THE ENDURING VULNERABILITY OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

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Liberal democracy is under pressure and on the defensive. After a three-decade global surge that brought the number of liberal democracies to a historic peak in 2005, the past fourteen years have witnessed a steady decline.[1] Many liberal democracies have lost vitality and public support; some have shed key features of the liberal-democratic form of government; a few have abandoned it outright. From Hungary and Turkey to India and Brazil, authoritarian-minded leaders brandishing democratic credentials have sought to curtail minority rights and political competition. Many of these leaders have seized on the covid-19 pandemic to expand their emergency powers, which they will be reluctant to yield when the crisis abates. Freedom of the press is under threat, as are the rule of law and the peaceful coexistence of ethnic and religious groups within diverse societies.

Well before the covid-19 outbreak, antiliberal politicians and intellectuals had issued a complex bill of particulars against liberalism. Populists charged that liberalism had become a cloak for antidemocratic elitism that took power away from rank-and-file citizens while undermining their economic interests. Nationalists alleged that liberalism bred international institutions and laws that invaded nations' sovereignty and hobbled the pursuit of legitimate national interests.[2] Cultural traditionalists claimed that liberal individualism eroded moral and religious communities and that liberal freedom erased the distinction between liberty and license. If everything is a matter of choice, they argued, then everything is permitted, and nihilism is inevitable.[3]

Despite their currency in today's politics, these indictments are neither new nor, in the main, true. But deeper forces are at work. Like every other form of government, liberal democracy has inherent structural

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weaknesses that the difficulties of the moment exacerbate but do not create. These weaknesses reside in liberal democracy's genetic code, handed down through the generations, the expression of which varies with circumstances. Wise leadership can mitigate these weaknesses, but it cannot eliminate them. They are a condition to be managed, not a disease to be cured.

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Scholars and political analysts have extensively studied the causes of the current liberal-democratic backsliding. The catalogue has become clear, even if the respective weights to be attributed to specific causes remain in dispute.

The global financial crisis that began in 2008 undermined confidence in the neoliberal consensus that had dominated politics since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. As the manufacturing sector struggled, many working- and middle-class citizens became victims of globalization and the rise of the information economy. The grindingly slow recovery and the premature adoption of fiscal austerity fed public discontent, as did the growing inequality between geographical regions as well as economic classes within countries.

Public discontent went well beyond economic issues. As globalization intensified and the significance of national borders declined (especially within the European Union), the pace of immigration accelerated and national populations became more diverse. Some citizens—mainly urban and highly educated—welcomed this; others did not. The 2015 European refugee crisis intensified this split, and anti-immigration parties enjoyed a surge of popular support.

Religion was another source of cultural conflict. In democratic societies where adherence to traditional religion remained widespread, the "liberal" component of liberal democracy became synonymous with antitraditional attitudes, especially on issues of sexuality and gender relations. Traditionalists resented—and organized against—what they saw as the efforts of cultural elites, governments, and international institutions to impose their views on dissenters.

In addition to economics and culture, governance became a third source of discontent with liberal democracy. In many long-established democracies, a duopoly of center-left and center-right political parties that alternated in power—and on occasion formed "grand coalitions" through which they governed together—left many citizens feeling unrepresented. In the emerging democracies of the former USSR, hopes

for democracy curdled into denunciations of official corruption as elites (many of them former communist officials) profited from the pell-mell privatization of state-owned assets. Throughout the democratic world, ordinary citizens criticized what they regarded as unrepresentative institutions and bureaucrats who dominated regulatory and financial bodies.

Antiliberalism and Discontent

This triad of discontents opened the door to regimes—Vladimir Putin's Russia and Xi Jinping's China—that never pretended to be liberal-democratic and that see the weakening of liberal democracy as serving their aspirations. Russia has worked tirelessly to block the rise of stable democratic institutions in Ukraine and to undermine the EU. China has used its growing economic might to move developing countries away from the democratic orbit and toward dependence on the Chinese model of authoritarian state capitalism.

This is nothing new. For the past two centuries, every era has had its leading form of antiliberalism. In the nineteenth century, it was an alliance of conservative monarchies and the Catholic Church. For most of the twentieth, it was regimes driven by antiliberal ideologies such as communism and fascism.

