether it is the victim of outside manipulation, and Americans have been led to believe that democracy is only word they need to know when it comes to judging politics. Ideology is a foreign notion to be shunned, thus Americans do not have the knowledge that would cause them to be shocked when fascist militias are used to shore up a ‘democratic’ regime.

Unlike the United States, Europe is steeped in ideology. The European Union represents the highest level of civilization the world has achieved, its almost thirty countries functioning as democratic welfare states, with parties from the far left to the far right participating in the political fray. Worried that Americans might eventually demand the same six week vacations and free medical care enjoyed by Europeans, the Wall Street-led military/industrial/financial complex engineered an economic debacle that has brought the welfare state to its knees. Combined with the presence of ever larger Muslim minorities, the situation is driving Europe into the arms of new fascists similar to those who clubbed their way to power in the Maidan.

This leads to an impertinent question: If allowing all citizens to vote fails to prevent power from residing in the hands of a few, should the word ‘democracy’ be used as the criterion for proper government? Socialists of all stripes insist that it isn’t enough for democracy to be ‘political’, giving each citizen a vote. It must also be ‘social’, ensuring that
the needs of all are met. They are opposed by ‘liberals’ who would like us to believe that guaranteeing ‘equality of opportunity’ suffices to ensure the well-being of all. Increasingly around the world citizens are coming to the conclusion that ‘democracy’ as the sole criterion of government is a God that has failed.

In 1949, six eminent writers, the Americans Louis Fischer, Stephen Spender, and Richard Wright, the Hungarian-British Arthur Koestler, the French Andre Gide and the Italian Ignazio Silone published a book on their conversion to and subsequent disillusionment with communism, titled The God that Failed. What is interesting about this book is that Fischer called the moment in which some communists or fellow-travelers decide not just to leave the Communist Party but to oppose it as anti-communists ‘Kronstadt’. ‘Kronstadt’ was a 1921 military rebellion during the young Soviet Union’s struggle against Western armies seeking ‘regime change’. In bold below are Kronstadt’s demands that are still being made today across the ‘democratic’ world:

1 Immediate new elections to the Soviets; the present Soviets no longer express the wishes of the workers and peasants. **The new elections** should be held by secret ballot, and should be preceded by free electoral propaganda for all workers and peasants before the elections.

2 Freedom of speech and of the press for workers and peasants, for the Anarchists, and for the Left Socialist parties.

3 The right of assembly, and freedom for trade union and peasant associations.

4 The organization, at the latest on 10 March 1921, of a Conference of non-Party workers, soldiers and sailors of Petrograd, Kronstadt and the Petrograd District.

5 The liberation of all political prisoners of the Socialist parties, and of all imprisoned workers and peasants, soldiers and sailors belonging to working class and peasant organizations.

6 The election of a commission to look into the dossiers of all those detained in prisons and concentration camps.

7 The abolition of all political sections in the armed forces; no political party should have privileges for the propagation of its ideas, or receive State subsidies to this end. In place of the political section, various cultural groups should be set up, deriving resources from the State.

8 The immediate abolition of the militia detachments set up between towns and countryside.

9 The equalization of rations for all workers, except those engaged in dangerous or unhealthy jobs.

10 The abolition of Party combat detachments in all military groups; the abolition of Party guards in factories and enterprises. If guards are required, they should be nominated, taking into account the views of the workers.

11 The granting to the peasants of freedom of action on their own soil, and of the right to own cattle, provided they look after them themselves and do not employ hired labour.

12 We request that all military units and officer trainee groups associate themselves with this resolution.

13 We demand that the Press give proper publicity to this resolution.

14 We demand the institution of mobile workers’ control groups.

15 We demand that handicraft production be authorized, provided it does not utilize wage labour.

Like today’s voters, the Kronstadt recruits - demonstrating as citizens - wanted more bread and less control. But the similarities end there. Although the rebellion was put down militarily, Lenin recognized that their demands echoed those of the population at large, and replaced what today we call ‘austerity’ with a less punishing New Economic Policy that lasted until 1928. The fledgling communist state was probably saved by recognizing that it had to respond to the workers’ demands, while today’s ‘democratic’ European and American governments insist on maintaining crippling austerity.

