

Idol Democracies

An Interview with Dariush Shayegan

Negin Djavaherian (McGill University)

Dariush Shayegan is one of Iran's foremost philosophers, and is a longtime voice in the debates taking place between the circulation of culturally-specific practices of political recognition and their varied forms of resistance and contestation. Herein he offers his thoughts on the cultural conditions that are necessary for specific aspects of democratic practices to take root and flourish, and confronts head on the difficult and timely question of how, following Montesquieu, "only power can stop power."

Negin Djavaherian Based on your writings and on your unique position as a thinker who situates himself at the meeting point between East and West, your perspective on the concept of existence and its articulations of choice seems to ask the following, quite difficult, question: is there a need for democracy? If this need for democracy exists, I would like to know if democracy can prevail in countries that strictly adhere to an ideology similar to that of Islamic rule or Communism? Under these conditions, what does it take for democracy to thrive?

Dariush Shayegan No doubt, democracy is no more a luxury, but a necessity. In other words, we peoples can no longer afford the luxury of not having a democracy. In the first place, the autocratic, despotic or totalitarian regimes are extremely costly at all levels, at the human level as well as the economic level. They can only be sustained by tremendous and horrific human

and material waste. We have all witnessed, sometimes with amazement, sometimes with sheer horror, the empty facade of communist regimes after the collapse of Soviet Union.

Non-democratic regimes produce passive and irresponsible citizens, who only strive desperately in order to survive. In these stagnant societies, human beings are reduced to their gregarious instincts, irrespective of their rights and responsibilities. If you don't have rights, you don't have responsibilities either; if you don't feel responsible, you do not cooperate for the public good. Not only do you not cooperate but you become a virtual saboteur. Your inertia contributes to the paralysis of the system which you were supposed to support. You also become a fatalist. Although fatalism is a part of the world-view of many oriental countries, where people rely more on destiny than on individual perseverance, the lack of democracy enhances all the more this propensity. In the old days, and perhaps even now, many people living in these countries thought, or even think now, that whatever happens is written somewhere, nowadays, with the secularization of the idea of providence, they have substituted the theory of conspiracy for the invisible decrees of some occult destiny. Since they are not responsible, since they are not active citizens, then they must be the puppets of some invisible hand which drags them here and there. This passive attitude is reinforced by the lack of democracy.

N.D. Is the concept of democracy universal? Or is it specific only to Western culture? I would be curious to know more about what can be made of the shape democracy adopts, or fails to adopt, in certain Eastern countries—is the difference between East and West part of the problem? Are the notions of choice and human rights characterized through race, culture or religion?

D.S. In a way I think that in our part of the world the situation has striking similarities with 18th century Europe. We are also the theatre of conflict between faith and reason. In fact, our political system declares clearly without ambiguity that we live in a religious republic. Here faith has undergone a whole process of ideologisation and has become a thorough political system. It has developed its own imperatives. But the difference that we have with the 18th century philosophers is crucial. They did not have a living model in front of them, but we do. Our models are western democracies which nowadays have spread outside the western world, in South East Asia, in India, in Latin America. The fact that democracy is realized outside the scope of western culture, shows that it is not anymore specific to geographical space, but can take root in other parts of the world.

Octavio Paz remarks that North America was born out of the idea of the Enlightenment, whereas Latin America was born of the Spanish Counter reformation, in other words the former came to life with modernity and the latter against modernity. At the outset there was a historical gap between these two worlds, a gap that was bridged only several centuries after the conquest, in the eighties of the last century. So if democracy is beginning to flourish in so many different places in the world, there is no conceivable reason why it shouldn't flourish in our part of the world. There is a Chinese proverb which says "whatever a fool can do, another fool can do also." If so many different countries have succeeded in this difficult path why should we, Persians or Arabs, fail unless we admit some sort of genetical pathology, which is of course totally absurd and obnoxious. Even if we take for granted that there are no universal values, we are bound nevertheless to accept one irrefutable fact. There is nowadays a universal civilization, which stretches

through all sorts of means and media, the new electronic revolution has, perhaps, not created a global village, but it has nonetheless projected a huge network of encompassing *interconnectiveness*, which links and interconnects all cultures, produces hybrid consciousness, kaleidoscopic vision of the world, multiple and plural identities.