Today, the greatest challenge to liberal democracy comes not from external subversion but rather from internal discontent. Some liberal-democratic citizens prize their system for its principles, but many more endorse it for its performance. If liberal-democratic governments fail to address their countries' most urgent problems in a manner that wins public approval, support for liberal-democratic institutions will decline, opening the door to alternatives. The covid pandemic is but the latest test of the liberal democracies' competence. Many of them seemed to be in danger of failing this test, while authoritarian governments boasted that their powers of organization were superior and even, in China's case, postured as fonts of international generosity as well.

Unlike the surge of opposition to liberal democracy in the 1920s and 1930s, today's dissent typically takes the form of populist insurgencies, which claim to restore rather than replace democracy. In contemporary parlance, "populism" stands for a distinctive brand of politics: the uprising of the common people against those whom they regard as wielding excessive political, economic, and cultural power. Populism typically brings to the fore a strong leader who can both channel the sentiments of the public and direct its fight against concentrated power. Populist leaders attack the "enemies of the people" in moralistic terms as self-seeking, corrupt conspirators against ordinary citizens, often with hidden links to outside powers. The success of populist movements and leaders depends on constant conflict with these enemies and endless struggle against the forces they represent. Populist programs draw bright lines that invite

even more conflict: They are nationalist rather than internationalist, and protectionist in the broad sense of the term, serving as bulwarks against foreign goods, foreign immigrants, and foreign ideas. Often nationalist populists join forces with cultural conservatives against what they regard as progressives' attack on traditional morality.

The populist vision is dyadic, dividing society into two opposing forces, each with a common interest and unitary will. One of these forces ("the people") is completely virtuous; the other ("the elite") is irredeemably malign. The evil force is the active agent, working against the interests of its victim, the good force. Because the good are not powerful enough to overcome the forces of darkness, they typically seek a strong leader to defend them against the evil that oppresses them and deprives them of their due. Populists claim to attack liberalism in the name of democracy. They can do this because liberal democracy brings together principles that operate along different dimensions. "Democracy" denotes a mode of government, while "liberal" defines the zone within which this mode may operate legitimately. In the concept of liberal democracy, the antonym of "liberal" is not "conservative," but rather "total." Liberal democracy is democracy limited by the fear of tyranny and the principle of individual rights.

Historically, liberals have feared any government—democratic or not—that claims unlimited scope for its decisions. Unlimited government is nascently tyrannical, and it takes only a clever demagogue to make this threat a reality. On prudential grounds, therefore, liberal regimes typically feature multiple, often competing centers of power.

But liberals also make a principled case for limited government. Individuals are not only morally equal, as democrats say; each person, as a human being, possesses rights and liberties that no government can take away. A fundamental purpose of government is to secure these rights, and government actions that violate them are presumptively illegitimate. To be sure, individuals may agree to limit some rights when they undermine other rights. In an emergency, for example, the full exercise of the right to liberty might undermine the right to life. But basic rights are unalienable, even by popular majority, and the people always retain the rights they temporarily surrender.

What Liberalism Is Not

Today's antiliberals—populists, nationalists, and traditionalists—draw upon a venerable tradition that attacks liberalism for what it is not. Here, briefly, are some of the misleading charges against it.

Because liberalism rests on an anthropology that elevates individualism and unfettered choice while denying the constraints of what is given and unchosen, it cannot accommodate cultural traditionalism. This charge rests on a longstanding failure to distinguish between politics and culture. In liberalism, choice functions as the source of po-

litical authority. As the Declaration of Independence puts it, our governing institutions "deriv[e] their just powers from the consent of the governed." Therefore, liberalism must reject the divine right of kings and clerics. Those who believe that legitimate political authority derives from the institutions and teachings of a specific faith are by principle antiliberal.

In liberal societies, traditional communities must thrive through the attraction of their ways of life, not because their members have no choice but to remain within them.

In our cultural and social life, by contrast, there are many different sources of authority. Parents enjoy rightful authority over their children, whatever rambunctious toddlers and rebellious teenagers may think. No principled liberal could argue that the Catholic Church must reorganize its affairs to accord with the principle of popular sovereignty. Traditional communities such as the Amish and ultra-Orthodox Jews may conduct their collective lives in accordance with ancestral practices that liberal regimes must permit unless these practices violate individual rights or threaten basic civic goods such as public health.

Yet within liberal societies, individuals who grow up in traditional communities cannot be prevented from repudiating these communities as adults. We do not choose the circumstances into which we are born, but eventually we enjoy the right to leave them, and the liberal state may enforce this right against communal forces that deny it.