In the same year that the Russian revolutionaries took power, the American President Woodrow Wilson made the agonizing decision to enter the first World War that was devastating Europe, against Germany. One sentence from the speech he made to the American Congress to request a declaration of war, became a watchword: ‘to make the world safe for democracy’. If you read the speech, which can be found at [http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4943/](http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4943/), you will see that Wilson was referring specifically to the fact that Germany was not a democratic country, that its attacks on unarmed merchant vessels bringing supplies to European countries at war would not have been possible had it
been a democracy, because ‘the people’ would not have tolerated such an immoral action. In Wilson’s mind, the phrase that became famous with a different meaning seems to have meant: ‘We have to go to war with Germany to make the world safe for democracies such as ours, which would never carry out such immoral attacks on civilians as are being carried out by an undemocratic Germany.’ It did not, at the time, mean what it was later taken to mean, i.e., ‘The US has to rule the world to make it safe for the financial/industrial complex, to rule’. Under the pretext of ‘bringing democracy’ to a country, the US modifies its entire political structure in order for it to serve the financial/military/industrial complex.

The most extreme form of that reorganization is embodied in the two major trade agreements that the US is trying to impose on the Pacific and European worlds, the TPP and TAFTA. As a telling example of the scope of these agreements, they would establish a framework for the re-privatization of the one of the European Union’s most significant features: free health care for all.

Notwithstanding the vast cultural and political differences between ‘Kronstadt’ and ‘Occupy’, the commonalities are striking. The austerity imposed on citizens by the world’s bankers to recoup losses created by their own reckless behavior has pulled the left out of decades of disarray. Parties like Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain are fomenting a modern equivalent to the Kronstadt rebellion. All over Europe, demonstrating has become an almost full-time occupation, now combining resistance to austerity with opposition to Muslim refugees. According to a 2015 article in the NYT:

Mario Draghi, president of the European Cenetral bank, acknowledged that Europeans “are going through very difficult times.” As a European Union institution “that has played a central role throughout the crisis, the ECB has become a focal point for those frustrated with this situation,” Mr. Draghi said in prepared remarks. “This may not be a fair charge — our action has been aimed precisely at cushioning the shocks suffered by the economy. But as the central bank of the whole euro area, we must listen very carefully to what all our citizens are saying.”

Fischer’s reference to Kronstadt was about Lenin’s repression, but Draghi was admitting that ‘austerity’ is modern Europe’s ‘Kronstadt’ and that the people will only put up with so much. According to a detailed report by the German Deutsche Welle news service:

France’s Up all Night isn’t some rag-tag little group of anarchists. It’s a leftist alliance composed of more than 90 organizations from across Europe - some big, some small - that have united in opposition to the European crisis, which Greece shares its five years of austerity with thousands of refugees while wealthier countries tout their generosity.

This, then, is the face of 21st century ‘democracy’ defined as a system based on ‘free and fair elections’. At the same time as the European left is finding its feet after a long decline, in the United States, after decades of worker passivity, Bernie Sanders has galvanized Americans eager for progressive change. For more than half a century, since the days of McCarthy, the mainstream media had successfully claimed that ‘Americans are not interested in foreign affairs’ to justify keeping its coverage to a minimum. But social media campaigns are international, and they have gradually widened American awareness of what the rest of the world is thinking and doing. In a stunning innovation, Ferguson’s Black Lives Matter has coupled its fight for justice with that of the Palestinians of Gaza, and more of these alliances are sure to follow.

If there is any hope that the United States is not headed for irrelevancy, it rests with a long overdue transformation of America’s definition of democracy from ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’ to ‘liberty, equality, fraternity’ as expressed by the French Revolution - and every revolution since. Thomas Jefferson wrote: “The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants.” And long before him, Aristotle wrote: “In a democracy the poor will have more power than the rich, because there are more of them, and the will of the majority is supreme.”

As long as ‘democracy’ is defined as one man, one vote, that will not happen.

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