

Hope and Democracy

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What is the basis of hopes for a world that is radically better – less unjust, less exploitative, less destructive -- than the one we have today? Is there still any mileage in the idea of historical hope, or the hope that radical injustice, exploitation and destruction will one day be seen as things of the past?

If the past is anything to go by, then hope for the future might seem to have some foundation in the human capacity for technical innovation. Technophobes and luddites might be right to fear or resist particular technologies, and technological change has always had its losers. But considered as a *power*, the human technical capacity is undoubtedly impressive. And it can hardly be denied that, not irregularly, technological change has brought great human benefits. There may be a basis for historical hope, then, if this power could be applied unhindered to the great challenges facing humanity today.

Furthermore, we might think that alongside humanity's achievements in science and technology, there has been progress – significant if not as dramatic – in its understanding of morality. It might be thought that we at least have a better *idea* now than in the past of what justice requires and how exploitation might be avoided. We have experts in moral and political theory who, in productive collaboration with economists and social scientists, can contribute through projects of social engineering to progressive social transformation at local and global levels. To realize our radical social hopes, on this view, we just need to be more effective in applying the moral and technical expertise at our disposal and mobilizing others to follow.

Something like this conception of the basis of historical hope undergirds much progressive political theory. In one form, it is implicit in the Marxist view that human history proper begins only with the liberation of human productive forces. And in another, it informs the conception of the relation between theory and practice held by many of the more radical liberal-egalitarians (for instance, those who see their job as ‘applying Rawls’).

But this idea is almost completely absent from Charles Taylor’s work. It is not that Taylor is a particular critic of ‘technological civilization’ as such, in the manner of, say, Adorno and Horkheimer. Taylor has been critical of the ‘device paradigm’, but technological innovation also has its place in his proposals for getting us out of the current crisis. Nor is it that Taylor has any particular objection to ‘ideal theory’ – the practice of justifying and independently applying ideal principles of justice – in the manner of Rawls. It is just that, in Taylor’s work, neither the development of technical knowledge (technical expertise) nor that of moral knowledge (in the narrow sense advanced by theories of justice), provide the centre of gravity for historical hope.

What, then, does provide it? I take Taylor to belong to the tradition of social thought that takes the human capacity for collective deliberation about the common good, as distinct from the technical capacity on the one hand or the capacity for moral freedom on the other, to be the main pillar of historical hope. More precisely, it is the capacity for deliberation about the common good of *ordinary people*, the capacity as it realized in a *democracy*, that hope for the future turns on.

Let me elaborate on this suggestion by distinguishing hope *for* democracy and hope *in* democracy.

Hope *for* democracy concerns the ability of actually existing democratic societies to survive the challenges that face them. Since we only hope for things that might *not* happen or we might not get, hope for democracy is premised on the perception that actually existing democracies face real dangers that threaten their existence as democracies. At the same time, since we only hope for things that really have some *possibility* of happening, hope for democracy is premised on the perception that these dangers can be overcome, that the anti-democratic forces that threaten democratic societies can be thwarted.

Taylor's political writings – from his youthful pieces on Stalinism and democratic socialism in the 1950s and 60s to his interventions on democratic degeneration and reconstruction as an octogenarian in the 2010s – are driven by and serve to sustain hope for democracy in this sense. And they do so by developing both of the perceptions on which such hope is based: a diagnosis of the dangers facing democracy, and identification of paths to recovery.

Of the dangers facing a particular democratic society, not all them will have to do with its character as a democracy, at least not directly. Foreign invaders, economic collapse and environmental degradation, for example, might threaten a democratic society's existence. Hope for democracy is, in any particular instance, hope that these other dangers can be averted too, where they arise. But the main focus of Taylor's diagnoses of the times has always been on the dangers threatening modern societies in so far as they *are and aspire to*

be democracies, with their economic life and relation with the natural environment providing background for this.

While there have been shifts in emphasis in Taylor's diagnoses of the ills of democratic societies over the decades, there has been underlying continuity. The main common thread concerns the kind of *identity* that the citizens of modern democratic societies have. A certain kind of identity is a pre-requisite for democracy, Taylor argues, because only citizens who are deeply enough attached to the democratic community will be motivated enough to serve and protect it. But this identity easily morphs into other kinds that are deeply hostile to democracy. From the wave of ethno-national conflicts of the 1980s and 90s to the (not completely unforeseeable) rise of populist demagogues in the 2000s and 2010s, democracies have been endangered by deformations of the very identity on which they depend. They depend on strong attachments amongst their citizens to the political community, but this attachment can easily be manipulated into a force hostile to democracy or, with consequences no less damaging for democracy, neutralized over time through lack of opportunities for effective participation in democratic life. Such manipulation and neutralization may have reached unprecedented levels recently, but there is nothing new in the phenomena themselves.

Taylor's diagnoses of the ills of democracy boost hope for democracy simply on account of making those ills intelligible. But they also boost hope for democracy by pointing to remedies for those ills. Constitutional and legal reform has its place here, and it is clear from Taylor's interventions in Canadian public affairs in particular how seriously he takes this. But reform of that kind, like technological innovation, doesn't get to the heart of the malaise, if

Taylor's diagnosis is accurate. This is because the fundamental threat to democracy comes from the lack or fragility of a certain kind of identity, an identity that is forged and sustained primarily through democratic *activity* or participation in democratic life.

How do we participate in the life of a democracy? It would be a much too narrow answer to this question to say that it is through voting, or engaging in election campaigns, or paying taxes, or performing military service if called upon – the kind of activity that Taylor often mentions when defending the 'republican thesis' that strong democracies need citizens with strong attachments to the political community. A broader and better answer will refer us to those everyday contexts of action that are as much part of the 'fabric' of democratic life as the political system, institutionalized by the different levels of the state. In particular, it will refer us to family life and working life, to our lives as friends, family members, producers and consumers, as well as citizens with political allegiances shaped by national or religious social imaginaries.

If we find ourselves convinced by that kind of answer, we will also see that democracy is endangered not just by degenerations of political identity, by overly exclusionary or rigid social imaginaries and so on, but also by degenerations in our identity as friends and family members, colleagues, workers, consumers and in other social roles. We will see that tyranny is just as liable to occur in the home and the workplace as in offices of the state, and we will be as vigilant in countering such tyranny as we are in opposing populist demagogues and neo-liberal technocrats.

We may also then place our hopes for a radically better world *in* democracy, and not just have hopes for the continued existence of the currently embattled liberal democracies. To have hope in democracy, in the sense I am suggesting, is to have one's radical social hopes – hopes for a world in which systematic injustice, exploitation and destruction are seen as things of the past – tied to the exercise of capacities for deliberation about the common good of ordinary people in *all aspects of their social lives*.

Hope in democracy is thus a more radical, and it must be said more difficult, hope than hope for democracy. But like hope for democracy, it is a hope that reading Taylor's writings can help to inspire.