Of course, exposure to the allure of the forbidden poses an ongoing challenge to traditional communities. Even the most insulated children eventually find out that there is a world beyond the perimeter of their group that they can enter, if only at great cost. Groups whose form of life rests on carefully cultivated self-restraint are subject to the siren call of self-expression and self-indulgence.

It is not by accident that traditional Judaism labels those who would disregard Jewish law as "Epicureans." The assumption is that violators who shed the constraints of the law do so to enjoy forbidden pleasures. The liberation of human appetites is always the easier path, against which traditional communities have always struggled.

In short, antiliberals are right to observe that the diverse ways of life on offer in liberal societies complicate the task of preserving traditional communities, but they are wrong to complain that liberal diversity makes cultural preservation impossible. In liberal societies, traditional communities must thrive through the attraction of their ways of life, not because their members have no choice but to remain within them.

Liberalism embraces a debased account of freedom as unlimited choice, leaving liberal societies unable to distinguish between liberty

and license or between virtue and vice. There is some basis for this charge. Liberal societies do permit individuals to make a wider range of choices, for example in gender expression and sexual conduct, than is the case in traditional societies.

A liberalism that is faithful to its core principles pays thoughtful attention to the distinction between what is public and what is not. A liberalism that disregards this principle in the name of other objectives becomes illiberal, handing a sword to its adversaries.

But an undue focus on these issues is a form of moral myopia; the proposition that liberal societies are value-neutral, or want to be, or can be, does not survive inspection. These societies embrace an ensemble of virtues, including work, law-abidingness, responsibility for oneself and one's family, tolerance for legitimate difference, truthfulness in public interactions, and willingness to perform civic duties. Without self-restraint, the successful functioning of heterogeneous liberal societies becomes impossible. Professions in these societies—teaching, firefighting, law enforcement, the military, and health care, among others—embody codes of conduct suffused with virtues and moral principles, which they seek to convey to aspiring practitioners. The real-life significance of these codes has been much in evidence in the response to the covid-19 outbreak.

On a deeper level, the concept of individual choice, on which liberalism relies, rests on something unchosen—that is, on rights with which every individual is "endowed," according to America's liberal creed. We do not choose to be the bearers of rights, and we cannot choose to surrender them. Nor can we take them away from others. They are a "self-evident" moral fact that constrains what we can rightly do.

Liberalism is a form of cultural imperialism that forces the proponents of traditional values to abandon their beliefs and bow to a new orthodoxy. Like every other creed, regrettably, liberalism has its share of zealots who push beyond its appropriate bounds. But liberalism stands or falls with the distinction between the public realm governed by public principles and a private sphere in which beliefs and practices at odds with public norms are protected from them.

For example, the U.S. Supreme Court has decided that same-sex marriage is an individual right rather than an option that public authorities can affirm or reject. But this does not mean that any public authority can rightly compel dissenting faith communities to recognize, let alone perform, same-sex marriages. To do so would be to transform liberalism from an account of political legitimacy into an oppressive cultural orthodoxy.

The critics of contemporary liberalism will retort (correctly) that in practice, matters are not so simple. What about business owners for

whom selling certain services to same-sex couples would violate their religious beliefs? What are morally traditionalist parents to do when public-school textbooks promote norms about marriage from which these parents conscientiously dissent?

These are difficult questions, but they need not be insoluble. For example, the 1968 Fair Housing Act, which bans discrimination in sales and rentals, contains what is known as the "Mrs. Murphy" exemption: If a dwelling has four or fewer rental units and the owner lives in one of these units, this home is exempt from the law's nondiscrimination provisions. The intuition is that an individual's home is more private than public and should be treated differently. Homeowners should not be forced to rent basement apartments to people whom they do not want living there, for whatever reason.

As the feminist movement has shown, the line between the public and private should not be viewed as fixed. The longstanding tradition that placed spousal abuse in the private realm gave way in the face of compelling reasons why it should be treated as a public matter. A home does not create a protective wall around assault and battery, which violate basic human rights and the good order of society.

The point is this: A liberalism that is faithful to its core principles pays thoughtful attention to the distinction between what is public and what is not. A liberalism that disregards this principle in the name of other objectives becomes illiberal, handing a sword to its adversaries. Traditionalist and authoritarian alternatives to liberalism, however, offer not a more coherent public-private distinction but no distinction at all. Under their sway, government would be free to take charge of every aspect of our lives.

