

?American? Democracy

Written by GWYNNE DYER

If I have to read one more hand-wringing article about the 'crisis of American democracy' and what it means for the world, I'm going toretch.

The last straw was an article in the 'New Yorker' this week by Adam Gopnik, an accomplished journalist whom I usually admire. It was called 'What We Get Wrong About America's Crisis of Democracy', and the strapline read: 'The interesting question is not what causes authoritarianism but what has ever suspended it.'

No, that's the wrong question. It assumes, as Gopnik says, that 'The default condition of humankind is not to thrive in broadly egalitarian and stable democratic arrangements that get unsettled only when something happens to unsettle them. The default condition of humankind, traced across thousands of years of history, is some sort of autocracy.'

The obvious way to continue this article would be to point out that Joe Biden won the election, that thanks to the run-off elections in Georgia the Democrats will control both houses of Congress, and that the joint session of Congress on Wednesday decisively rejected the corrupt populist and would-be strongman Donald Trump. Take that, Adam Gopnik!

All that is true, but Gopnik is correct in saying that American democracy is still in serious trouble and that the populist tide is running strongly in the world. The problem is with his view of the rest of the world and America's place in it.

Gopnik grew up in Canada, but he seems to have drunk the American Kool-Aid. That is the familiar mythology in which the United States is not only the first mass democracy but the indispensable one, the shining example without which the others would wander hopelessly in the darkness.

That's not true. Democracy is the default mode political system, even though it is 'the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time,' as Winston Churchill said in the House of Commons in 1947 (quoting an unknown predecessor).

Almost every dictator in the world holds fake elections so he can claim legitimacy, however fraudulently. No democratic leaders falsely claim to be dictators or tyrants (although some, like Trump, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Orbán in Hungary and Duterte in the Philippines, secretly aspire to it). So default mode democracy wins in a walk.

This was not true before the 18th century. There are indeed 'all those thousands of years of history' when the norm was 'some form of autocracy'. But before that there are all those hundreds of thousands of years of pre-history when all humans lived as equals, reaching their decisions by discussion and consensus, in little hunter-gatherer bands.

We know this because some of those bands, living in out-of-the-way places, survived long enough for anthropologists to study them 'and they were all egalitarian. In fact, they had no formal leaders, and the worst social crime was for one adult man to give an order to another.

They didn't hold elections, because the bands were hardly ever more than a hundred strong and they could just talk things over. But the core belief of democracy is that everybody has equal rights including a share in the decision-making process, and our distant ancestors all believed that. They believed it for so long that it became a basic human value.

That basic human belief went underground when the first mass societies appeared around 6,000 years ago. The only way to run them was from the top down, by force, because without mass communications (and they hadn't even invented writing yet) there was no way for tens or hundreds of thousands of people to make decisions together as equals.

So the tyrants took over and had a very long run, but the belief in equality never died, as all the slave and peasant revolts attest. And by the 18th century a kind of mass communications had finally emerged. Just the printing press plus mass literacy, but that meant everybody could get back to making decisions together as equals, and so the democratic revolutions began.

The United States was the first, perhaps because it then had the highest rate of literacy in the world. The far more radical French Revolution came only thirteen years later (it even abolished slavery), and democracy just kept spreading. By now half the governments on the planet are genuinely elected, and the other half pretend to be.

Democracy has nothing to do with being American or 'Western'. China was the first country with printing, and if it had also had mass literacy it could well have been the first country to have a democratic revolution. American democracy will probably survive its current difficulties. Democracy as the default mode in the world certainly will.