The Challenge of Regressive Democracy

By Charles Taylor

Taylor is McGill University Professor Emeritus of Political Science and Philosophy.[1]

Introduction

I would like to also welcome the many McGill graduates here who are among fellow graduates who are from different eras and different epochs. It's a great pleasure to have a discussion with you tonight on a very important issue on which we're all very confused, and I'm not the total exception to that but I'm going to try to see if we can clarify it a little bit.

I'm talking about *the crisis or crises of democracy we're now living*.

The Escalator View of Democracy is an Illusion

Let me introduce it by saying we've often had the idea, or the idea has often surfaced, that some kind of inevitable escalator in history is pushing us toward more rational, more humane, more democratic forms of society and government.

In the last century, we've had moments when we really believed in this, when this seemed to be plausible. I'm thinking of 1919 at the end of the First World War, the war to protect democracy or to defend democracy. 1945 – after 1945 various decolonization movements in the various European empires also encouraged this thought. More recently, in 1989, the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of communist regimes really gave it a fresh impetus, and it looked in the 1990s that "We're on a roll!"

And it didn't happen. On the contrary, we're in a rather grim situation today. I think we have to recognize that this hope – let's call it the escalator view that somehow things are moving that way – is really an illusion.

I want to try to explain why I think it is an illusion – because of certain inherent dangers and tendencies built into democracy, which does not mean that we're justified in being just as pessimistic as we were optimistic in 1989. No. But it does mean we that have to recognize these dangers and try to combat them.

The Struggle for Democracy: Three Vulnerabilities to Regression

So, democracy is not an escalator going up. Democracy is a perpetual struggle to maybe keep what we have and maybe advance a few more inches and not suffer retreat.

So, I want to talk about what I think are three ways – and there could be many, many other ways – in which democracy is vulnerable to, if you like, regression. That's why I use the word regression. Or you might even say degeneration. I mean losing its quality as democracy.

I.   Drifting Toward Elite Control

So, the first one of these I want to talk about is democracy can begin to lose its quality as democracy if we drift towards elite control or, to put it in other terms, if the non-elites play less and less of a role in society.

Non-elites. Well, that's of course translated into Greek, *demos*. What the Greeks meant by the *demos* was not the whole population, but the non-elites of the society.

It's a very remarkable fact about modern European languages that the word for *people* – pleb, [a few inaudible words], whatever – always has these two meanings. It has a meaning, on one level, of the whole population, all the citizens, the [ensemble] of them make *the people*, in one sense. In another sense, this Greek idea of *demos* recurs. When I say, "I'm going to mobilize the people against this unjust law that's been passed by the government," I'm talking about *the people* who don't have, don't wield the first level of power, but I'm talking about people who are, let's call them, non-elites.

So, democracy, actually, can only be understood as an interplay of two concepts with the same word. The concept of the people as all-embracing and the concept of the people as those who are disadvantaged and forgotten because they're not part of the elite.

You can see that, in a certain sense, the introduction of what we think of as modern democracy passed through a certain semantic shift.

Aristotle thought democracy was rule by the common people *over* and *above* the elites. That's what the word meant in European discourse until the end of the 18th century.

The founders of the American Constitution didn't want democracy. They wanted a republic. In other words, they wanted to have this kind of balance between the people and the elites.

The word democracy begins to take over, in the 19th century, for this mode of government precisely because this issue of elite rule, and combating elite rule, became tremendously important.

So, to keep ourselves from being confused we have to see there are two meanings of democracy.

In one, when legally and by the established law and so on, power, the ultimate power to elect, is in the hands of the whole people, as against aristocratic, oligarchic or dictatorial rule. That's one sense of democracy.

But, in another sense, the notion of a *demos* comes in and people can ask the question, "Well, are the non-elites really playing the role that they ought to be playing? Do they have their share of power which goes with their numbers?"

There, as against the first concept of democracy which is pretty well an on-off – either the laws give the vote to everybody or there's some mode of control from on top. You can say, "This country is a democracy. That country isn't."

Among the countries we think of as democracies in that sense, there are big issues arising as to the degree of elite control. This is something which can never be resolved once and for all.

If you just look quickly over the history of the last two centuries, you see there have been periods of this very severe imbalance in which the elites have more than their proper share of control. But it's been on the basis of very different qualifications.

In the early 19th century, in America, property and commercial success is what made you part of the elite. Then there were movements, the Jacksonian rebellion and so on, in which there was a push-back against this. But then the economy changes and we get an economy based on large industry, large corporations, robber barons, and we get a situation of great inequality arising. Then, in the 20th century in the '30s and the aftermath of the Second World War, there's a push-back against this overwhelming power, and we have trade unions and social democratic governments and so on. Then, after 1970, we find ourselves slipping back again. One of the indices of this is that the distance between the rich and poor becomes greater and greater. We get the power of finance playing a role.

