

When Democracy Fails . . . And When It Rallies
Reflection for FUUSM
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September 4, 2016

There's a joke making the rounds on social media—maybe you've seen it. In it, "Queen Elizabeth II" addresses the American people, claiming that since we've proved incompetent at self-governance (given the current election), Britain will be revoking our independence: Queen Elizabeth will reestablish monarchical rule over "all states, commonwealths, and territories, except North Dakota (which she does not fancy). . . . Congress and the Senate will be disbanded. A questionnaire may be circulated next year to see if any of you noticed." Such is the state of our democracy. The UU General Assembly has declared that "corruption in our democracy" is the most significant issue of the moment. Sometimes it seems it would be easier for someone to take charge and make the decisions for us (even if it would require adding the u's to words like colour and honour. . . and, notably today, labour).

This joke struck me as an interesting link between what I talked about the last time I was up here a couple of weeks ago—how American rebellion was an extension of the radically democratic thinking produced in 17th century Britain—and what I aim to talk about today: the Trouble With Democracy. For most of the time I've been teaching, this idea that democracy is a rather frustrating and difficult form of government has been a tough sell to my students. From the time they were little, they've been inculcated with the idea that democracy is The Best Form of Government, which every person knows almost instinctively and of course would choose among all other forms of government if only they had the chance. It's been hard to explain to them why a large number of people in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s gave up democracy for authoritarian rule—eagerly—and why some in Russia today still feel nostalgia for Stalin. Who would choose to be ruled over, instead of participating in self-governance? We're getting a study in that these days here in the United States, and I've noticed a corresponding trend of students who admire authoritarian leaders for their strength, decisiveness, ability to enforce unity and "get the job done."

Because, democracy is messy and complicated: it's multi-vocal and institutionalizes dissent; it emphasizes civil discourse over violence (the raw exercise of power); it resists uniformity; it can be excruciatingly slow to act; and it requires compromises that often leave everyone unsatisfied—or when compromise cannot be achieved, leaves the job undone.

The story of Europe in the years between WWI and WWII is one that demonstrates the hazards of democracy—and the appeal of authoritarianism in turbulent times. Woodrow Wilson justified the war to Americans as a conflict that "would make the world safe for democracy." And, indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the Great War, democracy seemed to have won the day. In 1921, 26 European states—all but Russia—were democracies. Less than 20 years later, there were only 10 democracies left (Britain and France, Netherlands, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Switzerland). This was the result of severe economic crisis brought on by a post-war bust in the early 1920s and the Great Depression that started in 1929 and got worse over the next three years as democracies struggled to decide how to respond.

In the light of the confusion—and bitter argument—about how to solve the economic and social problems that abounded in the interwar years, people longed for one powerful figure who could cut through all the committees and statecraft required in parliamentary systems: someone who could quickly and efficiently solve the deep problems that existed without having to win votes or gain consensus. Benito Mussolini in Italy was able to threaten his way into power: the parliamentary system was too weak and indecisive to stand against him when he demanded the position of prime minister and then used that position to jail his political opponents and cull away the democratic institutions that might have limited his power.

In Germany, Adolf Hitler attempted a coup in Mussolini's style only to get arrested and have to regroup. He determined that he could use the democratic system itself to gain power and emphasized propaganda in particular—as a modern tool to influence people's thoughts throughout their everyday lives. He used modern mass media to make his case that Germany needed a strongman ruler, one who didn't mince words and who would restore Germany to greatness by eliminating alien elements within who had corrupted the nation and brought economic, social, and spiritual misery to the people. He and he alone could do it.

About 40 countries across the globe developed fascist parties by the year 1925, including those states that remained democracies like France and Britain. In some of these places (like Spain), support for fascists produced dictatorships. More traditional dictators—without the modern ideology or modern propaganda machines—emerged in other European states like Portugal, Poland, Austria, and the Balkan states.

Much can be said about the economic, social, and political factors that contributed to the failure of democracy in the 1920s and 1930s, and we historians like multiple-causality. I'd like to focus, however, on an important element that sometimes falls by the wayside: the cultural factor. In most of these places where democracy failed, there was not a long tradition of democracy. That democracy is The Best Form of Government was not at all clear to eastern Europeans, Italians, Spaniards, Poles, and Germans, especially in the context of the economic, social, and political turmoil of the interwar years. Democracy, many people thought, had failed them. Dictatorship looked rational; it looked like strength.

I read a poignant article recently in *The Guardian* about the secretary of Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's minister of propaganda. Brunhilde Pomsel worked in Goebbels's office typing pool during the war, and admired him as her boss, but considered it really "just a job," she says. The reporter for *The Guardian* finds this attitude "bizarre" but this was actually a very typical view of a wide array of jobs that allowed repression and atrocities to be carried out in the Nazi state. The totalitarian state required its citizens to participate in the work of political repression and the persecutions of the Holocaust: train conductors, pencil-pushers, lawyers, teachers, factory workers, doctors, secretaries—millions of regular people, just doing their jobs. This is precisely what Hannah Arendt referred to as the banality of evil.

