

Contradictions at the heart of America's democracy

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May 2024

Notes on an *Opinion* piece in the *Washington Post*, April, 24, 2024*: ***We have a radical democracy. Will Trump voters destroy it?*** Adapted from ***Rebellion: How antiliberalism is tearing America apart – again***, by Robert Kagan. (Quotes from Kagan are in Calabri)

*I am most grateful to Janis Nowlan for alerting me to this insightful contribution.

Kagan asks the question 'will Trump destroy America's radical democracy, their brave experiment?'

At the core of Kagan's answer to the question of why so many support Trump, regardless, lies "something much deeper and more fundamental" that the usual list of suspects such as widening inequality or unsuccessful foreign policies. It is a decline in "public virtue" which the Founders worried about and Abraham Lincoln warned about. Essentially they worried about sustaining popular support for the "revolutionary liberal principles of the Declaration of Independence", that the "virtuous love of liberty and equality would in time give way to narrow selfish interest."

Trump and the forces of anti-liberalism

Kagan devotes a substantial proportion of his article documenting the anti-liberal sentiments long held by many Americans, right back to the beginning. These appear today in almost identical form to those espoused by the early critics of the 'radical democracy'. Dominant hierarchy in many of its forms including white supremacy and the inferiority of women has always been present and sometimes explicitly heralded.

"Anti-liberals these days complain about wokeness...but it is the liberal system of government bequeathed by the Founders, and the accompanying egalitarian spirit, that they are really objecting to, just as anti-liberals have since the founding of the nation". The MAGA mob insist they are patriots but whether they realize it or not, "their allegiance is not to the Founders' America but to an ethnoreligious definition of the nation that the Founder explicitly rejected."

"For two centuries, many Americans have felt under siege by the Founders' liberalism". It has been steadily deepening and expanding under presidents of both parties since about 1940 but even losing a civil war could not suppress the forces of anti-liberalism.

"Trump did not stumble into leadership of this movement of white rebellion. He summoned it." He rose to prominence amongst Republicans by championing the birther conspiracy of Barack Obama, an unabashed promotion of white supremacy. But he does not have some "carefully thought-out plan for seizing power, much less an elaborate ideological justification for doing so." He is a supreme egocentric where everything is for himself, his family and his business interests. That he does not respect the results of fair elections is the very definition of a tyrant.

While Trump does not have the plans, or the intellectual justifications, Kagan says that others do have such equipment, and are likely to populate his administration. In this sense, we can appreciate that Trump himself is merely a vehicle, or a means to an end, for these others. The many, and often disparate, forces of anti-liberalism are using him to attempt another turning of the tide.

The central tenet of liberalism

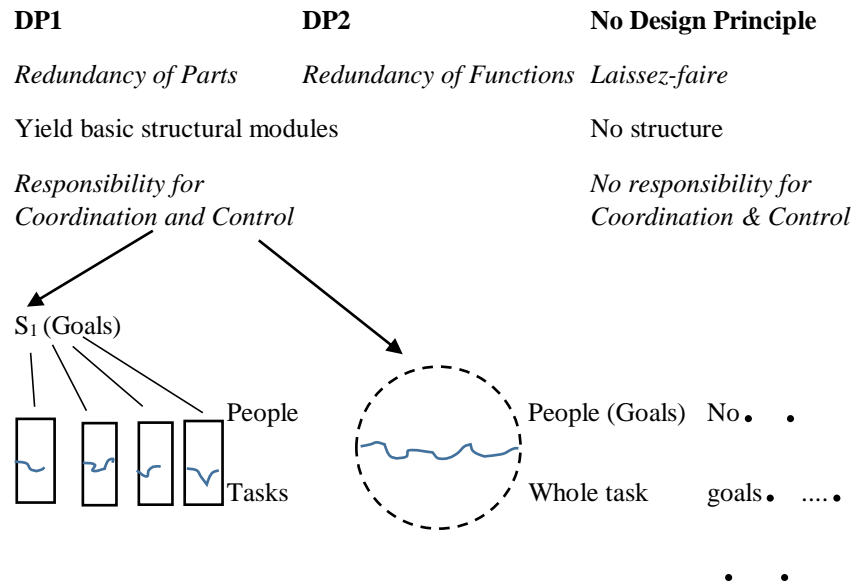
"The Founders based the republic on a radical set of principles and assertions about government: that all human beings were created equal in their possession of certain 'natural rights' that government was bound to respect and to safeguard. These rights did not derive from religious belief but were 'self-evident'. They were not

granted by the Christian God, by the crown or even by the Constitution. They were inherent in what it meant to be human."

This says Kagan is the central tenet of liberalism.

