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March 13, 2020

### **The House on the Hill**

Is America a democracy? This complex question prompts a difficult and nuanced response. Perhaps the best way to go about answering is to hedge around it, investigating the tangential questions: What makes a country undemocratic? Should democracy be a social, economic, or political ideal? How does a country lose democracy? Is democracy necessarily good? The authors discussed here provide unique and informed answers to these questions, each headed in a different, specific direction. Many of John Locke's ideals are commonly associated with the United States government and the definition of a democracy, while Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt operate under the assumption that the U.S. ought to be considered as a democracy, yet much can be drawn from both Locke and Levitsky and Ziblatt to severely critique the practices and systems of the American government. The philosophies of James Baldwin, Karl Marx, and Susan Okin provide much more critical analyses of American democracy, pointing out its key economic and social pitfalls as proof of its failed state. Furthermore, it's important to consider how these philosophers, authors, and theorists approach discussing democracy on different spectrums, from how implicitly or explicitly they address the American government to whether they view democracy as a function of the individual, a community, or the government, and what they see as the solution to an undemocratic state.

As much of the political philosophy surrounding the writing of America's constitution is drawn from John Locke it is easy to see how his ideals have trickled down into our government, yet we can further see that much of today's political system has drifted away from his philosophies. The ties which run directly between Locke's writing in *The Second Treatise of Government* to our constitution are easily apparent, from the defense of civil liberties, stress on the individual's role in government,

and reverence for property rights as the utmost priority for upholding freedom. Despite this, Locke would certainly disapprove, not only of the modern abuses of the government for personal or partisan gain, but of sections of the constitution itself. Locke worries “So tyranny is the exercise of power beyond right, which nobody can have a right to. And this is making use of the power anyone has in his hands, not for the good of those who are under it, but for his own private separate advantage.”<sup>1</sup> In so laying out his definition of tyranny, Locke condemns many practices within the U.S. Government. An obvious and egregious example is the use of gerrymandering and abuse of the voting system to benefit partisan advantage. We can see further examples of power corrupted to benefit an individual or their political party laid out in *How Democracies Die*. Specifically, in chapter 6, “The Unwritten Rules of American Politics,” Levitsky and Ziblatt present a convincing argument that American democracy has only been maintained through a respect for norms which block up the many dangerous holes left in the constitution.<sup>2</sup> These examples stretch from the President’s power to pardon, use executive orders, and pack the supreme court to abuses within congress such as the filibuster and right to “advice and consent” over appointments to the supreme court.<sup>3</sup> As these abuses are illustrated through examples across the board of American political history it is difficult to imagine Locke could possibly overlook these issues and would certainly condemn them as tyranny.

Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt lay out the examples of political corruption in chapter 6, not to prove the undemocratic nature of the American government, but to explain how fragile a democracy can be and that the United States may be teetering towards the brink of authoritarianism. In their introduction to *How Democracies Die* they clearly display their intent, “Democracies may die at the hands not of generals but of elected leaders – presidents or prime ministers who subvert the very

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<sup>1</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*. Sect. 199.

<sup>2</sup> Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*. 119-127.

<sup>3</sup> Levitsky and Ziblatt. 127-137.

process which brought them to power.”<sup>4</sup> By addressing the American government, they are accepting it as a democracy, yet aim to dissect the weakness of its political institutions, perhaps begging the question of whether a democracy is really the great institution we praise it as. Making their argument unique in comparison to the other authors discussed here, is their explicitly focused dissection of U.S. politics and presentation of a perspective lacking nuance and dis-interested in the spill of democracy into economics and society. Furthermore, they place much of the blame and responsibility for the downfalls and salvations of political democracy on the shoulders of individuals and politicians within the government who have either abused or upheld the tacit agreements holding our fragile system in place.

Across the spectrum from Levitsky and Ziblatt, firmly stands James Baldwin, providing a fresh, nuanced, and highly philosophical view of America in which he is deeply concerned for the health of our society. While Levitsky and Ziblatt approach the issue from a professional angle, looking to dig into case studies, provide concrete evidence and make a concise point, Baldwin addresses democracy on a personal level. His life provided him with a deep bank of experiences from which to draw critiques of the broken American systems. He builds his central judgement around the idea that a just, representational democracy cannot and will not exist without a just, representational, and democratic society. Highlighting the injustice of America through his life, he explains how the racial, religious, and sexual norms of society are built on discrimination and prejudice. “The American Negro has the great advantage of having never believed the collection of myths to which white Americans cling... The tendency has really been insofar as this was possible to dismiss white people as the slightly mad victims of their own brainwashing.”<sup>5</sup> Displaying through his stories the fundamental lack of democracy between White and Black America, he calls on the

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<sup>4</sup> Levitsky and Ziblatt. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*. 100-101.

individual to ratify and heal the situation. To the White population he implores that we wake up from our self-induced ignorance, realize our arrogance and deny the myths we have taught ourselves, only through this revolution will society and thus government gain democracy. To the Blacks he encourages patience over violence, though he makes his case not on the impossible innocence of the White population, rather he explains the corruptive nature of violence on the soul of those who commit it.

