

# Anne Applebaum's Debt to Adorno

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*Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*

By Anne Applebaum

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Since 2016, books devoted to the decline of democracy have established a niche market. Political scientists like David Runciman, Yascha Mounk, Larry Diamond, Steven Levitsky, and Daniel Ziblatt contemplate how democracies might “die” or “end.” It is to this academically fashionable American gothic genre devoted to the decay and death of the democratic body politic that we may assign Anne Applebaum’s *Twilight of Democracy*.

Unusually, given that the diviners of democratic doom are, for the most part, disappointed liberals, Applebaum once considered herself an enlightened conservative. Indeed, she still commends the “classical liberal,” democratic, international vision Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan espoused in the 1980s. But it has been irreparably sullied of late, she argues, by Anglo-American conservative intellectuals and commentators that include, among others, Roger Kimball, John O’Sullivan, Simon Heffer, and Dinesh D’Souza, whom she once befriended and entertained at the globalization-chic parties she hosted in her politician husband’s native Poland in the 1990s.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, she believed they all shared a common faith in

the end of totalitarianism, the triumph of reason, and a liberal democratic international order. Not so, it seems. These conservative *clerics* have abandoned the optimism of those heady days in a populist fit that Applebaum takes personally. They may even, she hints, have concealed a “closet authoritarian” demeanour all along.

Reflecting upon *La Trahison des Clercs*, Julien Benda’s attack upon those twentieth-century European intellectuals who abandoned dispassionate scholarship and Enlightenment universalism for “political passion” and the “intellectual organization of political hatreds,” Applebaum discovers a new and dangerous conservative “treason of the intellectuals.” The election of Trump in 2016 together with the Brexit vote, she believes, prompted her erstwhile colleagues to exploit the “authoritarian predisposition” of simple-minded electorates for nationalist purposes, a trait linking them genealogically to the Action Française fascism of Charles Maurras in the 1920s.

In Applebaum’s view, a “constructive nostalgia” for national identity and a lost sense of unity have corrupted both the Republican Party and post-Brexit English Tories like Daniel Hannan and Boris John-

son. It informs their admiration for the illiberal populism pursued by Viktor Orbán in Hungary and the Law and Justice Party in Poland. This authoritarian disposition not only troubles the U.K. and the U.S., the homelands of representative democratic institutions, but the influence of its *clerics*, like John O'Sullivan, also affects the paranoid political enthusiasms sweeping western Europe evident in Spain, Italy, and Greece and in the European Union's heartland states of Germany and France.

Applebaum's polemic shares an elective affinity with a mood swing in comparative political science from liberal optimism to pessimism about democracy's future. The reasons for this loss of faith, however, reveal a crisis not so much in established democracies themselves but in the limited political vocabulary that social scientists employ to compare systems of government and to promote a particular progressive view of how they might function.

In the 1990s, both conservative and liberal political scientists, from Samuel Huntington and Seymour Martin Lipset to Larry Diamond and Robert Dahl, identified a "third wave" of democracy sweeping the globe. Dahl wrote that an unprecedented political change occurred in the 1990s: "All of the main alternatives to democracy had either disappeared, turned into eccentric survivals or retreated from the field to hunker down in their last strongholds."

Yet what democratic theorists understood by democracy proved curiously mutable over time. During the Cold War, the inchoate American discipline of comparative political science opted for a parsimonious definition. Following Joseph Schumpeter's 1943 classic, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, political scientists considered "the democratic method" as that "institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions... by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote." Dahl spelt out its minimal

procedural requirements: elected officials; free, fair, and frequent elections; freedom of expression; alternative sources of information; associational autonomy; and inclusive citizenship. It also eschewed unelected "tutelary" authorities like monarchs, militaries, and priesthoods.