Genotypical design principles

Being equal in status is also the defining structural effect of the second genotypical design principle for organizational structures (DP2) (Emery F, 1967) where the people who are doing the planning, work, other action or learning, are responsible for the coordination and control of their section of the organization



These three options constitute a complete set – responsibility for coordination and control can either be with the actors, or not, or there is no responsibility for coordination and control.

In DP1 responsibility for coordination and control is located at least one level above the action. Therefore, the DP1 organization is autocratic or bureaucratic. This is a supervisory system, the master-servant relation in action where those above have the right and responsibility to tell those below what to do and how to do it. It is a structure of personal dominance, a dominant hierarchy.

To get ahead in DP1, or even survive, one must compete. As soon as people are forced to compete, they have to look after their own interests, and self-interest comes to dominate life in a DP1 structure.

In DP2, it is the opposite: responsibility for coordination and control is located with the people performing the task. The self-managing group, previously called semiautonomous (Emery F, 1980), works to a comprehensive set of agreed and measurable goals. Large DP2 structures are non-dominant hierarchies of function where all change is negotiated between peers.

Rather than individual jobs in DP1, the whole group in DP2 is now jointly responsible for every aspect of the task. Because they are working together to achieve agreed goals for which they are collectively responsible, it engenders cooperation.

Over time DP1 deskills and demotivates, DP2 skills and motivates (Emery & Emery, 1974). DP1 causes dependency, fight or flight, pairing (Emery, M, 1999) and amplifies communication problems and personality conflicts (Emery & Emery, 1976; Emery M, 2004).

Similarly, DP1 structures amplify, while DP2 structures attenuate errors (Beer, 1972, in Emery F, 1977) so only DP2 produces an organization “structured in such a way that its members can learn and continue to learn within it” (Emery M, 1993, p. 2). There is no implication here that organizations can learn.

The design principles operate throughout society, underlying political or governance systems in the same way as single organizations of all types. DP1 yields representative structure, DP2 alternatives are known as participative democracy (Emery F, 1974, 1976, 1989). These design principles also appear to operate across the animal, biological or cellular and mechanical realms (Emery M, 2003). For more details about these principles, consult the website www.socialsciencethatactuallyworks.com.

The main contradiction

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So while the Declaration of Independence centred around equality, the structure of their government centred around inequality.

Whether Kagan is aware of this contradiction is not clear but on his opening page he includes this statement: "Although James Madison and his colleagues hoped to establish a government on the solid foundation of self-interest, even Madison acknowledged that no government by the people could be sustained if the people themselves did not have sufficient dedication to the liberal ideals of the Declaration. The people had to love liberty, not just for themselves but as an abstract ideal for all humans." This almost sounds as if the Founders knew their great experiment could beach itself on DP1 which automatically leads to self interest.

It would seem that the structure of government trumps the Declaration (so to speak) as although it is by no means sure or certain that Trump will win the Presidency in 2024, it is obvious he, and his supporters, are going to give it a red hot go.

A serious confusion

It is here that we run into another contradiction - or really confusion - at the heart of American democracy as those favouring dominant hierarchies and opposing equality do not recognize that the structure of the government is actually on their side, that it is a breeding

I take issue with Kagan who claims "no government had ever been founded on liberal principles" but we won't quibble about words such as 'government'. Of course, all societies are governed even if they govern themselves. However, there is overwhelming evidence that ancient cultures around the world were built on DP2, and many function with this structure to this day. Kagan could visit some of them in the USA.

If we stick strictly to governments taking their lead from the British, then he is undoubtedly correct. He knows these systems, representative democracies, are based on dominant hierarchies. Unfortunately he does not know of the design principles any more than the Founding Fathers did and so cannot quickly or easily put his finger on one of the main contradictions at the heart of American democracy. For all its differences from the British system, the design of America's democracy is also rep dem, built on the first design principle (DP1) giving the structure of a dominant hierarchy.

ground for ever greater inequality in all its forms, financial as well as status. The USA is now one of the most financially unequal places on the planet.

The anti-liberals, however, have always been hell bent on overthrowing the government and Kagan quotes one woman participating in the insurrection of 6 January, 2021 as saying "We were just there to overthrow the government." *Absolutely no change there then.*

This raises another question altogether as the anti-liberals definitely do not want equality (DP2) but they also want to overthrow their DP1 government – *so what do they want?*

The crux of the confusion was one discovered, described and explained many moons ago in a series of classical experiments carried out in America, 1938-1940.

The experiments were to learn more about the phenomena of autocracy and democracy. The participants were boys organized into clubs, each with leaders adopting different leadership styles. Although it began as a study of autocracy and democracy, it rapidly changed into a study of three forms of “social climate” (Lippitt, 1940), or what we today call “structures.”

The third form, laissez-faire, (LF) was discovered by accident, as it arose from a misunderstanding of the nature of democracy. An inexperienced leader, Ralph White, became baffled by the anarchy created by boys who were 'real hell raisers'. Rather than work together with the boys to set rules, rewards and punishments as in the other democratic groups, he had let the boys 'do their own thing'.

