

Madison's nightmare: Political theorists have been worrying about mob rule for 2,000 years

Plato's "Republic" was, in part, a meditation on the evils of mob rule

The Economist

Jan 16th 2021

Liberals have become lazy when thinking about the mob. They have celebrated "people power" when it threatens regimes they disapprove of, in the Middle East, say, while turning a blind eye to the excesses of protesters who they deem to be on the right side of history— in Portland, Oregon, for example. In August 2020 a mainstream publisher, Public Affairs, produced "In Defence of Looting: A Riotous History of Uncivil Action" by Vicky Osterweil.

The invasion of America's Capitol by mobs of President Donald Trump's supporters on January 6th was a reminder of the danger of playing with fire. It is naive to assume that mobs will be confined to the "nice" side of the political spectrum; the left-wing kind by their nature generate the right-wing sort. It is doubly naive to expect that mobs will set limits; it is in their nature to run out of control.

Political philosophers have been making these points for more than 2,000 years. Pre- modern theorists never tired of warning that, given the chance, the "many-headed monster" would trample the established order. Even liberal thinkers worried that democracy might give rise to "mobocracy". They argued that the will of the people needed to be restrained by a combination of constitutional intricacy (individual rights, and checks and balances) and civic culture. The wiser among them added that the decay of such restraints could transform democracy into mob rule.

The first great work of political philosophy, Plato's "Republic", was, in part, a meditation on the evils of mob rule. Plato regarded democracy as little more than mob rule by another name— perhaps without the violence, at least at first, but with the same lack of impulse control. He compared the citizens of democracies to shoppers who see a "coat of many colours" in a market and buy it only to discover that it falls apart when it has been worn a couple of times. He noted that democracies are hard-wired to test boundaries.

Plato also argued that democracies inevitably degenerate into anarchy, as the poor plunder the rich and profligacy produces bankruptcy. Anarchy leads to the rule of tyrants: a bully can appeal to the mob's worst instincts precisely because he is ruled by his own worst instincts. He is, as it were, the mob in the form of a single person. For Plato the only viable alternative to mob rule was the rule of a caste of guardians: philosopher kings trained from infancy to control their emotions and put wisdom before instinct.

Aristotle, Plato's great pupil, distinguished between three legitimate forms of government: kingship, aristocracy and democracy. He argued that they each have their dark shadows: tyranny, oligarchy and mob rule. He then outlined the ways in which these virtuous forms of government

evolve into their opposites: democracy becomes mob rule when the rich hog the society's wealth. A more practical thinker than Plato, Aristotle argued that there were two ways of preventing democracy from degenerating into mobocracy: mix in elements of kingship and aristocracy to restrain the will of the people; and create a large middle class with a stake in stability.

The following centuries saw only a few innovations in thinking about the mob. Machiavelli speculated that clever princes might be able to profit from chaos if they could forge the mob into a battering-ram against a decaying regime. Mostly elites were content with demonisation. They invented a slew of fearsome names for the people—the “beast of many heads”, the “swinish multitude” and the *mobile vulgus*, or changeable crowd, which gave rise to the term “mob”. They also invented cynical ways of diverting its anarchic energies, most notably Rome's bread and circuses. But this changed with the French and American revolutions, which were based on contrasting approaches to mob rule.

Two revolutions

Initially many celebrated the “people power” of the French revolution. In response to the tumult Wordsworth wrote: “Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive/ But to be young was very Heaven!” But many changed their minds when they discovered that, far from unleashing man's natural goodness, the revolution had set free his inner demons. Those who stuck with the revolution despite the guillotine and the Terror did so on two grounds: that the old regime was responsible for the violence because it created so much pent-up hatred; and that you cannot improve the world without bloodshed. Tom Paine, a British radical, remained a true believer despite the fact that he was imprisoned for ten months during the Terror and only escaped with his life because the chalk mark indicating he should be executed was placed on the wrong door.

