

# The Psychology of Democracy

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## From Public Lecture

### \*The Psychology of Democracy

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JOHN Adams (1735–1826), second president of the United States, is quoted as saying, “There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide” (Ketchum, n.d.). I believe this is an apt starting point for our discussion of the psychology of democracy, because the 21st century is going to be a highly challenging time for democracy. The threat to democracy arises in many ways. First, there is the direct threat posed by dictatorships large (e.g., China, Russia) and small (Iran, North Korea). Second, there is indirect threat to democracies from radicalization movements of different kinds, including religious extremists who engage in violent terrorist acts. In reaction to radicalization and terrorism, even more democratic governments are limiting freedoms and weakening democracy. Third, democracy is being threatened by globalization forces, which weaken local and national governments, and accelerate the concentration of global wealth in fewer and fewer hands. According to Oxfam (2016), 62 people now own as much wealth as the poorest half of the world’s population, 3.5 billion people.

My concern for the future of democracy will be rejected by optimists who see an endless supremacy of democracies, led by the United States. The American empire is suffering from what the historian Toynebee (1965) described as the ‘mirage of immortality’, when global powers come to see their own way of life as the final form of human civilization. Some American politicians tout the United States as ‘the greatest nation in history’, and some American academics seriously argue that we have reached the ‘end of history’. Obviously we should not allow these short-sighted pronouncements to distract us from the long-term goal of progressing beyond the profound limitations of nations today—including the severe limitations of the United States, countries of the European Union, and the other semi-developed democracies in the 21st century.

My goal is to discuss how psychological changes are needed to move our societies forward to achieve what I call *actualized democracy*,

where there is full, informed, equal participation in wide aspects of political, economic, and cultural decision-making independent of financial investment and resources. These psychological changes can be seen as part of a growth toward a 'greater self', as proposed by Daisaku Ikeda (2010), for example. Such a growth is essential for the fulfillment of actualized democracy. From Athens 2,500 years ago, to the Roman Republic half a millennium later, to modern democracies, there has been a tradition of democracies "committing suicide", and of not achieving their full potential. There are no actualized democracies in our 21st century world. India, the 'largest democracy', and the United States, the 'superpower democracy', are far from actualized democracies. India is rife with corruption and enormous injustices; the United States has a citizenry that is largely disillusioned and distrusting of government. Even in the most important national elections, barely 50% of eligible citizens actually vote in the U.S.A., and participation in local elections is routinely below 20% (Sharp, 2012).

The weakness of American democracy is in part by design: for example, some elite groups in America invest heavily in preventing mass participation in American elections, and ensuring that only those with enormous private funding can compete as candidates in elections. Consequently, many U.S. citizens do not see their interests represented among the well-resourced candidates for political office. The Supreme Court decision equating spending in political elections with free speech (*Citizens United v. Federal Election Comm'n*, 558 U.S. 310, 2010) means that there is no limit to what the most affluent individuals and families spend attempting to shape election results. It is hardly surprising that trust in politicians and political institutions has declined among Americans. But the idea of the United States being an open society where 'anyone can make it' continues to influence the non-elite masses, and they continue to vote for political leaders who do not represent their true interests.

My goal is to explore the psychological reasons for the allusive nature of actualized democracy, even after major revolutions have created dramatic macro level political and economic changes. This discussion is intended to pave the way for psychological science to play a more central role in achieving movement toward actualized democracy. I begin by distinguishing between three different types of change, at micro, meso, and macro levels. I argue that revolutions typically achieve macro change in a relatively short amount of time, but they fail to achieve the meso and micro level changes necessary for movement toward actualized democracy. This is despite sometimes using extreme violence and

high levels of control, as in the so-called 'cultural revolutions' of the 1960s in China and the early 1980s in Iran. Consequently, even major revolutions only change political and economic systems, often only at the surface level, without transforming styles of social relations and cognition. Second, I map out the social and psychological changes that need to take place in order to develop psychological citizens capable of achieving and sustaining actualized democracy. Third, I discuss the psychological foundations of the macro system that can sustain actualized democracy, with a focus on meritocracy.

### Three Different Types of Change

It is useful to distinguish between three different types of change. This distinction will help us better understand movement toward and away from actualized democracy. We must keep in mind that movement can be both toward and away from actualized democracy.

#### *First-Order, Second-Order, and Third-Order Change*

All major societies began as dictatorships, and some societies have made some progress toward actualized democracy (Moghaddam, 2013). If we imagine a continuum with 'pure dictatorship' at one extreme and 'pure democracy' at the opposite extreme (Figure 1), all major societies are located somewhere between these two ends, with some being closer to 'pure democracy' than 'pure dictatorship'. However, no major society is a 'pure dictatorship' or a 'pure democracy'.

