

The Disintegration of Fractured Democracies

In America, the Fracturing results from the Economic System

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Consider this paraphrased account of a famous nation's demise:

The death of the nation was both violent and natural. The fatal agents were the organic disorders of the system. The government had proven incapable of solving problems: it failed to preserve domestic order or an effective defense; it discovered no way of reconciling local autonomy with national stability and power; and its love of liberty failed to interfere with its passion for empire and war. The class struggle had become bitter beyond control and had turned democracy into a contest in legislative looting. The legislature degenerated into a mob, rejecting all restraint, voting itself every favor, and crushing initiative, industry, and thrift.

Education spread, but thinly; it stressed knowledge more than character and produced masses of half-educated people. The old problem of ethics and morals found no solution in religion, statesmanship, or philosophy. Religious superstition spread even while science reached its apogee. The growth of knowledge secularized morals, marriage, parentage, and law, and the pursuit of pleasure prevailed. Public games degenerated into professional contests; the people, who had once been athletic, now became spectators, content to witness rather than to do. Sexual morality was relaxed, and human life was portrayed as a round of triviality, seduction, and adultery. . . . The nation had destroyed itself; it died of its own tyrannous anarchy.

What nation do these paragraphs describe? It could be the United States of America, but it is not. These paragraphs come almost word for word from Will Durant's *The Life of Greece* where he describes the demise of Athenian democracy.

Madison, in *The Federalist*, No. 10, writes,

The friend of popular governments never finds himself so much alarmed for their character and fate, as when he contemplates their propensity to [factions]. . . . Complaints are everywhere heard . . . that our governments are too unstable, that the public good is disregarded in the conflicts of rival parties, and that measures are too often decided, not according to the rules of justice and . . . rights. . . .

The latent causes of faction are . . . sown in the nature of man. . . . A zeal for different opinions concerning religion, concerning government, and many other points, as well . . . ; an attachment to different leaders ambitiously contending for pre-eminence and power; or to persons of other descriptions whose fortunes have been interesting to the human passions, have, in turn, divided mankind into parties, inflamed them with mutual animosity, and rendered

them much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to co-operate for their common good. . . . But the most common and durable source of factions has been the various and unequal distribution of property. . . .

It is in vain to say that enlightened statesmen will be able to adjust these clashing interests, and render them all subservient to the public good. Enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm. . . .

The inference to which we are brought is, that the CAUSES of faction cannot be removed, and that relief is only to be sought in the means of controlling its EFFECTS. . . .

By what means is this object attainable? . . .

Madison believed that “[A]s each representative will be chosen by a greater number of citizens . . . it will be more difficult for unworthy candidates to practice with success the vicious arts by which elections are too often carried; and the suffrages of the people being more free, will be more likely to centre in men who possess the most attractive merit and the most diffusive and established characters.” Unfortunately he was wrong, but he was right in writing that “Men of factious tempers, of local prejudices, or of sinister designs, may, by intrigue, by corruption, or by other means, first obtain the suffrages, and then betray the interests, of the people. . . .”

When the number of contentious factions in a society becomes large, society becomes ungovernable; it literally implodes. All appearances indicate that the United States has reached this point. A recent [poll](#) found that only 21% of Americans believe that the government functions with the people’s consent, and nearly six in ten Americans [say](#) they are dissatisfied with the way democracy works in the United States.

Aside from the government’s being paralyzed, violence is ubiquitous and uncontrollable and the incarcerated are routinely freed to make space for others. Worse, the judicial system often convicts the innocent. Many laws are routinely ignored by even those who are generally law abiding citizens. Religious and racial intolerance is prevalent and often justified by untrue historical claims often taught to students in “history” classes.

Primitive societies are unified by common ancestries and beliefs, but current “advanced” societies lack both. The claim is often made, however, that there are fundamental beliefs that underlie even “advanced” societies. Unfortunately, these claims are always made on some level of generality. For instance, some claim that America was founded on “Christian” principles, but ‘Christian’ today is an abstract noun. It specifies nothing concrete. Yes, many of those who colonized America did so for religious reasons, but not all did, and those who did did not exhibit much “Christian” charity in dealing with others, even other Christians. The Constitution would never have been ratified by this disparate group had no assurance been given that the federal government would not attempt to impose a “state” religion upon the new nation, and even that did not placate all: Clifton Olmstead, in his *History of Religion in United States* quotes a Congregationalist minister about the separation: “It was as dark a day as ever I saw. The odium thrown upon the ministry was inconceivable. The injury done to the cause of Christ, as we then supposed, was irreparable,” and many today hold similar views. So, if someone had asked the colonists what “Christian” principles they all agreed to, I suspect that “None!” Would have been the answer.