Pomsel, who is now 105 years old, reflects on the idea that she was used to authoritarianism in her home-life; her father exercised "Prussian discipline" and was a harsh task-master who demanded unquestioning obedience. Resistance never occurred to her, as it never occurred to so many others, even when a Jewish friend and a gay colleague were persecuted. She says, "Those people nowadays who say they would have

stood up against the Nazis – I believe they are sincere in meaning that, but believe me, most of them wouldn't have.” She says that “the whole country was as if under a kind of a spell.” She also claims she really had no suspicions that anything sinister was happening, even when her Jewish friend disappeared; she thought Jews were being relocated to Czechoslovakia. “I know no one ever believes us nowadays,” she says, “everyone thinks we knew everything. We knew nothing . . . We believed it – we swallowed it – it seemed entirely plausible.” This is the lure of authoritarianism: rendered childlike, we only need to tend to our tasks and not worry about the larger import of what is going on around us. Someone else will take care of it.

Of course, some people did resist authoritarianism: the Republican forces in the Spanish Civil War, the Communists (who were the first jailed and executed for political opposition in fascist states), and individuals who practiced sabotage to topple these dictatorships. One such group was the White Rose Society in Germany, a group of students at the University of Munich led by Hans and Sophie Scholl who distributed leaflets throughout Germany demanding that Germans “wake up” to the realities of the Nazi regime. Their leaflets said, “Nothing is so unworthy of a civilized nation as to allow itself to be ‘governed’ without any opposition by an irresponsible clique that has yielded to its basest instincts. . . .” “Why are the German people so apathetic in the face of all these abominable crimes, crimes so unworthy of the human race? . . . The German people slumber on in their dull, stupid sleep and thereby encourage these fascist criminals; they give them the opportunity to carry on their depredations; and of course they do so.” The leaflets advised Germans to practice passive resistance strategies like sabotage, to resist the regime and pull their consent from it, by deliberately doing their jobs poorly. Ironically, it was Brunhilde Pomsel who tucked Sophie Scholl's file into the vault in Goebbels's office after Sophie's execution; exhorted not to examine it, she later expressed pride that her honor had won out over her curiosity. Just doing her job.

Passive resistance strategies would prove more effective later in the century. By the 1980s, the Cold War was so well entrenched that few people imagined that its demise was close at hand. Totalitarian regimes proliferated in eastern Europe in the aftermath of WWII because the Soviet Army laid claim to the lands they marched through toward Berlin. No one wanted to engage in a direct conflict after the tremendous losses of WWII, and so the Iron Curtain fell over Europe, dividing democratic west from authoritarian east. Many of these people of eastern Europe had not had much experience with democracy and were so shocked by the events of the 1940s that they were passive and even apathetic about how they were governed. But at some point in the latter half of the 20th century, that began to change. Again, there are many economic, social, and political reasons for the wave of resistance that began to develop in eastern Europe beginning in the 1970s, but I'd like once again to focus on cultural factors.

The totalitarian system, according to Czechoslovakian playwright and protester Vaclav Havel, demoralizes people. It denies them basic humanity, making them just cogs in a giant machine. He recognizes that when people consent to be ruled in a totalitarian state—and it does require daily acts of consent—they become complicit in their own subjugation. He says, “not only does the system alienate humanity, but at the same time alienated humanity supports this system as its own involuntary masterplan, as a degenerate image of its own degeneration, as a record of people's own failure as individuals.” Such a system is really fragile, though, and it's quite easy to revoke consent

by either a refusal to participate or an affirmation of basic human values. At a certain point, every person becomes a rebel in such a system, just by reaching out for human connection and expression.

In his essay “The Power of the Powerless,” Havel tells a story of a brewer in Czechoslovakia he calls “S.” S loves his job and is a beer fanatic. He wants nothing more as his life’s work than for his brewery to produce the best beer in the country. It’s his passion. So he comes up with ideas for how to improve the beer and takes them to his superior. His superior doesn’t want to have to do anything, and the whole way the rigid state system is set up makes any change complicated, so he refuses the request. S writes letters to his superior’s superior and to the local party chair explaining the reasonableness of his request and the foolishness of denying it. For his trouble he gets branded a political radical and sacked from his job in the brewery. It’s enough that he didn’t just do his job with obedience to authority; he wanted to do it well and better. He cared about the results of his labor. And thus he became a dissident.