Today no one is purely Chinese, Indian or Persian, everyone possesses, apart from his original identity, a new identity which is superimposed upon his consciousness, and this modern identity conveys a whole set of values. What are these values? Are they universal, innate, Kantian “common moral consciousness”? I cannot pronounce myself with certainty on this controversial subject, all I know is that they are terribly relevant, irresistibly attractive, highly efficient and are the *sine qua non* conditions of every progress, material as well as spiritual. There are no Hindu, Christian, or Islamic human rights, there are only human rights irrespective of race, religion and ethnicity.

N.D. In the modern era man has become a subject responsible for his identity and social constitution, with the freedom to choose according to his own rationality. It has also been argued that his intellectual life is shaped by the unknown realm of unconsciousness (Freud), by symbolic forms of cultural life such as language (Hermeneutics), and by the social context (Marx). On the one hand, we have established a subjective world, while on the other hand we have de-valored this subject. There is no absolute truth, and human actions and thoughts are defined by existing cultural and historical conditions.

What would the limitations of choice be for this de-valored subject in the post-modern era? What could a democratic principle of choice be under our present conditions?

D. S. In fact, all my traditional culture is founded on *a priori* categories of mind. We are all impregnated by lofty neo-platonic ideas. They are found amongst our poets, our philosophers, our mystics. We are overwhelmed by their omnipresence, they constitute, in a way, the fundamental ingredients of our collective memory. We need sometimes a gigantic effort of the mind, to strip them out of our thought. On the other hand we are flooded by western, modern ideas. We are learning to doubt, to adopt a critical approach towards things, to become skeptical with regard to our own cultural heritage, to establish a salutary distance between our perception of historical experience and the preconceived ideas that shape the highly hierarchized and metaphysical world in which we were brought up.

Now a new question arises: what are we to gain by joining the club of democracies? In my view we can benefit at three levels: political, individual and epistemological. 1- Richard Rorty's understanding of constitutionalism and egalitarianism shows how both of them are complementary and can be mutually inclusive. But what we need most of all in our part of the world is constitutionalism, not the sort of "illiberal democracy" to which Farid Zakaria has referred, but real political institutions and foremost the famous, irrevocable separation of powers. "Only power can stop power," Montesquieu used to say, and he was right. The American constitution is a masterpiece of that model, for it embodies judiciously the delicate art of checks and balances, it tries to stop power from gaining ground on other realms of public and private lives. It is true that it is not perfect but it strives for a more perfect union. This brings me to the individual level. 2- If you have an independent judiciary system then you will also have a safeguard against the abuse of power, you will know, for example, that your fundamental rights like *habeas*

corpus will be protected. You are not at the mercy of arbitrary power, you are not guilty unless proven otherwise. In totalitarian regimes everyone, by the very fact that he exists, is guilty of something, he has to prove that he is innocent, but then nobody is really innocent because in a totalitarian world everyone is by definition a suspicious character. 3- At the epistemological level, we have to adopt a critical approach. In the so called traditional societies, where the collective memory is active at all levels of perception, people are drowned in an ocean of preconceived ideas, of archetypal images, of mythical patterns, of mimetic behaviors. These civilizations have immense difficulty to innovate, they have difficulty to break through the deeply rooted mental patterns which like black holes suck up all their creative energy and their audacity to innovate. The past becomes a heavy burden. It becomes the immutable model that repeats itself in the cycle of eternal beginning. How to break away from it, how to cut the umbilical cord is an exhilarating challenge by itself. Yet it is a challenge that everyone has to take up. Only a critical attitude towards “the idols of the mind” can liberate people from the paralysing effect of the past. That is why, in my opinion, the self-critical attitude must reflect itself in our reception of tolerant ideas in an open society, without which democracy can never get a solid ground.

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