The French Revolution also produced a robust conservative critique of mob rule—first in Edmund Burke's “Reflections on the Revolution in France”, published before the worst of the Terror, then in a flood of works. Burke recognised that the mob has a collective psychology that makes it uniquely dangerous. It is a “monstrous medley of all conditions, tongues, and nations”. It relishes wild abandon—“horrid yells”, “shrilling screams” and the “unutterable abominations of the furies of hell”. It gets so carried away with its own righteous bloodlust that even normally decent people can be transformed into monsters. He predicted that the revolution would end in the massacre of thousands (including the king, queen and priests) and the rise of a dictator who could restore law and order. The

cycle of mass protest followed by violence followed by dictatorship set a pattern for subsequent revolutions in Russia (1917), Cuba (1958) and elsewhere.

The American revolution succeeded where the French revolution and its progeny failed because it was based on a considered fear of “the confusion and intemperance of a multitude”. “Federalist No. 55”, written by either James Madison or Alexander Hamilton, is particularly sharp on the way that ill-designed institutions can turn even sensible citizens into a baying crowd: “Had every Athenian citizen been a Socrates, every Athenian assembly would still have been a mob”.

The Founding Fathers argued that democracy could avoid becoming mobocracy only if it was hedged with a series of restraints to control the power of the people. Power was divided between the branches of government to make sure that nobody wielded too much. Citizens were given extensive constitutional rights. Senators were given six-year terms to insulate them from fads. They were also initially appointed by state legislatures rather than directly elected. Supreme Court judges were appointed for life, ensuring they cannot be removed by people from other branches.

Alexis de Tocqueville added his own worries about mob rule in “Democracy in America”. For him the constitution alone is not strong enough to save democracy from the mob. A vigorous civic culture rooted in self-governing communities (he was particularly keen on New England’s townships) and a self-reliant and educated population are also necessary. So too is a responsible elite that recognises that its first duty is to “educate democracy”.

The march of democracy

The 19th century saw the world’s ruling elites reconciling themselves to the fact that democracy was the wave of the future. How you dealt with this wave depended largely on your attitude to the mob. Optimists thought that extending the franchise was not only right but also a way to tame the mob. Benjamin Disraeli thought that voting would help assimilate people: just as owning property makes people more sober, so exercising democratic rights converts them into responsible citizens.

Pessimists held that delay was the best way to avert the mob. Most members of the British ruling class favoured introducing democracy in measured stages because they made a sharp distinction between the respectable middle- and upper-working classes, who would vote responsibly because they owned property, and the unrespectable classes, who, as well as being propertyless, were, in their opinion, addicted to drink and licentiousness. J.S. Mill argued in favour of a “variable franchise”: “one person at least one vote, and up to three or four votes according to education”. Walter Bagehot, editor of *The Economist* from 1861 to 1877, and a man who worried obsessively about the breakdown of social order, added a new solution: use the monarchy as a theatre that would simultaneously entertain the masses and distract them from the real wielders of power.

This sort of pessimism has been out of fashion for a long time. The second world war and the defeat of Nazism led to an era of democratic self-confidence, and the fall of the Berlin Wall to one of democratic euphoria. But a few pessimists continued to warn that democracies might well degenerate into mob rule if they neglected the health of their political institutions and civic culture. Seymour Martin Lipset, an American sociologist, echoed Aristotle’s view that a healthy democracy requires broad-based prosperity. Harvey Mansfield, a political philosopher, reiterated Tocqueville’s worry that civic decay might corrupt democracy. Samuel Huntington warned that “democratic overload”, with too many interest groups demanding too much from the state, would lead to democratic disillusionment as the state failed to live up to its ever-escalating promises.