Karl Marx approaches democracy from a new angle, as Baldwin is concerned with society Marx is with economics, but far from speaking from experience his arguments are concocted purely from theory and observation. His writing applies to America in an implicit way, as he is most concerned with addressing the shortcomings of the “democracy” of liberalism in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. As he exposes the ways in which a political system, often under the guise of democracy, builds a horrifically unjust economic system, we are confronted with the gap between democracy as an idealistic philosophy and its reality in application. Marx labels the oppressive system created by the bourgeoisie of the liberal government as “political economy” and proceeds to condemn it on the grounds of its destructive affect on the relationship between owner, laborer, and product.<sup>6</sup> He says of the laborer, “Just as he creates his own production as the loss of his reality, as his punishment; his own product as a loss, as a product not belonging to him; so he creates the domination of the person who does not produce over production and over the product, Just as he estranges his own activity from himself, so he confers upon the stranger and activity which is not his own.”<sup>7</sup> In these words Marx reveals the depths of his concern for the effect of a capitalist economic system on the laborer, explaining that the system is corrupted to such a point that it forces the laborer to commit crimes against himself and society. Here we can see Marx’s belief that economics and the systems

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<sup>6</sup> Marx, “Estranged Labour.” 8.

<sup>7</sup> Marx. 1.

therein are responsible for what happens in society and politics. For him there is no hope for justice, representation or democracy for a people consumed by a sickly economy which wages war on community, relationships, and the individual. However, his hope for reform lies not in self-restraint within the government or personal enlightenment within the people, but in a mass movement, a revolution of the oppressed against the oppressor.

Susan Okin expresses a similar concern for the health of American society, economy, and democracy, but to her the source of the ailment stems from the family. “The family is the primary institution of formative moral development. And the structure and practices of the family must parallel those of the larger society if the sense of justice is to be fostered and maintained.”<sup>8</sup> Here, just as Baldwin and Marx argue that a just government cannot exist without a just society or economy, Okin presents the family as the root source of justice. Without just families no individual will learn true justice and this in turn will limit the justice and democracy of any system, society, or government they participate in. Her case for the injustice present in most American families is convincing. She shows how gender roles in parenting and households, in chorus with societal and economic norms embedded in the judicial system, are used to suppress women in the family. Though this philosophy has its limits, especially in a society which continues to deemphasize the role of the family, it is a fascinating diagnosis for America. In many cases it does an alarmingly good job of sighting the family as the source of much systematic injustice. It provides an alluring argument for reform of the family, an alternative to Baldwin’s individual or Marx’s mass of proletariats, as a means of creating democracy.

If we take these views and lay them on top of one another, perhaps we can begin to see an accurate picture of democracy in America. Democracy, as Baldwin points out starts in the individual, yet certainly the American individual is far from democratic. They are raised in families racked by

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<sup>8</sup> Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*. 22

inequality and injustice, live in a society which refuses to capitulate to racial equality, and work jobs which distance them from their own ability to create, relate to others, and to feel valued within society. Furthermore, this individual must participate in a government system plagued with partisan injustice, systematic abuse of power, and run by other similarly damaged individuals hungry to dominate the levers of power. Yet, it is only as a result of the shortcomings of society and fundamental inequality of the economy that an individual American finds themselves in this sad state, so far estranged from true democracy. If this be the case, that America is plagued with undemocratic principles and actions on all levels, why is the U.S. so acceptably labeled as a model democracy? It appears to me that there are two answers, either America is falsely labeled and is not in fact a democracy at all, or a democracy, as theorized by Locke, liberals, and the American “forefathers,” is a broken and corrupt answer to humans desire for just and representational government, and must either be re-defined or cast aside as a failed political theory. Baldwin elegantly describes this sad state of our “house on the hill” democracy in his haunting question, “Do I really want to be integrated into a burning house?”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*. 93.

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