Samuel Huntington concurred, adding that this realist model involved two dimensions: contestation and participation. This afforded a procedural benchmark that made it possible to judge to what extent different regimes were democratic, compare them, and assess whether these "systems are becoming more or less democratic." From this "systemic" and seemingly scientific perspective, Seymour Martin Lipset identified the economic preconditions that would inform the processes of liberalization and democratization in developing states. Subsequently, his student Larry Diamond found that, although it has "multiple causations," a common thread linked "regime performance" to democratic legitimacy.

Even eccentric autocratic regimes that survived this inexorable global movement felt constrained to offer some form of electoral competition, however specious. Yet as one form or another of electoral democracy became the only game in town, the concept of democracy also stretched to include something more virtuous than mere procedures. The democratic package now came with the associated virtues of good governance, accountability, transparency, the rule of law, and respect for civil liberties, alongside equitable economic growth. As the Third Wave peaked, Dahl regretted "that every actual democracy has always fallen short" of the requisite criteria he and his fellow scientists increasingly demanded. Democracy extended elastically to entail an ideal goal as well as "a procedural actuality that is only a partial attainment of the goal."

Introducing qualitative values into quantifiable procedures is a recipe for incoherence,

and the fact that those analyzing the procedure were partisans of this new idealist agenda did not help. Diamond, who launched the *Journal of Democracy* in 1990 to decode, advance, and promote the democratic model, found that “democracies in trouble were virtually all illiberal,” suffering from “weak rule of law, violation of human rights, corruption and no independent judiciary.”

To avoid illiberal breakdowns, states must achieve “democratic consolidation.” This required a well-functioning state and judicial system, decent and fair elections, “horizontal accountability, and different means of checking and restraining the abuse of power.” Democratic publics also demanded “truly free, accountable, honest, just, inclusive and responsive government.” For Yascha Mounck, this requires the “non-negotiable” promise of “multi-ethnic democracy.” Without such morally accountable and just governance, democracy in any form, it was alleged, was vulnerable to breakdown. Many democracies, Diamond averred, were in “recession,” “degraded by the actions of their own democratically elected executives.”

Yet as Montesquieu and the authors of *The Federalist* recognized, democracy’s virtues of liberty and equality require limits, not progressive extensions. Montesquieu’s reasoning in fact suggests that once invested with power even liberals are apt to abuse it and will carry authority as far as it will go. Virtue, and especially virtue signalling, also needs constitutional restraint. The prevention of abuse requires that “power should be a check to power.”

In its “first wave,” democracy assumed a state where impersonal law regulated personal freedom. It implied that governments were responsive to the desires and opinions of the governed and accountable to them. A government regulated by law and responsible to the body politic is a constitutional government, and constitutionalism or republican-

ism is therefore perhaps a more adequate appellation for this form of government than democracy. In the careless hands of later political scientists, the term *democracy* has sadly suffered verbicide.

This becomes evident when Applebaum, like the political science departments of most Anglo-American universities, attributes our current democratic malaise to “authoritarianism.” As Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt explain in *How Democracies Die*, they can die slowly, deceptively, and in piecemeal fashion with the election of an authoritarian leader, the abuse of power, and the repression of opposition.

Curiously, according to this way of thinking it is only conservatives that cultivate this intolerant, politically polarizing predisposition. Black Lives Matter, the Democrats, the U.K.’s Labour Party, the EU, and unelected tutelary bodies like the universities themselves, have, we are told, “not been the principal drivers” of “deeper polarization.” Instead, democracy in the U.S. and U.K. today, “dying from within,” has been eviscerated by conservatives with a penchant for something only recently added to the political science vocabulary, namely authoritarianism.

According to this Manichean style of thinking, paranoid populism and authoritarian personalities threaten the democratic ideals of multiethnic equality, justice, and liberty. In other words, virtuous government can no longer be entrusted to the people because the people suffer from both a horror of complexity and a simple-minded attraction to the authoritarian personality, aka Donald Trump, Viktor Orban, and, even more incongruously, Boris Johnson.