In recent years the pessimists have grown in number. The experience of countries such as Egypt during the Arab spring confirmed warnings that, without strong institutions in place, democracy

would succumb to mob rule. The election of Mr Trump, a reality-tv star, raised profound questions about the health of America's political regime. Can democracy survive if television channels make billions of dollars by peddling misinformation and partisanship? Or if wealthy people can invest vast sums of money in the political process? Or if society is polarised into a superclass and a demoralised proletariat? Recent events suggest that the answer is "no".

The age of democratic naivety died on January 6th. It is time for an age of democratic sophistication. Democracies may well be the best safeguard against mob rule, as liberal democrats have been preaching for centuries. But they can be successful only if countries put the necessary effort into nurturing democratic institutions: guarding against too much inequality, ensuring that voters have access to objective information, taming money in politics and reinforcing checks and balances. Otherwise, the rule of the people will indeed become the rule of the mob, and the stable democratic order that flourished from the second world war onwards will look like a brief historical curiosity.

Can Epistocracy, or knowledge-based voting, fix democracy?

Los Angeles Times

August, 28, 2016

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For 60 years, political scientists have studied what voters actually know. The results are depressing. Hundreds of different surveys, such as the American National Election Studies, find that the median voter is ignorant or misinformed not only about the social sciences needed to evaluate candidates' policy proposals, but even of basic facts and trends, such as what the unemployment rate is and whether it's going up or down.

This isn't because public schools fail us. It's not because Fox News or MSNBC (take your pick) bamboozles poor voters with well-crafted lies. It's not because people are inherently stupid or unable to think for themselves. It's because democracy gives us the wrong incentives. How we vote matters, but how any one of us votes does not. The chance an individual vote will make a difference is vanishingly small. Thus, we have little incentive to gather relevant information so that we can cast our votes in careful, thoughtful ways. Votes are like lottery tickets. Winning the lottery changes everything, but an individual lottery ticket is nearly worthless. If a philanthropist offered to pay you \$10 million if you could pass Economics 101, you'd probably learn basic economics. But if the same philanthropist offered you a 1 in 100 million chance of winning \$10 million if you could pass Economics 101, you'd stay ignorant. While not everything governments do is decided by voters — bureaucracies, parties and officials have significant independence — what voters want makes a difference. And since voters are generally uninformed, we get worse policies that we would with a better-informed electorate . . . We cannot "fix" this problem because it's a built-in feature of democracy. So maybe it's time to consider an alternative to democracy called epistocracy. In a democracy, every citizen gets an equal right to vote. In an epistocracy, voting power is widespread, but votes are weighted: More knowledgeable citizens' votes count more . . .

Epistocracy comes in many forms. An epistocracy might give everyone one vote, then grant extra votes to citizens who pass a test of basic political knowledge (such as the citizenship exam). Or it might grant the right to vote only to citizens who pass such a test. Or it might instead hold an “enfranchisement lottery”: Immediately before an election, choose 10,000 citizens at random, and then those citizens, and only those, are permitted to vote, but only if they first complete a competence-building exercise . . .

One major question is what counts, and who decides what counts, as political competence or basic political knowledge. We don’t want selfish parties rigging a political exam for their own benefit. One solution would be to use widely accepted existing tests, such as the American Citizenship Exam . . .

Some would object that epistocracy is essentially inegalitarian. In an epistocracy, not everyone has the same voting power. But what’s so wrong with that? Only some people have plumbing or hairdressing licenses because we accept that only some people are qualified to fix pipes or cut hair. Perhaps only some people, rather than everyone 18 and over, are truly qualified to decide who will lead the most powerful country on earth.

Another obvious complaint is that in an epistocracy, some demographic groups would have more voting power than others because some demographic groups have more measurable political knowledge than others. In our society, advantaged people are more knowledgeable, and advantaged people are more likely to be old and white than young and brown. Epistocracy could therefore take us back to the bad old days when middle-aged white professionals had more sway at the ballot box than everyone else. But at least some versions of epistocracy — such as the enfranchisement lottery—avoid this problem.

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