Liberals cannot be nationalists. This charge is incorrect, both historically and philosophically. Throughout the nineteenth century, many nationalist uprisings against local and imperial oppression were inspired by liberal principles. (Garibaldi's struggle to liberate and unify Italy is a classic example.) Influenced by Isaiah Berlin, contemporary political thinkers such as David Miller and Yael Tamir have defended liberal nationalism as a coherent alternative to illiberal nationalism and liberal universalism.[4]

Two features of liberalism have inspired this mistaken criticism. Liberals can accept a national identity based on history and cultural traditions, but not on race or ethnicity. Liberals, in other words, can be civic nationalists but not ethnonationalists. Elevating one race or ethnic group above others within a shared civic space is incompatible with core liberal tenets.

Liberalism embraces universal principles, giving rise to the mistaken conclusion that liberals cannot accept national self-preference. This is a *non sequitur*. Even though the moral weight and worth of your child are equal to those of my child, this does not mean that I am obliged to care about your child as much as I care about my own. Similarly, the principle

that "all men are created equal" does not imply that human beings cannot live in separate, independent countries, or that the citizens of a country are prohibited from caring more about their fellow citizens than about citizens of other countries. Within broad limits, liberalism is compatible with collective self-preference, restrictive immigration policies, and strong national boundaries. The fact that some liberals endorse open borders does not imply that all liberals must do so as a matter of principle.

Liberalism requires its adherents to endorse Wilsonian internationalism, a fatally flawed basis for international relations. This is not so. Rather, this version of internationalism is a contestable application of liberal principles to the sphere of foreign policy. Woodrow Wilson believed that a rules-based international order overseen by an international organization offered an effective alternative to war as an instrument of state policy. Nevertheless, liberalism within one country is a coherent alternative that long guided U.S. foreign policy. So would be an international organization that allowed only liberal democracies to join, which is supposedly the rule with the EU.

There is room for legitimate debate about the basis of international law and the extent to which international institutions can rightly restrict the pursuit of national self-interest. But the claim that nations are free to define and pursue their self-interest in absolutely any manner they wish is hard to sustain, and the history of the twentieth century illustrates the disaster to which this contention can lead.

Liberalism means endorsing the proposition that history inexorably progresses toward liberalism as the principle eventually guiding political life everywhere. While it is true that many liberals have embraced the belief that history is on their side, not all do—or must. Even if you believe that rational inquiry compels us to embrace liberal principles, you cannot conclude from this that history is inexorably moving in a direction that favors liberalism, unless you also believe that reason is the dominant force guiding historical change. Liberal pessimists can imagine a time when liberal politics could drown in a wave of authoritarianism without ceasing to be, in principle, the best form of government. Liberals need not believe that there is an arc of history bending toward justice or any other human good. Wise liberals understand that there is nothing inevitable about the success of liberalism at home or abroad, and if they take its survival for granted, it may well fail.

Enduring Weaknesses

Although these familiar critiques of liberal democracy represent misunderstandings, and in some cases deliberate misrepresentations, paring them away lays bare the deeper difficulties that liberal democracy will always face. Indeed, the unavoidable vulnerabilities of liberal democracy form an impressive roster.

Liberalism rests on a principled individualism that combines the blessings of liberty with the burdens of personal responsibility. When these burdens are too much to bear, the desire for a savior-leader who lifts them can become overwhelming.

Life in rule-governed societies suppresses anger and aggression. Designating an enemy legitimates the release of this pent-up anger and aggression. Populism makes politics more warlike, a source of its appeal.

The liberal ethos is resolutely nonheroic, prizing security over risk and peace over war—which is not to say that risk and war can ever be expunged, or that some members of liberal societies will not prize risk-taking or the military life. But for the most part, liberal regimes try to give their citizens as much security as possible, and regard war as a sad necessity rather than a glorious enterprise. Against this backdrop, liberal life can seem unexciting and ignoble, fueling a desire for conflict and adventure. And as liberal theorists such as Karl Popper and Isaiah Berlin have pointed out, liberalism normally embraces a mundane-seeming ethos of incremental progress by trial and error. Liberalism thus tends to disappoint those who yearn for romantic ideals, great reforms, and visionary leaders.

Liberal democracy presupposes a distinctive outlook and political psychology. Many of its requirements are demanding and require self-restraint—for example, respect for the rule of law and patience in the making of law. For those who prize decisive action, these restraints will chafe and can make the idea of authoritarian governance appear attractive.