Dissent can also emerge from participating in counter-cultural activities, and in the totalitarian state this is a wide arena consisting of anything that isn’t approved by the state as official culture. For Havel, this was the rock music of the Prague Spring in 1968. Students in my 20th Century Europe class read Havel’s essay and then we watch two documentaries about how the search for authentic human expression in art and culture led to the democratic wave of 1989-91. The film “How the Beatles Rocked the Kremlin” argues that the Beatles brought down Communism in Russia more than anything else. The Soviet bloc was never strong enough to prevent western culture from trickling in, and when Russians heard the Beatles for the first time, they felt they had been awakened from a deep sleep. Soviets defied school rules to wear mop-top hairstyles, smuggled music illegally across the border, illegally distributed songs on discarded X-rays turned into records, dismantled public speakers to make amplifiers for guitars. They just wanted to hear music and make music about basic human emotions—love and pain—and in doing so they became opponents of the state. The film’s producer—and those experts he talks to—believe that these acts of rebellion paved the way for the demands for democratic reforms of the mid to late 1980s.

The second documentary is a one I just happened to catch on PBS last year with the excellent title “Chuck Norris vs. Communism.” This documentary looks at the bootleg VHS industry in Communist Romania in the 1980s, in which smugglers brought in American movies, had them dubbed by a woman who was government translator (who became known as the “voice of freedom”), and then copied them and distributed them widely to Romanians who had illegal film-watching parties in their apartment complexes. Every step along the way was filled with danger and the possibility of discovery. But when discovered, it turns out the government officials were quite open to bribery in the form of their own VHS tapes of American movies. The illegality of all of these activities undermined the state system, but the content of the films—ones like *Rocky* and even Chuck Norris films that celebrate individualism, courage, personal achievement, and the quest for freedom—just like the irreverent content of many Beatles songs, helped pave the way for a democratic mentality. You may find this hard to believe when thinking of Chuck Norris movies, but for people behind the Iron Curtain, the *authenticity* of these voices, the real humanism that emerged from western culture, was like rain in the desert. Experience with western culture made it all the more likely that people would begin to

demand more for themselves on all levels. When opportunity presented itself, people primed for resistance and democratic expression could seize it en masse, in a large enough group to fell the totalitarian regimes that had formerly seemed so indomitable.

Western culture isn't an automatic antidote to the lure of authoritarianism, though, as we can see throughout the world today. Havel implicated the west in totalitarian culture, too, through consumerist society that more subtly manipulates people into conformity, into complacency, and into a narrow focus on being an obedient cog in the industrial-political machine. It's harder to pinpoint what you're fighting against in the west, and so perhaps it's all the more insidious. Media can be used to oppress, silence, and manipulate in a democratic society as well as an authoritarian one. But it can also be (and has been) used to amplify protest and make it visible to the whole world.

It is true (and I try to take comfort from this) that most of us in the west have a deeper democratic culture than existed in those European states where democracy failed in between the wars and where it was squashed by Soviet totalitarianism. Some of that comes from that naïve though confident assumption of my American students that democracy is The Best Form of Government. That doesn't absolve us of the need for constant vigilance to make sure that our democracy is functional, fair, and robust. The Queen Elizabeth letter is actually not new to this election cycle: it comes around in one form or another nearly every election, because elections produce uncertainty and frustration; they require faith in the messy, slow, and compromise-laden democratic system. We take that leap of faith every time.

With prominent examples of resistance to authoritarianism prevalent in our popular culture, we affirm to ourselves that resistance to authoritarianism is possible, noble, moral. Stories like those of both the White Rose students and Brunhilde Pomsel—and like that of the Sharps in the upcoming PBS documentary—help us to imagine ourselves in a similar situation and wonder: What would I do? And to think: I hope I would have the courage to be disobedient. If such a circumstance presented itself in our society and in our lifetime, I think many of us would have ready inspiration to sabotage, to passively resist, to undermine a dictatorial system, to refuse to consent to authoritarianism.

On this Labor Day weekend, it's also important to note that in Poland, it was an underground workers' union that produced the Solidarity movement, and an electrician in that union, Lech Walesa, who led the democratic movement in the late 1980s. In the 19th century, Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* wrote, "Despotism, which is of a very timorous nature, is never more secure of continuance than when it can keep men asunder; and all its influence is commonly exerted for that purpose. No vice of the human heart is so acceptable to it as egotism: a despot easily forgives his subjects for not loving him, provided they do not love each other." The whole idea of solidarity—whether for fellow workers in particular or humanity in general—is about embracing each other with support, friendship, and love. No dictatorship can survive if we seek our authentic voices, if we do our jobs passionately but never blindly, if we hold examples of resistance as inspiration, if we defy the lure of child-like obedience to a higher authority who will magically fix everything. Authoritarianism cannot prevail if we love each other and bind ourselves together in human solidarity. When democracy fails, we have failed; when it rallies, we all win.