But the same is true of what are called “American values” or, as it is often put, “what

America stands for.” No one ever specifies what those values are or attempts to verify that Americans really hold them. Sen. David Vitter said, “I’m on the side of conservatives getting back to core conservative values,” but no one ever provides a specific list of them. As a matter of fact, the Pew Social and Demographic Trends [Project](#) found that “American adults from young to old disagree increasingly today on . . . values ranging from religion to relationships, creating the largest generation gap since divisions 40 years ago over Vietnam, civil rights and women’s liberation.” So appeals to America’s core values are appeals to nothing real. No group of traditional beliefs exists to unite America’s disparate groups. America is a fractured society.

But how did this fracture come about? Many causes can be cited, but the ultimate cause is clear. The fracturing results from the economic system. Madison had that right, too: “the most common and durable source of factions has been the various and unequal distribution of property. . . .”

Think about it. Virginia was planned as a commercial venture by businessmen, operating through a joint-stock company, who wanted to get rich. Southern colonies were founded on the distinctly medieval concept of landed estates populated by masters and slaves, and Pennsylvania attracted an influx of immigrants with its policy of freehold ownership which meant that farmers owned their land free and clear of leases. This disparity of colonial economic systems brought about the Civil War.

American society is fractured by differing religious groups, racial groups, groups based on national origin, political groups, and economic groups. Waves of immigration were and still are being fostered to provide needed labor for America’s industrial enterprises, and although these waves of immigration are encouraged, the immigrants in each wave suffer racial and cultural discrimination. Assimilation, if it takes place at all, is slow and painful. So, economic motives have a role in every aspect of creating what passes for American “society.”

Some Americans have a silly-putty view of human nature. They believe that persons who come to America from other cultures can be squeezed here and there and molded into Uncle Sams. They are to be assimilated by learning English and adopting American customs and “values.” But what the Americans who hold this belief don’t realize is that if immigrants can be so squeezed to become model Americans, Americans can be squeezed to become as “un-American” as the others.

Americans often reject ideas because they are termed “foreign.” For instance, socialism to Americans is a foreign ideology, but, although it goes unacknowledged, so is capitalism. Adam Smith and David Ricardo, the grandfathers of America’s capitalist economic system, were not Americans. In fact, hardly any ideologies that have taken root in America have American origins. Certainly not Christianity, democracy, or hegemony. And the one American idea often boasted of has been totally ineffective—the melting pot. It never got hot enough to melt anything. Fractious groups created by the needs of the economic system make up America’s uncivil society. Andrew Arena, head of the FBI’s field office in Detroit, has [said](#) “radical and extremist fringe groups . . . can be found throughout our society.” But the factions prevalent in American society are not limited to the “radical and extremist fringe.”

The fractiousness of these groups is fostered by America’s elite. The strategy is one of divide and conquer. Politicians prey on hot-button issues to generate antagonism between

groups: women's righters against pro-lifers, environmentalists against developers, social liberals against social conservatives, labor against management, union organizers against right-to-work advocates, the poor against the wealthy, Republicans against Democrats and both against anyone else, hegemonists against pacifists, believers against atheists and often against each other, heterosexuals against homosexuals, whites against other races, Tea Parties against Coffee Cuppers, state's rightists against federalists, and on and on. These group disparities are promoted to the point that they are not just ideological disputes. Many in these groups genuinely dislike those in other groups, and although overt display of this dislike is often disparaged, it is nevertheless quietly accommodated. These antagonisms make unity unattainable. Divide and conquer has become divided we fall.

In the days immediately following September 11, 2001, the mainstream press touted America's "coming together" in response to the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center. But that coming together was quickly sundered. The Port Authority and the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation were soon at odds over how to redevelop the site. With much fanfare, a cornerstone was laid and secretly removed. Legal disputes over the attendant costs of illnesses related to the attacks are still in the court system. On the day of the attacks, New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani proclaimed, "We will rebuild. We're going to come out of this stronger than before, politically stronger, economically stronger. The skyline will be made whole again." But it hasn't. Any many now doubt that Americans have been told the truth about what really happened on nine/eleven. Not only is America a society at war with itself, there is little that Americans can even agree on.

Madison claims "that the causes of faction cannot be removed." Perhaps! But factionalism can be minimized, and the way to do it is not difficult to discern. All that needs to be done is for governments to enact legislation that enhances the well being of people rather than institutions and special interests. Promoting an economic system that exploits the people and impoverishes them at fairly regular intervals, restrictions on freedom, and corruption of the political system are not effective ways of making friends and influencing people. They are, however, effective ways of promoting anger, sometimes to the point of hatred. Any government anywhere, regardless of its form, democratic or authoritarian, that governs for the few rather than all generates factions. Such governments sooner or later lose their legitimacies and their societies implode.

During the Revolutionary War, John Dickinson composed the Liberty Song. Its last stanza reads, "Then join hand in hand, brave Americans all, by uniting we stand, by dividing we fall; in so righteous a cause let us hope to succeed, for heaven approves of each generous deed." Nations and the institutions they support fall unless governments, like decent men and women, exhibit compassion, generosity, and a concern for the welfare of real, living people. That's all that saving America requires.

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