Citizens often crave more unity and solidarity than liberal life typically offers, and community—especially the community of the tribe—can be a satisfying alternative to the loneliness of individual self-expression. Liberalism, with its broadly antitribal thrust and its abstract concepts of equal citizenship, objective rules, and common humanity, can all too often find itself forced to work against the grain of widely held sentiments. Antiliberalism's frank embrace of tribalism, its Manichean outlook, and the constant conflict it entails all draw strength from the enduring incompleteness of life in liberal societies, offering potent emotional shadings of love and hate that liberalism with its grayer tones cannot provide. Antipathy has its satisfactions, and conflict, like love, can make us feel more fully alive.

Liberal-democratic societies require each citizen to share civic space with others of diverse views and hues. Some find this exhilarating; on others, it grates. Citizens are not called upon to agree with or like one another, but they are required to permit others to speak and act as they see fit, within broad limits. The desire to suppress speech and behav-

ior one finds offensive is instinctive. Restraining oneself from doing so goes against the grain and requires training and indoctrination. Even when this process of social formation is successful, a residue of the desire to suppress difference remains, and the result is inner conflict. This is the specifically liberal-democratic strand of the painful renunciation of instinctual drives that Sigmund Freud analyzed in *Civilization and Its Discontents*.[5]

As Freud explored the dimension of original tragedy from which civilization can never fully free itself, let us pause to consider the vulnerabilities with which liberal democracy (facing its own tragic fate of sorts) will always have to cope.

The complexity of human motives. From its inception, liberal democracy has been linked with rationalism—respect for science, technical expertise, empirical evidence, and rational argument generally. Rationalism has bred the hope that politics itself—the crafting of public policy and basic institutions—might be brought under the sway of reason. As Alexander Hamilton put it at the beginning of the *Federalist,* the question is "whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force."[6] He was not alone among the U.S. founders in his determination to demonstrate that the hope for reason as the basis of political choice was a realistic aspiration.

Liberals have never believed that reason could always be the dominant motive for action. As former Polish premier Donald Tusk warned the European Council amid rising populism, "emotions, symbols and simplifications motivate people much more than rational arguments and programmes." Excessive rationalism will undermine liberal purposes, he argued, because "people will not fight with full determination for procedures or abstract ideas. They will be ready to get involved in public affairs and sacrifice a lot only if emotions are sparked in them."[7]

Acknowledging the need for symbols and inspiring emotions is not liberalism's only bow to the complexity of human motivation. From the beginning, liberal thinkers have recognized, and sometimes celebrated, the role of individual and group interests in human affairs. They have hoped that artfully built institutions can transmute the pursuit of self-interest into a guarantor of political freedom and a source of material progress.

Liberals have always acknowledged the influence of a third force, the passions, on human conduct. But they have seen the passions as sources of disruption and turbulence. Ambition, envy, bellicosity, and the quest for honor lead us to reject the promptings of reason and even self-interest. The passions can be destructive, and sometimes self-destructive. They can be at war with the goals of security, prosperity, and peace—the heart of the way of life we have come to call "bourgeois."

In this respect among others, antiliberalism goes with the grain of our humanity, liberalism against it. Life in rule-governed societies suppresses anger and aggression. Designating an enemy legitimates the release of this pent-up anger and aggression. Populism makes politics more warlike, a source of its appeal.

Since the dawn of modernity, liberal thinkers have hoped that enlightened self-interest can subdue or even supplant a more immediate recourse to the passions. In 1914, many observers considered a European war unthinkable because of the economic damage it would wreak. As late as 1936, with the horrors of the Great War still fresh, John Maynard Keynes could write:

> Dangerous human proclivities can be canalized into comparatively harmless channels by the existence of opportunities for money-making and private wealth, which, if they cannot be satisfied in this way, may find their outlet in cruelty, the reckless pursuit of personal power and authority, and other forms of self-aggrandizement.[8]

He seemed to have forgotten that the century of relative peace and prosperity after the Congress of Vienna had also witnessed the flowering of antibourgeois sentiments—in particular, contempt for commercial activities and for the self-protective timidity of bourgeois life.

Antibourgeois thinkers and politicians dominated the interwar years, preparing the way for Italian Fascism and German National Socialism. In times of chaos and strife, human beings crave the tranquility of daily life, and many are satisfied when they get it. But some are not, and they tend to include not only the potential leaders of societies but also individuals whose aspirations extend beyond material comfort. Theories of politics that neglect the reality of these human types are bound to be inadequate, both as accounts of what is and as guides to action. Realism demands more than a narrow focus on the political order within which individuals can pursue their self-interest.