So, there isn't a lever B, a final resolution of the problem of equal distribution of power.

What there is – and that I think is very important – is a sense people have of what the direction is. Are we moving towards – in this sense of an equal distribution of power – a more democratic society? Or are we being pushed away from it?

It's very clear that in the 30 years after the Second World War, what the French call *Les Trente Glorieuses*, the years of great prosperity after the war and of various gains of popular legislation, welfare state and so on, people had a sense that we're moving towards [democracy]. [But] since 1975, 1980, the sense is very powerful that we're sliding away.

The Loss of a Sense of *Citizen Efficacy*

Now, we have to understand this kind of move has its own tendency to enhance itself to spiral downward. If you think of the situation since the 1980s, in most democracies I think you can see a steady growth of the sense *citizen efficacy* has been slipping.

I want to introduce a word here, *citizen efficacy*, the sense people have that, as a citizen, they can really do something. So, it's a subjective sense, a sense that either we can't do anything [because] all the parties are the same, it's all corrupt and they control everything. Or the sense, "Yeah, we can do something."

This sense of citizen efficacy has been slipping, and this kind of move can have a self-feeding quality. That is, if people feel they can't really do anything serious in politics, they will *both* tune out more and more *and*, in many cases, stop voting.

So, we see a steady direction in all western European democracies, since roughly the '70s or '80s, for a lesser participation in the vote. Up and down, but the general trend is clear.

But, of course, that enhances the imbalance of power. That – the non-voting of a large part of the *demos* – gives greater power to those who are in the elites.

Then the tuning politics out in general gives a much greater power to money because you need money to reach people through television and so on and then, again, the imbalance of power gets intensified.

So, we have here a real danger. It's not something that can just be easily reversed. It's a trend towards degeneration, the lowering of democratic morale which can feed on itself.

It's also the source of great dissatisfaction. You can see this sense of decline in felt citizen efficacy, you can see that for a lot of people that is really a sense of decline, and of a disempowering of themselves. You can see that in, for instance, the Obama slogan, "Yes, we can." "Yes, we can" is an answer to the feeling of "No, we can't. We're help-less."

If you think of the movement of [a few inaudible words] in Spain, one of the political parties that emerges from this is called *Podemos*. It's "Yes, we can" in Spanish. It's the same idea.

So, that is one of the paths of degeneration I want to talk about here.

II.   Membership: A Narrowing Definition of *the People*

The second one is *the notion of* the plebs, of *the people*, in the sense of the *demos*, *is captured by a restricted definition of who the people really are*. So, we get a discrimination between *the real people* and certain others in the population who are really *outsiders* and *don't belong* to the real people.

That's of course what we see today in contemporary populism – almost everywhere in the western world, that kind of development of a narrowing definition of the people to the real people, to the core.

And it happens for various reasons. An important part of many western societies has been immigration. Particularly in European societies that weren't used to immigration, and therefore there can be this reaction: "They're not really part of us. They don't really belong to our culture." And to some extent in Québec we've got something similar.

But I think we have to see that that flip, that move toward a kind of nativist outlook is, in a sense, built into modern democracy for a reason I don't think we adequately focus on normally.

Democratic Societies Require a *Common Bond/Identity*

That is, democratic societies are a peculiar kind of society. They *require* a very strong sense of *common identity*. We are linked together because we have important common moral beliefs about democracy and so on; and, because we have a history together of forging and upholding these democratic principles. There's usually a sense of identity, a level of principle and a level of identification of *us* as a particular project – an American project, a French project – of realizing democracy.

Now that is essential. You couldn't have a democracy without a very strongly felt *common bond*. Just look at places where it doesn't exist. The attempt to get a vibrant democratic life with elections in the European Union has not got off the ground because there isn't a European people, there isn't a people who identify primarily, and have a strong identification, with that whole.

Or there can be societies which are split as was threatened in the case with Canada between two segments. One segment was French and many people were saying, "We don't belong. We're not really respected. We're not part of this." So, we had a great movement for independence in Québec.

We see something like this going on in Catalonia, at the moment.

Democratic Societies Require *Solidarity*

Moreover, democratic societies really require a certain amount of solidarity and help, that those in a good situation give to those in a bad situation. Even in the United States, where I suppose the sense of solidarity is the weakest of any western society, it has – when you get these huge catastrophes, hurricanes and so on – the sense that we should help each other.