“Authoritarian” and its cognate terms “authoritarianism” and “the authoritarian personality” do a lot of work in this grammar of decline, but what do they actually mean? The theorists of the “third wave” had identified a form of electoral politics that tolerates

opposition but manipulates it to guarantee certain electoral outcomes. They initially termed this practice, exemplified by states in East and Southeast Asia, “illiberal democracy.” As these regimes proved impermeable to the third wave’s blandishments, Levitsky and his colleagues called it “competitive authoritarianism.”

Armed with this new model, it was easy to find it at play in Hungary and Poland and to stretch the concept further and find its tentacles suffocating established constitutional governments in the U.K., U.S., and Australia, where conservative parties might have the temerity to question progressive liberal-democratic ideals. Applebaum thus finds authoritarianism corrupting not only the Trump-era U.S. but also informing the U.K.’s withdrawal from the EU. Indeed, conservative policies that might value unity, national integrity, sovereignty, and the rule of law now appear replete with authoritarian implications.

How? Applebaum’s critique shares a theoretical affinity with Levitsky and Ziblatt, who identify four practices informing authoritarianism: a lack of commitment to democratic rules; denying the legitimacy of political opponents; toleration of violence; and a readiness to curtail the civil liberties of opponents, including media. Is this plausible, though—and how did it first arise?

Its origins may be traced to the Marxist Frankfurt School of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who first detected how authoritarianism corrupted European politics between the World Wars. Democracy theorists thus draw similarities between contemporary U.S. and U.K. politics and the collapse of the Weimar Republic in 1933 and the rise of fascism across Europe. In fact, according to Levitsky and Ziblatt the Italian and German experiences of the 1920s and ’30s “highlight the type of fateful alliance that often elevates authoritarians to power.”

Yet to reduce contemporary political outcomes to an “authoritarian personality” disorder commits an egregious political solecism. The term is a Marxist ideological construction, not a political theory. Adorno and Horkheimer floated the concept as a device for smoking out concealed fascism everywhere, especially in the false consciousness of postwar, Western, liberal, consumer capitalism.

Applebaum should know this. To obscure this dubious genealogy, she instead contends that the roots of authoritarianism as a concept may be found in the work of liberal political theorists like Hannah Arendt and in Benda’s work on intellectual treason. According to Applebaum, these writers first identified the authoritarian predisposition in leaders like Hitler and Mussolini, who offered solace to those seeking liberation from anomic lives through an activist mass movement. Applebaum’s reading of Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* consequently argues that “closet authoritarians” mobilize a paranoid populist predisposition, culminating in polarizing, anti-pluralist, totalitarian dictatorship.

Arendt, however, had little time for the Frankfurt School or its theory of authoritarianism. In her careful exposition of the contrast between authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, she wrote that “in totalitarian movements authority is *not* filtered down from the top” through intervening layers “to the bottom of the body politic,” as was the case with authoritarian regimes. Arendt argues that in spite of “the numerous misunderstandings concerning *the so-called authoritarian personality*, the principle of authority is, in all important respects, diametrically opposed to that of totalitarian domination.” Rather than authoritarianism inexorably eliding into totalitarianism, as Applebaum and the augurs of democratic decline imply, Arendt treated authoritarianism and totalitarianism as distinct forms of

rule. Conservatives might therefore embrace the principle of authority and not abandon respect for either a mixed and balanced constitution or the rule of law.

By contrast, Applebaum and the melodrama that is contemporary democratic theory invoke that most ancient of unfalsifiable analogies, the cycle of rise and fall. In its modern guise, this takes a long view of the future and short view of the past, expressed in a language of what Arendt termed “scientificity”—taking statements in the form of predictions to a height of “efficiency of method and absurdity of content” because “there is hardly a better way to avoid discussion than by releasing an argument from the

control of the present and saying that only the future can reveal its merits.”

In truth democracy, which concerns the source of government authority, entails nothing about the participatory, inclusive, just, or responsive way it is conducted, and to suggest it must do so is to commit a category mistake. The addition of progressive values and declinist despair to a procedural arrangement plunges the theory, rather than the democratic institutions themselves, into disarray.

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