Liberal democracy rests on a philosophy of comfortable self-preservation. No doubt this is a pervasive desire, never more so than in times of poverty, war, or civil strife. But as strife invites its own antithesis, so does tranquility. As Bertrand Russell once remarked, "the impulse to danger and adventure is deeply ingrained in human nature, and no society which ignores it can long be stable."[9]

This proposition led William James to search for a "moral equivalent of war."[10] Although there is no such thing, political combat comes close. So do social movements, when masses of likeminded individuals find common purpose in the struggle against society's imperfections and injustices. So do national emergencies, which call for bravery and sacrifice. So do the rare moments of national purpose when charismatic leaders inspire high-minded young people to set aside gain in favor of service.

The ambiguities of freedom and equality. Liberal democracy rests too on a philosophy of individual freedom—and with it, personal responsibility—but individualism is not always satisfying. Most people crave a measure of community and solidarity that life in individualistic societies often frustrates. The Preamble to the U.S. Constitution speaks of the "Blessings of Liberty," but freedom can also be a burden. As Erich Fromm argued in *Escape from Freedom,* the anxiety that freedom often produces can lead to the desire to dominate, and even destroy, what seems uncontrollable.[11]

This anxiety can also induce people to seek psychological security through submission to external authority. Faced with seemingly irresistible external forces, individuals who sense a loss of personal agency and control over their lives often seek leaders who promise to supply mastery over contingency and who offer psychic relief through unmediated bonds with their followers. Domination and submission are the *yin* and *yang* of authoritarianism and also, somewhat more benignly, of hierarchical institutions in general (including the kinds that even the most liberal society cannot do without).

Liberal democracy is poised uneasily between particularism and universalism. On the one hand, the commitment to equality erodes distinctions. If dignity and rights pertain to all human beings by virtue of their common humanity, then treating individuals differently based on where they were born or what they revere seems unjustifiable. Refugees fleeing persecution should be treated as we would wish to be treated were our situations reversed. From a strictly egalitarian perspective, national boundaries appear to be vehicles for collective selfishness.

On the other hand, the founding document of the United States speaks of peoples as well as individuals, and of "the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle" each people. In principle, not only individuals but also peoples stand in a relation of equality to one another, and these two kinds of equality can collide in practice, as can individual freedom and national self-determination.

Freedom and equality can collide too. Alexis de Tocqueville famously worried that the immoderate passion for equality would lead democratic citizens to surrender their liberties to the soft despotism of a centralized bureaucracy, a concern that today's conservatives often echo. But there is evidence of the reverse as well: The passion for liberty can lead democratic citizens to tolerate a degree of inequality that threatens to transform democracy into oligarchy. And the immoderate zeal for liberty can undermine the collective action on which the security and well-being of the country can depend in times of danger.

Tribal sentiments. A measure of tribalism seems hardwired into the human condition, and in the often-unacknowledged sentiments of in-

dividuals. We take pleasure in associating with those who share our language, customs, and history, and we are more likely to trust them than to trust "outsiders." When resources are to be shared, we are likely to prefer sharing with those with whom we identify. When our tribe is challenged, our sense of identification strengthens, as does the impulse to come to its defense. When trans-tribal commitments challenge tribal identification, the tribe usually prevails. This was the case in 1914 at the outset of the Great War, when the vaunted international unity of Europe's working class instantly collapsed as workers rallied to their respective national flags.

Populism, especially when joined with ethnonationalism, is openly tribal. It legitimates sentiments that liberal-democratic principles suppress. This is one of populism's main sources of strength. Tribes ascribe merit to their members and inferiority to nonmembers, usually in stereotypical terms. This gives rise to the remarkably stubborn phenomenon of prejudice. Even when members of a tribe are persuaded through reason and experience that their prejudice is unwarranted, the sentiment persists. Populist politicians understand this and have been known to appeal to prejudice in ways that please their followers, but which can have dangerous consequences for individual security and social order.

In circumstances of scarcity or threat, the dyad of same and different often gives way to the dyad of friends and enemies. And when a good is inherently scarce, this cycle is even more likely and pernicious. When new groups challenge traditional hierarchies, those with higher status are bound to resist. Others' gain must be their loss. And when those of higher status are asked to relinquish claims based on religion or ethnicity in the name of a common civic identity, they are apt to respond by redoubling their particularist claims.