The results were overwhelmingly negative and totally opposed to the behaviour of the boys in every other democratic group. Their behaviour was even more negative in some ways than in some of the autocratic groups where the leader had set all the rules and the boys had no say.

White's understanding was that democracy meant total individual freedom. His approach with this group allowed the *distinction between democracy and laissez-faire* to be made. Many people practice laissez-faire thinking that they are being democratic just because they are not controlling autocratically (White, 1990). Unfortunately, this confusion of democracy and laissez-faire is still with us.

The rest of the experiments then thoroughly tested the three conditions; There were no rules made in laissez-faire; the leader supplied materials and gave information only if asked, did not participate in the group work, did not praise or blame, and did not attempt to regulate work (Lippitt & White, 1943).

The three structures produced very different behaviours: aggression was a characteristic of both the autocratic and laissez-faire groups but not the democratic. It was directed toward other groups and individuals as well as toward the leader. In all ways, the experiments showed clearly that democracy and laissez-faire were very distinct social climates or conditions.

The democratic form showed its superiority on every measure. Since then, this result has been found many times over in just about every form of human endeavour although there has been an updating of the language since the design principles were discovered. *Climate* is now known as *structure*. Laissez-faire is now known as the absence of a design principle because there are no structural relationships between the people (Emery M, 1999). Because laissez-faire is qualitatively different from both autocracy and democracy and its effects are so negative, it cannot be a half-way house between bureaucracy and democracy (Fiorelli, 1988; Emery F, 1988). Unfortunately today, many laissez-faire organizations exist where the structure is DP1 on paper but generally ignored (deGuerre, 2000). They tend to fail (Trist & Dwyer, 1993).

Kagan says that these anti-liberals know that bringing their dream of such as a hierarchical Christian commonwealth or 'conservative nationalism' into being "means jettisoning the Founders'

obsession with individual rights." So this confusion between democracy and laissez-faire may well go back to the origins of the independent USA.

Many today interpret that other famous clause in the Declaration of Independence, *the pursuit of happiness*, as a rationale for the very common belief that democracy means laissez-faire and radical individualism. This was not however, the motivation of the Founders who had rather more noble and uplifting sentiments for their statement. Arguments have raged as to the origins of this pursuit but rather than property, it was generally believed to be natural justice. Happiness, rather than a personal attainment of some individual or material desire, was seen to be more like the satisfaction or joy that accrues after an act of altruism or generosity (Wikipedia). Nothing could have been further from the minds of the Founding Fathers than shooting somebody because you felt like it, to avenge or simply to have fun.

It has long been established that individuals only flourish when they are securely embedded in a cohesive and supporting group or community (DP2). Individuals living a privatized and lonely life (in DP1 or LF) suffer and wither away (Fromm, 1963; Angyal, 1965).

It would seem that the Founding Fathers had a rather more accurate view of the nature of individual rights and the conditions under which they could thrive than the current inhabitants of the USA.

The ascendance of individualism

The confusion between democracy and laissez-faire plus today's dreadful deployment of the pursuit of happiness raises one factor that Kagan does not mention in this comprehensive appraisal of American democracy. It is the ascendance of individualism to its position of prominence, if not preeminence in today's American belief system. Individualism has always been there, in such forms as the Wild West and the conquering of the same by the rugged pioneers.

At the same time, the USA also has a history of mutuality, cooperation towards the greater good. The old practice of barn raising is just one well known example of how early white America was a cohesive community based society in which mutual help and support was paramount in building the country up from its scattered and often precarious beginnings. That was obviously present in the Founders' minds as we see with their understanding of happiness.

So together with its belief in dominant hierarchies, with themselves as the top of the heap, the dispossession of the original inhabitants for land and wealth, there also coexisted the other two members of the total set of two design principles and laissez-faire. All three appear to have waxed and waned over its history and this is not the place to delve into the various forces behind those changes.

Conclusion

Kagan concludes that "If the American system of government fails this year, it will not be because the institutions established by the Founders failed. It will not be because of new technologies or flaws in the Constitution. No system of government can protect against a determined tyrant. Only the people can. So this year we will learn if they will."

He may be right. However, it is clear from this brief analysis of the very basics, the genotypical design principles, that there is a problem within the Founders' system. Having a conflict between DP1 in the governance structures, and most organizational structures, DP2 in the Declaration of Independence, and laissez-faire firmly established in the culture, cannot be helping the cause of liberalism or democracy in any way. It is a recipe for disaster and has so proven itself before in the civil war for example. People do not have to know about the design principles to experience their effects. It is these conflicts and contradictions which

account for most of its current instability and will render the coming election unpredictable and potentially a calamity.

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