Democratic Societies Require *Trust*

But most of all, democratic societies need to generate trust in the sense that I can trust all of you that, when we're deliberating together to think about the general good, you're including me, and not simply you.

So, it's very important to have this emotionally powerful sense of the people as the whole people. But that emotionally powerful feeling can easily slip into being the people are the original people, the real people or the people who are originally here.

Conceptions of *Inherent Hierarchy*

Or, they can be infected by – this is something very hard to pick up on but I think it's eminently working – conceptions of inherent hierarchy or precedence. Take the fact – extraordinary to our children – that in the whole development of democracy, male universal suffrage came well before the extension to women, and in a very conflictual way at different times and in different places. Only very recently in the Swiss cantons and only in 1940 in Québec and so on.

Because there's an inherent hierarchical sense that the real operative agent in the family is the man. That hierarchical sense somehow just, as women say today, blinded people to the fact that democracy, as manhood suffrage, was incomplete.

But you can see how other notions of hierarchy, or precedence, operating today, like very powerful notions in the United States, which you see being exploited by Trump and that movement. It's a very subtle notion of hierarchy. It's a notion of precedence that certain people need to be served first. Natives rather than people who just arrived. In the South, whites as against blacks. Still, for many people, men as against women. Original Americans, etc., original Anglo-Saxons, Scotch-Irish Americans versus others, and so on.

Destroying Democracy from Within

So, when these begin to play a role, the basis for the very thing democracy thrives on – which is a strong sense of common identity – gets captured and narrowed, and becomes something destroying it from within by dividing people.

So, put these two things together, which is what we're living with today. That is, the neglect of non-elite power, and the lessening of non-elite power, and the sense of dissatisfaction arising from the lack of felt citizen efficacy, on the one hand; and, on the other, the sliding of the sense of who is lacking in efficacy, who is *the demos*, into a narrower confine. And you get the basis for the kind of mobilization Marine Le Pen pulled off in France, Trump pulled off in the United States and [name?] pulled off in Holland. You can go down the whole list.

The appeal is: "You have been neglected" – and there's a certain economic basis for this – "You have been neglected by these elites who are more interested in serving these people -- that should be second, or maybe don't even belong to us -- than in serving you. You have to rise up and put an end to this."

That, of course, itself can produce a spiral, a spiral you can see happening in certain European societies, particularly France, where the populations that are being pushed to the edge develop a counter identity and say, "No, we're not really French. We're [a few inaudible French words] and these then play off against each other and threaten to destroy the society.

III.   Misinterpreting Majority Rule

So, let me mention a third one, the third mode of decline. It's when democracy gets misinterpreted as majority rule. You can see this can arise easily along the second slide. If you're thinking of *the people* as this group and then you think that this group, which is the *demos* which must be ruling, then there's no need to think of negotiation or discussion or sawing off certain differences with the rest of the society that isn't really belonging to the people.

So, the successful democracy gets reinterpreted as majority rule in the sense that this majority movement is now in power. But the others are not treated as fellow citizens, as people you have to negotiate with. An obvious manifestation of this is a decline in civic language where you get extreme language, branding people as enemies, they can't be talked to, and so on.

Now, in a sense, you're seeing in the West a kind of perfect storm, if I could put it that way, in which these three kinds of degeneration are, as it were, working together.

Certainly, the sense of loss of citizen efficacy is feeding the various modes of populism that is defining the populists as narrow. That, in turn, is feeding the idea that what we're dealing with here is enemies, outsiders, so what we need is *the people* to rule, and for them to ride roughshod over these outsiders.

Whereas a real *democracy*, in the proper sense, is *a deliberative community* in which we nourish the sense of *mutual recognition* that can allow for a real discussion in which people respect each other and so on and can arrive at some kind of general conclusion, for the moment – a conclusion that may be determined by the majority, but it is understood that the discussion goes on with these other people. They aren't enemies. They are people who have temporarily lost the battle.

What Are We Going to Do About the Triple Slide?

So, all right. You might very well ask, "What are we going to do about it?" And I only have 35 minutes and that's very bad in one way, but I am tremendously relieved in another way.

But I think we owe it to each other to look at some of the things we have to be able to tackle in order to fight back against this triple slide [-- toward elite control, narrowing the definition of *the people* and misinterpreting majority rule --] where these different elements are, as it were, supporting each other.

The *first* is we have to look at *what produced the discontent on the economic level* in places like the Rust Belt or various parts of England that voted for Brexit, and so on. The Rust Belt is perhaps the major factor here. Parts of the French working class that rolled over from communism to support Le Pen are precisely from areas that are de-industrializing.