Hierarchy versus equality. This is not to say that the citizens of liberal democracies have nothing to be angry about. Liberal-democratic polities combine moral equality with economic and social inequality. When the wealth of economic elites seems disconnected from—even opposed to—the well-being of the community, the community reacts with moral indignation.

Inequalities of status are even more emotionally volatile. Every society, no matter how egalitarian in principle, has multiple social hierarchies. Those of higher status often look down on people lower on the status ladder, who answer disdain with resentment. Being denigrated, if only with a gesture or a glance, always stings. Being ignored is even worse.

In principle, liberal-democratic societies accord social status based on achievement rather than the accident of birth. But individuals can achieve along many different dimensions, and the kind of achievement that a society singles out shapes how it defines status. In contemporary

liberal democracies, individuals without educational and professional achievement are often made to feel second-rate, and the claim that this hierarchy is merit-based only makes things worse. Understandably, those who are looked down upon respond by dismissing claims based on expertise in favor of common sense and gut instinct.

Elite technocratic institutions such as the U.S. Federal Reserve Board are always exposed to this critique, all the more so if they are designed to be insulated from elections. In such cases, economic and status concerns often merge, because it is natural to imagine that distant, secretive institutions serve the interests of the elites, not average citizens.

Action versus constraint. Liberal-democratic governance breeds many kinds of public frustration. Although liberal democracy is compatible with direct self-government, nearly every country today is so large that representative institutions—and hence the various pathologies of representation—are unavoidable. Geographic distance breeds psychic distance, and the people as "principals" will always fear that their "agents" will serve their own interests rather than those of the citizens whom they are supposed to be representing. Corruption among representatives, a perennial danger, is especially likely to be thought widespread when things are going badly and mistrust in leaders and institutions runs high.

Citizens elect representatives who do not—indeed, cannot—do what each voter wants, in part because voters support candidates for different, sometimes opposing reasons. Citizens' desire to govern themselves collides with the obligations of daily life—and with most people's distaste for the practice of politics. "The trouble with socialism," Oscar Wilde is said to have remarked, is that "it takes too many evenings." So does every other political program, if one takes it seriously. Most citizens want government that is of the people and for the people, but they are ambivalent about government by the people.

Some liberal-democratic systems divide power among multiple institutions, deliberately slowing decision making to allow diverse points of view a chance to shape policy. Multiparty parliamentary systems typically require parties to negotiate to form a government. Both these systems frustrate citizens' desire for swift, decisive action. Adding to their frustration, all liberal-democratic regimes prevent majorities from acting when their desires collide with the rights of individuals and minority groups.

Max Weber famously described policy making as the "slow boring of hard boards."[12] Nowhere is this truer than in liberal democracies. When citizens in these regimes become frustrated with the slow pace of change, they are tempted to turn toward less constrained and more decisive forms of public action—that is, toward more authoritarian brands of leadership. This is especially likely during national emergencies. The question is whether democratically elected leaders who obtain

extraordinary powers in these circumstances will willingly surrender them when the emergency passes. As Viktor Orbán wields his newly won emergency powers amid a plague, many Hungarians are asking just this question.

The fateful marriage of liberal politics and economic markets. Liberal-democratic political institutions long have cohabited with market economies, and not by accident: The latter are a necessary condition for the former. Not only do well-functioning market economies produce the prosperity needed to mute cultural conflict and class warfare, but a partly independent sphere of property and transactions helps to secure the individual liberty that liberal-democratic politics pledges to defend.[13]

Yet even regulated markets produce inequality, and inequality beyond a certain (albeit hard to specify) point becomes a problem for democracy. Aristotle saw a link between a strong middle class and a stable constitutional order, as did James Madison.[14] Contemporary political science affirms this connection.[15] When the trend toward inequality increases the demographic shares of the rich and the poor at the expense of the middle, conflict between the extremes is likely to intensify. And because economic resources can be translated into political power, the wealthy can exert disproportionate influence on public policy.

We can argue about whether, left to their own devices, market economies move inexorably toward wider inequality. But it is unarguable that beyond a certain point, economic inequality is a threat to liberal democracy. From time to time, liberal political systems must act to keep market outcomes within democratic bounds.

There is another key tension between markets and liberal politics. Markets ceaselessly displace existing products and modes of production. Some people welcome unending change; many others find it disconcerting. Most of us depend on ingrained habits and stable institutions, economic and political. Factory closings can destabilize entire communities and demoralize workers who took their economic circumstances for granted.

