

A Summons to Save Democracy

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COMMENTARY

A sense of impending doom is in the air. The left's best and brightest proclaim that President Trump is racist, mentally ill, lawless, and should be removed from office at the first opportunity. Many in the rank-and-file right believe that the media elites, entrenched government bureaucrats, and political establishments of both parties -- whom they elected Trump to rein in -- are demonstrating their determination to overturn the 2016 presidential election. Significant segments of both camps are convinced that their partisan opponents have plunged the country into a crisis from which it may never recover.

Despite their dark moods, both sides offer not just diagnoses of the country's ills but prescriptions for restoring health that exude a certain self-confidence. Each supposes that if only it were put in charge and emancipated from the other's poisonous interference, it would govern effectively and justly.

The dark moods and the underlying self-confidence obscure a disquieting possibility. Suppose the country's problems do not stem from partisan hypocrisy, arrogance, and ineptitude. Perhaps the dysfunction of American party politics reflects instead larger forces that have gained sway over both camps. Perhaps each side's determination to vilify the other is itself a symptom of a more fundamental crisis. Perhaps so many on the left and right are ill-tempered and self-righteous because they have lost sight of the core principles of freedom and democracy that undergird the American experiment in self-government.

That denizens of the West have been cut adrift from their civilization's defining values and no longer recognize its sustaining principles is the chastening possibility that Rob Riemen raises in "The Fight Against This Age: On Fascism and Humanism." His short book consists of a portentous introduction that explains what he regards as the obtuseness to the rise of fascism within Europe, and two learned, lyrical, and lofty essays, both of which were originally published in the author's native Dutch. One examines the permanent fascist impulses within "mass democracy." The other explores the ideal for the sake of which the mounting menace must be defeated. While both essays appeared before Trump upended American politics, Riemen indicates in the introduction that the celebrity tycoon's ascent to the White House reflects the same fascist tendencies poisoning Europe.

A writer of philosophical essays about culture and politics and founder in 1994 of the Nexus Institute, which provides "a counterweight to nowadays society and its mere one-dimensional focus on science, technology and commercial values," Riemen argues that the spirit of the age is at war with the spirit of Enlightenment humanism, which he understands as heir of the "Judeo-Christian tradition."

He asserts in the introduction that “populism,” the favorite explanation for the discontents roiling liberal democracies in the West, is a euphemism that masks the authoritarianism of our politics and the bankruptcy of our morals. Citing the appeal of populism in accounting for the contemporary “revolt of the masses” is, he maintains, “one more way to cultivate the denial that the ghost of fascism is haunting our societies again and to deny the fact that liberal democracies have turned into their opposite: mass democracies deprived of the spirit of democracy.”

Several misguided beliefs, maintains Riemen, obscure the decay of democracy. Enthrallment with science and technology induces neglect of literature and the arts, history, philosophy, and theology — the true sources of knowledge about morals and politics. The political left fosters a naïve faith in rationality, progress, and the natural goodness of man that blinds adherents to “the impact that the will to power, lust, desire, and self-interest have on the human condition.” And also concealing our precarious condition is the fear that arises from “economic insecurity, and the threat of terror or war,” as well as the “organized stupidity” that has become the “dominant force” of Western society, and which promotes an obsessive preference for the pleasures of the body over care for the soul.

In enumerating the beliefs that he contends have estranged us from our enlightened and democratic heritage, Riemen unwittingly encounters a difficulty. For belief in science and technology, in the rational improvement of mankind, and in satisfying the desire for secure, comfortable living are themselves central to our enlightened and democratic heritage. The essays that constitute his book compound the difficulty by supposing that democracy and Enlightenment have no downside.

In the first, “The Eternal Return of Fascism,” originally published in 2010, Riemen focuses on the failings of “mass-man,” the debased form of humanity produced by the debased form of political society he calls mass democracy. Mass-man is selfish, calculating but thoughtless, restless and inattentive, enslaved to vulgar appetites and base passions, incapable of lofty feelings and noble sentiments, and inclined to submit to state authority.

There’s plenty of blame to go around, according to Riemen. Mass-man is “the result of political parties that have renounced their own intellectual tradition, of intellectuals who have cultivated a pleasure-seeking nihilism, of universities not worthy of their description, of the greed of the business world, and a mass media that would rather be the people’s ventriloquist than a critical mirror.” He’s got a point.

Yet his alternative reveals the extremism of his perspective. Riemen invites us to consider how far short mass-man falls of two paragons of philosophical virtue, Socrates and Spinoza. But rather than having been representatives of their societies, both were reproaches to them: democratic Athens put Socrates to death and the Jews of 17th century Amsterdam — a bustling, cosmopolitan port city — excommunicated Spinoza. Contrary to his argument,

Riemen's examples suggest that the tension between spiritual excellence and politics is not a peculiar feature of contemporary commercial democracies but a permanent feature of democracies and commercial societies.

In the second essay, "The Return of Europa: Her Tears, Deeds, and Dreams," which first appeared in 2015, Riemen offers an impassioned meditation on "the future of the European ideal of civilization," inspired by a serendipitous encounter in Sils-Maria, the enchanting Swiss Alps town to which Nietzsche regularly repaired to renew his spirits.

Riemen espouses an extravagant conception of democracy, which he describes as "the form of government that attempts to elevate human beings, to enable them to think and to be free." A "true democracy" nurtures "a passion for truth, creation of beauty, and the idea of justice," he contends. "The goal of democracy is therefore education, intellectual development, and nobility of spirit, and nobility of spirit is the most important weapon against the degeneration of democracy into mass democracy, whereby demagogues, stupidity, propaganda, claptrap, vulgarity, and the lowest of human instincts increase their dominance until they inevitably give birth to the bastard child of democracy: fascism."

It's a stirring summons. But if a true democracy, as Riemen contends, "cultivates the soul," then it never has and probably never will exist. *Liberal* democracy, moreover, deliberately shifts care for the soul away from government to individuals and the communities they form and maintain. By holding contemporary liberal democracies up to a surpassingly lofty standard, indeed an illiberal standard, Riemen encourages the intemperate criticism of liberal democracy that is a distinguishing feature of the very politics he seeks to overcome.

The fight against this age is in no small measure a fight against the apocalyptic criticism of the age.

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