Pure Dictatorship \_\_\_\_\_ Pure Democracy

Figure 1. The dictatorship-democracy continuum

Movement on the 'dictatorship-democracy' continuum is usefully conceptualized as involving three different types of change (Moghaddam, 2002). *First-order change* takes place without altering either the formal law or the informal normative system that justifies unequal treatment on the basis of group membership. For example, during the era of slavery in the United States, various changes took place in society (such as in fashion) without changing either formal law or the informal normative system as it pertained to slavery. *Second-order change* involves change in formal law to make illegal unequal treatment on the basis of group membership, but the informal normative system continues to allow unequal treatment on the basis of group membership. For example, race based discrimination continued in various ways in the

United States after slavery formally ended. A second example concerns social class: despite formal laws supporting 'fair competition' in access to higher education, children born in poor families are far less likely to gain access to competitive universities than equally talented children born in affluent families. Thus, first-order and second-order children stitute 'within system' change, because they do not necessarily bring about a change from one system to another. *Third-order change* involves a transformation of both the formal and informal systems: it is a change of systems, from one system to another, rather than a change only within one system.

Most revolutions throughout history have brought about first-order change, a few have resulted in second-order change, but so far third-order change has remained elusive through revolution. That is, most revolutions have, at most, changed the formal economic, political, legal macro-structure. In most instances this represents only cosmetic, surface change. On paper, the constitutions put in place by some revolutions seem progressive. But actual behavior, regulated as it is by powerful informal normative systems, has not been changed toward actualized democracy. This pattern is clear when we examine change over historical time, which fits Pareto's (1935) model of perpetual 'elite rule' and inter-group inequalities, rather than idealist visions of Thomas More (1965/1516), Karl Marx (Marx & Engels, 1967/1848), and others, depicting egalitarian societies sometime in the future.

There was some movement earlier in the 20th century toward smaller resource inequalities between high and low status groups (such as different social classes, ethnicities, and the like), but since the 1970s group-based inequalities have accelerated. This trend is well documented (Atkinson, 2015; Dorling, 2014; Piketty, 2014), as are the detrimental physical and mental health consequences of greater resource inequalities particularly for the groups with least access to resources (Marmot, 2004). Pareto's (1935) elite theory provides a critical lens through which to evaluate these trends: we should not be distracted by the labels political systems give themselves, because elites use ideologies to mask the true nature of continued inequalities and elite rule. For example, Pareto could argue that the United States and China, the nations with the two largest economies in the world, are ostensibly very different from one another: the most powerful capitalist democracy and the most powerful communist nation. But the United States and China are similar in that in both nations, a tiny elite monopolizes wealth and power.

### *The Macro-Micro Rule of Change*

Macro level change can be brought about quickly by political revolution. After they have come to power, revolutionaries can with the stroke of a pen change constitutions, the rules of ownership, and even entire economic systems. For example, private ownership can be abolished by the new government. Monarchs, Shahs, and Tsars can be executed and 'representatives of the people' or 'the representative of God on earth' can gain absolute power 'on behalf of the people', taking on titles like 'supreme leader' and 'chairman' or 'president'. These macro level political, economic, and institutional changes can take place very quickly. However, micro-level changes involving the values, attitudes, motivations, needs, and relationship patterns between people, how they solve problems and interact at the everyday level, how they think and act in relation to authority figures as well as those with lower status than themselves—these all change at a relatively slow pace.

### *The Fleeting Post-Revolution 'Opportunity Bubble'*

This relatively slower pace of change at the micro social and psychological level is particularly important in the highly sensitive period immediately after a revolution, when a dictatorship has just collapsed. There is usually a brief period of jubilation and opportunity: the chains of dictatorial control have been broken and it is possible to move toward a more open society. The door seems to be open for a change of systems. All major revolutions have a brief window, an 'opportunity bubble', during which this change from one system to another is feasible.

I experienced such a momentous 'opportunity bubble' when I was in Iran immediately after the 1979 revolution. The Shah had fled Iran and his regime had collapsed. We had a brief opportunity to move from dictatorship to democracy. The excitement was palpable in the cities and villages in Iran. People talked enthusiastically about the opportunities ahead: the dictator Shah had fled and there seemed to be a real chance to achieve a more open society, with free speech and political and social freedoms for all, including women and minorities. However, we learned the hard way that such third-order change, a change from one system to another, can only come about when certain pre-requisites are met.

First, there must be leadership in support of movement toward actualized democracy. This is a tall order; George Washington and Nelson Mandela stand out as exceptions among the leaders at times of major revolutions. These two leaders voluntarily stepped aside from power, rather than monopolizing power all of their lives, as did Stalin, Mao,

Khomeini, and other dictators. In terms of personality characteristics, the kind of leader who is able to win power and control through and after a major revolution is typically not likely to reach out to opposition groups and attempt to develop dialogue and compromise.

Most leaders who come to power through revolutions are motivated to achieve power monopoly: the behavior patterns of Stalin, Mao, Khomeini, Castro, and Putin represent the norm. Washington and Mandela are the anomalies. Unfortunately, in terms of personality characteristics, the kinds of leaders who are ruthless enough to come to power through revolution, and who often have the charisma and ability to rattle-rouse and mobilize the masses, are less inclined to share power and democratize decision-making after they have come to leadership positions. In the terminology of traditional personality research, leaders who come to power through revolutions tend to be high on Machiavellianism, authoritarianism, and need for power, but low on tolerance for ambiguity, openness, and conscientiousness. From Napoleon to Stalin to Khomeini, the behavior pattern of these leaders is characterized by dogmatic, ruthless, relentless pursuit of power, not compromise and reaching out to opposition groups in order to achieve consensus. As I witnessed in Iran in the case of Khomeini, these leaders are inclined to smash the opposition with iron fists, rather than engage the opposition in dialogue with open arms.

Second, there must be political opportunity to create institutional support for movement toward democracy. Such political opportunity is often thwarted by elites within society, such as military, religious, and business elites determined to protect their resources, high status positions, and domains of influence. Another important source of opposition to democracy can be foreign powers, including world powers, who might see continued dictatorship as the best means of protecting their own interests. Unfortunately the post-World-War two era is littered with examples of American, European, Russian and (most recently) Chinese interventions in nations around the world in support of dictatorship rather than democracy. Thus, it is seldom the case that elites, foreign powers, and other forces are in support of building institutions to move toward openness and democracy.

But there is a third, far less researched and discussed, pre-requisite for third-order change: the general population has to acquire in a timely manner the social and psychological skills needed to become *democratic citizens*. This change has to take place at two levels: first at the collective level and second at the individual level; it is collective level changes that make widespread individual level changes possible (Moghaddam,

2006). Some exceptional individuals are able to achieve the characteristics of democratic citizenship without support from the collective, but as lone individuals their influence always remains very limited.

Unfortunately this third condition is very difficult to achieve, because of the slow pace of change in styles of cognition and action. One can change governments overnight, but changing the way people think and act takes far longer. This proves to be a huge stumbling block confronting pro-democracy movements immediately after they have toppled a dictatorship. There is very little time, sometimes not more than a few months, in order to socialize the population to think and act in ways that will nurture and support democracy, rather than return the country back to dictatorship. But what are the characteristics of the psychological citizen we need to achieve, in order to support movement toward democracy? This is the question I turn to next.

### Characteristics of the Democratic Psychological Citizen

I have identified ten key psychological characteristics that the citizen needs to have in order to be capable of fully supporting, and participating in, a democracy (see Figure 2). These characteristics should be the focus of socialization in families and schools. In particular, civic education should focus on these characteristics.

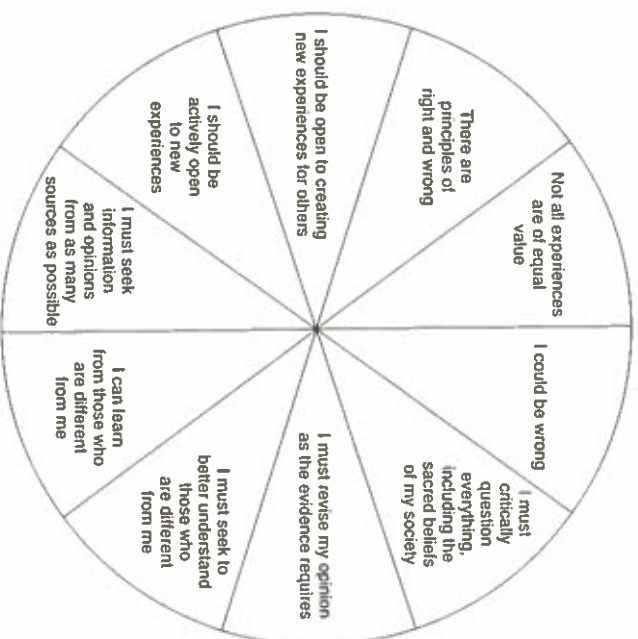


Figure 2. The psychological characteristics of the democratic citizen

*Have Self Doubt:* The first step is the experience of self-doubt and leaving open the possibility that "I could be wrong". This does not mean that the person is crippled with doubt and unable to take positive action. Rather, it means that the person moves forward always ready to incorporate and adopt better information, ideas, and directions.

*Be Ready to Question Sacred Beliefs:* The individual must not only question their own assumptions, but also be willing to seriously question the sacred beliefs of their own societies. This can be extremely difficult to do, because often it involves going against the norms and beliefs seen as 'natural' and even 'sacred' by one's family, community, and nation. However, such questioning is necessary because it opens the path for the constructive growth of both individuals and societies.

*Have Flexibility of Opinions in Light of Evidence:* As opposed to categorical 'we are correct, they are wrong' thinking, democratic citizens develop high tolerance for ambiguity and openness to change. They seek and are guided by new information and are capable of changing their opinions. Their opinions are less likely to be guided by dogma and irrational factors, and more in line with the latest evidence gathered from different sources.

*Understand Those Who Are Different from Us:* Most human groups tend to be insular and to see their way of life as 'natural' and 'better'. This trend is in line with the requirements of closed rather than open societies, dictatorships rather than democracies. Democracy requires us to seek out and be inclusive toward those who are different from us.

*Learn From Those Who Are Different:* We must not only be open toward others who are different from us, but be motivated to learn what we can from them. This is a very difficult characteristic to acquire, because the 'natural' tendency for humans is to be attracted toward similar rather than dissimilar others.

*Seek Information and Opinions from Different Sources:* A central feature of education for democratic citizenship is that it teaches people from a young age to seek information from different sources. This is not difficult to achieve when it is carried out systematically, and becomes central to the educational mission from the start of schooling. In many cases teaching the young to seek information from different and sometimes contradictory sources goes against the traditions in their families, where political and religious biases strictly narrow down the sources of information. However, when carried out correctly, teaching the young to seek diverse sources of information will also feed back into the family, helping the parents to also become more open-minded.

*Be Open to New Experiences:* Democratic citizens actively seek out

new experiences through engagement with those outside their ingroups. This encompasses all kinds of learning, and includes behavioral engagement and interactions with outgroups on the basis of openness. Openness is motivated by the ever-present question: what can I learn from these other people?

*Create New Experiences for Others:* In addition to gaining from the new experiences that others open up for the self, the democratic citizen actively opens up new experiences for others to benefit from. This is a difficult skill to learn, because sharing ingroup experiences with outsiders can feel threatening. This 'opening up to others' is often very challenging, because it means allowing outgroup members to enter as trusted partners into the life of the ingroup. However, such 'opening up' is made possible through trust and priority being given to basic human commonalities, in line with omniculturalism (Moghaddam, 2012), rather than giving priority to intergroup differences. Omniculturalism leads us to give priority to our similarities and what we share with other humans, rather than first attending to how we are different.

*Adopt Principles of Right and Wrong:* The characteristics needed for democratic citizenship, such as openness to others, should not lead to the acceptance of relativism and a rejection of all universal principles. Growth toward democratic citizenship is based on principles of right and wrong, as reflected in the *United Nations Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) and other such foundational documents. Similarly, democratic governance is based on universal principles that guarantee basic freedoms and just treatment. It is strong adherence to basic democratic principles that enable the democratic citizen to gain the confidence needed to acquire all the characteristics outlined above.

*Seek Experiences of Higher Value:* Guided by basic principles of right and wrong, the democratic citizen seeks out experiences of higher value and rejects less valuable experiences.

### Psychology and Third-Order Change

I have argued that psychological obstacles make it very difficult to achieve a change from one system to another, third-order change. This is particularly when the change involves moving society from dictatorship to democracy. Because of the influence of psychological obstacles, history often seems to follow a cyclical path, with each revolution resulting in a change of who is 'on top' and who is 'at the bottom', but no change in the deeper nature of relationships. The poet Yeats (1865–1939) captured this cycle in his poem 'The great day', with the image of two beggars changing places to whip one another, so one beggar now rides

on horseback and the other beggar is on foot receiving the lash. The fixed feature of their relationship is the lash, which goes on irrespective of who is riding the horse.

“The beggars have changed places, but the lash goes on.”

William Butler Yeats (1962, p. 190)

This is in line with Pareto's (1935) vision of elites always ruling in all major societies, but using different ideologies to manage their rule over the non-elite. This pattern is clearly visible when one considers the move from the Tsar to Stalin and his successors, the Shah to the mullahs in Iran, the Arab Spring and what followed in Egypt and most other Arab societies, to consider just a few examples.

While I have identified the very difficult psychological changes that the masses need to achieve in order to evolve into democratic citizens and move society toward actualized democracy, the elite theory tradition highlights the perhaps equally difficult transformations the elites need to achieve for democratic change. According to elite theorists, when a society becomes too closed and social mobility diminishes, so that talented individuals are unable to climb up the status hierarchy, a counter-elite forms to lead the masses against the current rulers. However, after a revolution has succeeded, the elite who led the masses to overthrow the old regime, gradually change their own behavior until they become corrupt and resemble the former elite they replaced.

But we should not assume that ‘power corrupts’ only in relatively closed societies such as Russia and Iran. The connection between political power, corruption, and hypocrisy is evident in Western societies (Runciman, 2008). Empirical research in Western societies suggests that power can lead people not only to cheat more, but also to overlook their own moral transgressions (Lammers, Stapel & Galinsky, 2010). Evidence also shows that power can lead people to act and perceive the world in self-serving ways (Kelmer, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; Whiston, Lijtenquist, Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld & Cadena, 2013; Overbeck & Drouman, 2013; Overbeck, Neale & Govan, 2010) and to become blind to the perceptions and interests of others (Galinsky, Magee, Inesi & Gruenfeld, 2006; Lammers, Gordijn & Otten, 2008). Influencing those in power to sense the illegitimacy of their own position can result in some constraints (Lammers, Galinsky, Gordijn & Otten, 2008), but this is difficult for the powerless to do.

Thus, one of the psychological obstacles to democratization is the tendency for leaders to become corrupted by power. In order to limit the

possibility of this happening and society more broadly being protected against corruption, a number of contextual conditions have to be met. These conditions include measures to ensure leaders are responsive to the wishes of citizens and are removable through popular will; other conditions are rule of law, freedom of speech, minority rights, independent judiciary, universal suffrage, some measure of procedural and equitable justice, and meritocracy. The legal and ‘formal law’ conditions in areas such as rule of law can only be adequately met when the population collectively acquires certain psychological characteristics (as discussed in Moghaddam, 2016).

### Concluding Comment

About 2,500 years ago, Plato (trans. 1987, Book III 415b, c. d) argued that social mobility is essential for the survival of societies. If talented children born to ‘copper’ parents are not allowed to rise up, and untalented children born to ‘gold’ parents are not allowed to fall to lower levels, society will collapse. Extreme capitalism relies on talented individuals being motivated by personal greed to excel, whereas communism attempts to develop citizens who would be motivated to excel solely by collective interests. Actualized democracy requires a balanced approach between these two extremes.

The challenge in social organization is to achieve a balance between individual and collective incentives. Too much emphasis on ‘greed is good’ leads to financial crashes, as occurred in 2008-2009; too much emphasis on collective ownership and group incentives results in the kind of lackluster economic performance as witnessed in many communist states. A balanced approach requires sufficient social mobility: as Plato argued, individual talent must be allowed to circulate on the basis of personal motivation to a minimum degree, otherwise society will collapse. From this perspective, the growing concentration of wealth in fewer hands (Atkinson, 2015; Dorling, 2014; Piketty, 2014), and the stagnation of social mobility are warning signs for capitalist democracies (Moghaddam, 2016).

The 21st century is characterized by competition and conflict between forces attempting to move human societies toward less and more openness. China and Russia, supported by lesser dictatorships such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and North Korea, are leading the efforts to move us away from openness. Capitalist democracies, including those of North America and the European Union, continue to be relatively open. However, it is not clear what the situation will be by the end of the 21st century. Globalization is associated with radicalization of different types and the



strengthening of anti-democratic forces (Moghaddam, 2008), and it may be that by the end of the present century the world has moved further toward dictatorship rather than democracy. Psychological science has a vitally important role to play in helping human societies move toward greater openness.

The achievement of actualized democracy requires psychological changes in cognitive and behavioral styles. The psychological citizen can become capable of constructively participating in, and supporting, a democracy through acquiring a variety of cognitive and behavioral skills and practices. I discussed a number of such psychological characteristics needed at the individual level. A challenge is that such psychological characteristics cannot be acquired quickly; they are acquired far more slowly than the time it takes to topple a government or write a new constitution. In practice, this means that even major revolutions only manage to achieve first- and second-order change; they fail to achieve third-order change, a change of systems. The struggle for open societies that began about 2,500 years ago in Athens continues today, but now psychological science can put into effect more powerful tools in favor of the pro-democracy forces. This requires that psychology itself first becomes more open and pro-democracy.

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