There is no reason to believe that liberal democracy can ever permanently resolve the tension between state institutions and the market, in large measure because to some extent both politics and markets are downstream from technological change. The Industrial Revolution produced new economic formations that called for novel political responses. The results—universal suffrage, public regulation of corporations, and the development of social insurance—helped to constrain economic inequality for many decades. Although the legacy of the Industrial Revolution continues to shape democratic politics throughout the West, relentless technological transformation in the context of globalization

has raised new questions that inherited political institutions are hard-pressed to address.

Willing More Than One Thing

Søren Kierkegaard once said that "purity of heart is to will one thing."[16] Judged against this standard, human beings are radically impure. We seek multiple inharmonious goods, and our inability to achieve all of them through one way of life or form of political organization is a source of perpetual dissatisfaction.

Liberal vulnerabilities reflect this human condition. Individualism gives rise to the desire for denser communities. Egalitarianism strains against the desire for status and distinction. The burden of personal responsibility opens the door to leaders who promise to make our choices for us. Diversity produces a craving for unity; tedious negotiation, for swift and decisive leadership; stability, for change; tranquility, for excitement; security, for danger.

The psychic arrow points both ways, of course. Citizens of oppressive societies yearn for freedom. Minorities in countries with established religions want nothing more than religious liberty. Communitarian societies frustrate members who seek a greater measure of individual choice and privacy.

There is no permanent cure for this perpetual oscillation, only palliative treatment. Wise societies leave enough space for individuals and groups to strike their own balances (within broad limits) between competing goods, and to change their views over time. If dominant political forces (including popular majorities) press their advantages to the hilt, dissenting minorities may conclude that their only choice is to resist.

Societies that combine responsiveness to the will of their people with robust protections for individuals and minority groups are in the best position to strike a flexible and sustainable balance among these competing forces. And liberal societies' capacity for self-criticism and peaceful reform is a perennial source of strength. Despite its current travails, the prospects for liberal democracy are not as bleak as current circumstances might suggest.

Still, there is no guarantee that this hard-won form of governance will survive. Without wise leadership that understands and addresses the permanent vulnerabilities of liberal democracy, it may continue to decline. History offers no guarantees, only challenges and opportunities.

NOTES

1 Adrian Karatnycky, "The 30th Anniversary Freedom House Survey: Liberty's Advances in a Troubled World," *Journal of Democracy* 14 (January 2003): 100–13; Free-

dom House, "Freedom in the World 2020," 2020, *https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/FIW_2020_REPORT_BOOKLET_Final.pdf*.

2. Yoram Hazony, *The Virtue of Nationalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2018).

3. Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2017); Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

4. Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (New York: Viking, 1980); David Miller, *Citizenship and National Identity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000); Yael Tamir, *Why Nationalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

5. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1962).

6. Alexander Hamilton, "The Federalist No. 1: Introduction," in Ian Shapiro, ed., *The Federalist Papers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 7–10.

7. For Tusk's address to the Council, see *www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2018/12/16/ceremonial-lecture-by-president-donald-tusk-at-the-technical-university-of-dortmund*. See also Jarosław Kuisz and Karolina Wigura, "The Pushback Against Populism: Reclaiming the Politics of Emotion," *Journal of Democracy* 31 (April 2020): 41–53.

8. John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (London: Macmillan, 1936), 374.

9. Bertrand Russell, *The Impact of Science on Society* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953), 69.

10. For James's 1906 address "The Moral Equivalent of War," first printed in 1910, see *www.uky.edu/ẽushe2/Pajares/moral.html*.

11. Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1941).

12. The quote is from Weber's famous 1918 address, "Politics as a Vocation," as found in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology,* trans. and ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (London: Routledge, 1948), 77–128.

13. Robert Dahl puts it this way: "Polyarchal democracy has endured only in countries with a predominantly market-capitalist economy" and "this strict relation exists because certain basic features of market-capitalism make it favorable for democratic institutions." Robert A. Dahl, *On Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 166–67.

14. Aristotle, *Politics,* 1295b–1296b. In an unsigned January 1792 newspaper column, Madison observed that "parties are unavoidable," but urged policies to "combat the evil." Among the steps he advocated were "laws, which, without violating the rights of property, reduce extreme wealth towards a state of mediocrity, and raise extreme indigence towards a state of comfort." See *https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-14-02-0176*.

15. Seymour Martin Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy," *American Political Science Review* 53 (March 1959): 69–105.

16. Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing: Spiritual Preparation for the Office of Confession*, trans. Douglas V. Steere (New York: Harper and Row, 1956).