We may have to look at something much more radical. I don't mean in the sense of rallying people on the barricades. But much bigger changes than we have thought of before. Is it going to be possible -- in an age of globalization and extreme automation -- to insure self-respecting jobs for everybody without changing very considerably the way we remunerate work, the way we can help to support voluntary work, the way in

which communities can determine their own needs and set up programs of contribution, [volunteerism and preservation] which are funded from the center but which are not necessarily paid work?

So, all these things need to be thought through. And I'm just at the beginning of thinking this through. So that's one area we have to tackle – tackling, as it were, the economic sources of this slide, which you can see typified in the Rust Belt.

The *second* very important feature of any real solution is *the recreation of a sense of deliberative community*, which requires working seriously on our public sphere – the sphere in which we discuss with each other, exchange ideas, and exchange propositions and so on.

The public sphere is really in a very sick condition for two reasons, which we all recognize. One is that we no longer have media that are read and contributed to by the whole spectrum. We have media now which constitute kinds of echo chambers, Fox News against MSNBC, etc., where like-minded people get their information, get their opinions and so on – and never hear what happens elsewhere.

I mean Fox News gave a report of the terrible attack in Québec on the 29th of January. But their report was that the assassin was Moroccan as against the real case – which was some of the victims were Moroccan. I don't think they ever rectified it.

So, people who listen only to Fox News – I mean I have very great mixtures of half-pity and half-horror – they just never get any access to reality.

But then that is exacerbated, I think, by the way in which social media work where people get a certain set of friends and ideas circulate and supposed facts circulate, which in some cases are just totally non-facts – and, again, never get called.

So, we have a very deep set of problems here about how to recreate a public sphere – which is a genuine exchange across difference. There are other things, too, we have to look to. But these are two very general problems that we have to tackle.

I'm glad I don't have to give you the detail on these today because I don't have it and I'm still struggling. But this is the direction in which our thinking has to struggle.

So, is this a pessimistic message?

Well, if you believe in the escalator it sounds devastating. If you cease believing in the escalator -- things are automatically going up – it could even be exhilarating. Because these are things that can be fought against, you can fight back against. And in some cases, as in the Macron election, it can be faced and defeated. But we have a lot of

hard thinking to do if we're going to move the needle back so people have a sense that, *yes, we can*, and we are moving towards a more democratic society as against sliding away.

Well, thank you very much for your very kind attention.

Endnote

[1] **Bio**: Born in Montreal in 1931, Taylor earned a B.A. in history from McGill and as a Rhodes Scholar studied political science, philosophy and economics at Oxford University where he obtained a Ph.D. in 1961 under Isaiah Berlin. Taylor has taught in numerous institutions, including Oxford where from 1976 to 1981 he served as the Chichele Chair of Social and Political Theory. He has written 20 books, including *Hegel and Modern Society* (1979), *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (1989), *The Ethics of Authenticity* (1992), *Modern Social Imaginaries* (2004), *A Secular Age* (2007), and *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity* (2016). His research focuses on modernity, pluralism, multiculturalism, the question of identity, secularism, and language.

In the 1960s Taylor ran for election to high office in Canada four times as candidate for the social democratic New Democratic Party. In the 1965 election, he lost to newcomer and future prime minister, Pierre Trudeau. This campaign garnered nation-wide attention since both Taylor and Trudeau were considered intellectuals, friends and "star candidates." Taylor is the author of a now classic essay "The Politics of Recognition" (1992), and in 2007 Canadian Premier Jean-Charest appointed Taylor and the sociologist Gérard Bouchard to Co-Chair a one-year *Commission de consultation sur les pratiques d'accommodements reliées aux différences culturelles* to study and explore the widespread, highly charged debate centering on the social accommodation of religious and cultural minorities in Québec. The commission published its 300-page report in 2008.

In addition to numerous Canadian honors, Taylor has received international recognition. In 2007, Taylor, a practicing Catholic, won the Templeton Prize ($1.5 million) for "exceptional contribution to the affirmation of life's spiritual dimension." In 2008, he won the Kyoto Prize ($460,000) for "lifetime achievement in arts and philosophy." In 2015, with the German sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas, he shared the U.S. Library of Congress John W. Kluge Prize ($1.5 million) for "outstanding scholarship in the humanities and social sciences that has shaped both public affairs and civil society." In 2016, Taylor was the first winner of the Berggruen Prize ($1 million) for thinkers "whose ideas are of broad significance for shaping human self-understanding and the advancement of humanity" and "whose ideas are intellectually profound but also able to inform practical and public life across the range of world civilizations." Taylor is a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and the British Academy and a member of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences.