Sowing the Seeds of its Own Destruction: Democracy and Democide

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Abstract
That all democracies have, by their very nature, the potential to destroy themselves is a fact too rarely documented by the acolytes of democracy. Indeed, in the brief decades since Joseph Goebbels, then as Reich Minister of Propaganda, reminded the world that it ‘will always remain one of the best jokes of democracy, that it gave its deadly enemies the means by which it was destroyed’, democrats have quickly forgotten just how precarious a thing democracy can be. The objective of this article is to entertain the under-explored notion that democratic failure is a possibility that remains very much entrenched within the idea and ideal of democracy itself. Using the breakdown of democracy during the Weimar Republic as a brief illustrative example, the article first describes the process through which a democracy can self-destruct before offering a theoretical explanation of why this is so – one which draws its inspiration from the dual notions of autonomy and tragedy. By doing this, it will hope to have shown just how a democracy can, in the course of being democratic no less, sow the seeds of its own destruction.

Introduction
That all democracies have, by their very nature, the potential to destroy themselves is a fact too rarely documented by the acolytes of democracy. Indeed, in the brief decades since Joseph Goebbels, then as Reich Minister of Propaganda, reminded the world that it “will always remain one of the best jokes of democracy, that it gave its deadly enemies the means by which it was destroyed”, democrats have quickly forgotten just how precarious a thing democracy can be (see Fox and Nolte 1995, 1; Issacharoff 2007, 1408). Democracy, if we are to take Goebbels seriously, is the very thing that can bring democracy to its knees – or, in the words of Robert Moss (1977, 12), the Australian historian, “democracy can be destroyed through its own institutions.”

At its most rudimentary, the logic at work here is as follows. Because most conceptions of democracy are premised on some notion of majoritarian rule, pluralism and tolerance, it follows that were a majority of citizens in a society or country to decide after an open and fair election that they no longer wish to abide under their present democratic constitution, that instead they desire to end democracy’s tenure and institute another form of political
governance, they will have nonetheless acted in accordance with the principles of democracy despite their resolution to suspend democracy. In other words, in a democracy views and policies that are anti-democratic in nature – whether they be authoritarian or not – cannot technically be excluded from the political domain nor deemed illegitimate where they have been backed by a majority (Kirshner 2010, 424; Howard 2002, 551). Democracy necessarily must encourage these perspectives as it would of perspectives more sympathetic to its future. This being so, the future of democracy is not predetermined but becomes an open question: it transforms into a choice and, as Alain Touraine writes, “in each such situation an opposite anti-democratic choice” is always possible (Touraine and McDonald 1994, 10). Those who disavow democracy – in order to advance or repudiate it – have a vested interest in its current trajectory. And when these individuals and groups mobilize in large enough numbers they can immobilize the democratic process, sometimes for an extended period of time. The result of this cessation will not necessarily produce authoritarian or totalitarian regimes. Other forms of government not completely at odds with democracy may arise. But regardless of what form of political governance arises, it will have nevertheless ended the run of democracy in its present form. Writing against the backdrop of this possibility, the political theorist John Keane (2010, xxxii) recently recalled us to the point that democracies can “commit ‘democide’.” They can, when incapable of redressing the political crises they manufacture, whether because of individual freedom, bureaucratic morass or the sluggishness of democratic politics, die by their own hands. Democracies, he admits, “have suffered and died under several bad moons”, another of which “is now rising over all democracy” (Keane 2010, xxxii). Though this is not a prospect that scholars of democracy readily admit to, and fewer still have really come to terms with it, Keane (2010, xxxii-xxxiii) puts forward the “vexing thought that democracy as we now know it in all its geographic and historical variations might not survive indefinitely, that it could slit its own throat or quietly take its own life in an act of ‘democide’”. This thinking is confirmed both by democracy’s historical decline and the view that “democracy may well turn out to be a campfire on ice.”

Instead of the idea of ‘democide’ – or democratic suicide – the work of democratic theorists more frequently centers on the issue weak, failing or failed democracies, with the focus directed largely towards extrinsic factors that impact upon democracy from the outside. Not only that, but the large majority tend only to examine democratic failures as part of the early stages of the transition toward democracy. Few studies examine the collapse of mature or strong democracies – in part because of the widely held assumption that mature or strong democracies are almost near impenetrable to attack. In short, the general tendency has been to
approach democratic breakdowns as an anomaly whose true source stem from economic instability and inequality, inappropriate or ineffective institutional frameworks or the existence of intractable ethnic divisions for instance (see, for example, Stepan 2009; Kapstein and Converse 2008; Converse and Kapstein 2008; Diamond 2008; Svolik 2008; Diskin, Diskin and Hazan 2005; Huntington 1991; Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki 1975). The objective of these studies has, according to Alfred Stepan (2009a), primarily been “to diagnose the origins of the problem” and “attempt to evaluate possible prescriptions.” Once identified, the institutional, socio-economic and political glitches can be minimized if not eliminated. And as this happens, democratization should progress unimpeded. While the proposals and measures deployed by these scholars are both sophisticated and varied in nature, often the endpoint of their efforts is to consolidate the democracy in question. Democratic consolidation aims to secure democracies against so-called ‘reverse-waves’ of democratization and is “pre-occupied with keeping democracy alive” (Schedler 1998, 95). Democracies do not fail in-and-of-themselves is the predominant reasoning here. And so the task is to isolate and mitigate these extrinsic factors before they can corrode democratic institutions and cultures. But even analyses which distinguish an ‘exogenous’ termination of democracy from an ‘endogenous’ termination, like Ko Maeda’s (2010) does, have ultimately sought to find a way out, attempting in the process to distinguish failures of particular democracies from the broader idea of democracy itself.

True, as political scientists we must, following after Maeda’s recommendations, pay due attention to endogenous terminations, that is, to terminations of democracy instigated by democratic processes themselves. Yet we must also pay heed to the less recognized possibility that endogenous termination – or democide – may be an intrinsic risk that can just as easily be divorced from the idea and ideal of democracy as it can be rendered obsolete through the creation of more nuanced institutional, socio-economic and political designs. We define the problem too narrowly if we attend only to these factors. And in defining the problem too narrowly we also misconstrue the problem of democide as a problem and not as a possibility that can allow us to probe the links between democracy and totalitarianism as well as to question democracy’s supposed progressive teleology (Isaac 1998, 23-24).

This essay entertains the under-explored notion that democratic failure is a possibility that is very much entrenched within the idea and ideal of democracy itself. As such, unlike analyses which have attempted to distinguish failures of this or that democracy from the broader idea of democracy itself, my aim is to do the opposite: to entertain the idea that the broader idea of democracy is itself fallible, which is not the same as saying that this, that or
any democracy will necessarily self-destruct. In other words, this essay will systematically explore the claim, recently floated by the political theorist Nathalie Karagiannis (2010, 35), that “[d]emocracy contains in itself the seeds of its own destruction.” It asks what does a theorist like Karagiannis mean when she says this? How can a democracy, to borrow Keane’s phrase, slit its own throat? And what theoretical and policy lessons might we take away from this prospect?

**Sowing the Seeds of its Own Destruction**

At its most fundamental, this essay argues that there is no effective mechanism in a democracy which can prevent it from paving the way for its antithesis. Not only that, but I argue that it is the former which can, when functioning paradoxically at its best, trigger the rise of the latter. There is no distinct marker to alert a democracy before it goes too far and invites into its midst forces capable of ripping it apart. Unlike Pierre Rosanvallon (cited in Bensaid 2011, 19) therefore, who believes that “[n]ever has there been such a thin line between a positive outlook for democracy and the chance that it might go off the rails”, I want to put forward a case which dispels the belief that there is a line at all, thin or not, separating democracy from its supposed antithesis. So much to say: the seeds of democracy’s end are sown into its very constitution and operation.

But what does it actually mean for a democracy to sow the seeds of its own destruction? According to Alexander Kirshner (2010, 407), a democracy can destroy itself – or be subjected to what he labels as a “popular threat” – when a “group credibly intends to use democratic procedures to win power, stymie democratic institutions, and undermine democracy itself.” The idea behind this claim is that in a democracy questions can be legitimately raised not only about the nature of the democracy but also about its very foundations. There is nothing that cannot be interrogated and revoked. And because democratic principles and processes, in theory at least, are premised on the participation of the entire citizenry on all matters related to that society, a diverse range of perspectives and proposals can emerge. Though these are most frequently related to micro-issues – for example, the most expedient and economic ways to redress problems to do with the environment, refugees and resources – a democracy can also call on its citizens to think about deeper questions to do with their way of life. When this occurs, that democracy will almost certainly open itself up to varying dissenting views and attacks because, as Kirshner (2010, 417) argues, “[a]ll democratic regimes include members who prefer other forms of government” and on rare occasions “those who oppose democracy may stymie representative
institutions or disenfranchise minorities.” Enfranchising the masses necessarily means giving a political voice to those who will disdain democratic configurations. Therefore, by being democratic it is possible if not always likely that a democracy will permit itself to be defeated from within.

There are, of course, specific mechanisms which have been built into modern democracies whose aim is to prevent them from being illegitimately taken hostage by a small minority of its own leaders or citizens. But what Kirshner is talking about are those rare situations where a sufficient chorus of citizens legitimately and fairly deploys democratic principles and procedures to voice their displeasure at democracy and, where they can, to end its tenure. These occasions, even though their result is the toppling of democracy, can and do in the meantime contribute to the fervor of democratic deliberations, not the reverse. In this respect, the prospect of democide, at least according to the theory of proceduralism, remains a risk which no democracy should legitimately guard against (see, for example, Kirshner 2010; Fox and Nolte 1995, 14-16; Estlund 2008, 1; Dworkin 2006, 131, 134; Dunn 2005, 149). Democratic proceduralism puts forward the case that the ultimate authority of democracy is vested in its democratic procedures. Where the institutional requirements of a fair and free debate, press and election have been met, where citizens have not been unduly prevented from or pressured into participation, then the resultant majority decision must be given the full weight of law – even if that decision is patently at odds with the principles and processes of democracy themselves. The test for legitimacy as such is independent of the content of the democratic decision made. Much of this thinking rests on the optimism that can be traced back to the Enlightenment belief in human independence and political progress. Humans, in this view, should be given the freedom choose their own paths in life. And the choices they make, particularly when guided by rationality, should be denied by no man or woman. Of course, it is assumed that few would, under these conditions, freely opt to return themselves to the enslavement enacted upon them in times past by authoritarian and totalitarian masters. Yet this is no guarantee against the human tenacity to choose as they will. Indeed, just as skepticism that the masses actually know what is best for them is an indication of anti-democratic elitism, so too can a disregard for the substance of democratic decisions trigger an outburst of anti-democratic sentiment which, despite having been reached via democratic procedures, nevertheless jeopardizes the future of that democracy. Because of this, “[t]he end of democracy” will, for Kirshner (2010, 413), play “an important, if underappreciated role in procedural theory.”
In practice, what this means is that sometimes a democracy can legitimately bring about totalitarianism or, to put this differently, totalitarianism can legitimately result from democratic processes (Pabst 2010, 44-67, 46; Coles 2005, 18-19). While the two conditions are not the same by any means, they are certainly not as distinct as they have been traditionally conceived. Totalitarianism remains entrenched in the logic of democracy and sometimes becomes the natural corollary to the difficulties and freedoms imposed by democracy on itself. The analogy that Moss (1977, 35) draws between the collapse of democracy and the transformation of boiling water into steam is an apt way to surmise this predicament. Just like water when boiled, a democracy tolerates debate, dissent and emendation to its basic principles and processes without undermining the fact that it remains a democracy. To a certain extent, a democracy will even become more refined through such a process – which is no different to water when it is boiled. But that only holds true up to a point: water, once boiled, will eventually evaporate and transform into steam just as democracy, when pushed far enough by its own citizens, can begin to unravel. Perhaps its undoing will only be temporary given that debate, dissent and emendation will likely not be silenced for long, even if formal opposition in the aftermath becomes more difficult under a system of governance less favorable to popular rule. Yet, however temporary that suspension is, what this shows is that democracies can suffer from debilitating crises of their own making. They can, by being democratic, self-destruct.

Concluding Thoughts: Dealing with Democide

In his article on fragile democracies, Samuel Issacharoff (2007, 1451-1452) observes that when a democracy is faced with a threat from within, it becomes vulnerable in one of two ways. In the first instance, when legitimately met with a serious affront from a majority of citizens or a group of elected leaders, a democracy that does not do all it can to impede and sabotage its ‘enemies’, but rather endorses an ‘anything goes’ mentality, will make itself susceptible to defeat. It becomes possible in such an environment that those who detest democracy might justifiably use democratic avenues to slowly work their way into the corridors of power, all the while intending to undercut and eventually abolish the democratic principles and processes which empowered them in the first place (Wolin 2010, xxi). Exploiting the openness of democracy, using its procedural inclusivity against itself, these popular threats can at first contribute to and as such affirm what a vibrant and open democracy can tolerate. But before long, if these movements gain sufficient popular support, the processes of democracy will have handed power over to those whose ultimate wish is to invert the
principles of democracy. The product will be a democracy that is shorn increasingly of its characteristic openness and risk. Accordingly, in order to safeguard itself from impending doom, that democracy might opt to defend itself by instituting and enforcing a raft of measures that temporarily or permanently suspend certain fundamental democratic rights and freedoms. Protected by what is effectively an iron fist, democracy’s core principles therefore have a better chance of survival even if the citizens are in the meantime denied of certain democratic promises. While this may ward off the initial threat described above, Issacharoff notes that by doing so “the ambit of democratic deliberation will be drawn too narrowly” and will, in turn, likewise do damage to the democracy in question. As this occurs, democracy will have dealt itself another deadly blow.

One can either view this as a congenital birth defect ingrained into all democracies that must be rectified somehow or as an inescapable part of the process of continued democratization. But regardless of how one perceives it, it is no small thing that democracy is apt to falter, sometimes with a self-destructiveness that is without parallel in other forms of political governance (Wolin 1994, 23). Because of this, democracy’s future can never be assured or put to rest. It will remain an open question (Howard 1993, 16).

For many, this is no doubt an unwelcome proposition. If democracy will always remain an unfinished product, neither its full potential nor the full gambit of its problems will ever be known before they manifest. Instead, John Safford (2002, viii) argues that “it will always be an open-ended process, subject to great triumphs and horrendous mistakes.” This leads him to label democracy as dangerous. And indeed, the less that is known about democracy’s future the more anxiety there will be about the potential perils that might lie in wait (Luhmann 1990, 46). How can something so unpredictable be successfully managed and controlled?

It is imperative then, for those who share this view, that efforts be continuously made to refine those democratic institutions and procedures which have in the past allowed ‘too much democracy’ or ‘too little democracy’ to clasp onto democracy’s lifeblood, without themselves becoming a risk to democracy. Though this is no easy charge it has, for the most part, been skillfully navigated by scholars of democratic consolidation. To their credit, the initiatives they have proposed and put into effect has in recent years decreased both the likelihood and actual number of democratic failures around the world. But the point which I have tried to make in this article is that even the best efforts and most well-conceived mechanisms constitute no absolute guarantee because democide remains an inherent possibility in all democracies. Because of this, there have been other commentators who, in a last ditch effort, stress the importance of viewing democide not as a logical continuation of democracy, but
instead as an inversion or cessation of democracy. By making a point of identifying when a
democracy ceases to be democratic, even when that result has been brought about by
democratic processes, these scholars believe we can rescue the idea if not the practice of
democracy from the worst of itself. It is better to focus on “the persistence of a democratic
spirit, or culture, even in the face of a cancellation of the institutional underpinnings of
democracy” writes Karagiannis (2010, 35-36). Certainly, it is right that we hold democracy
responsible for the rise of Nazism. But while doing so, Claude Lefort (1988, 28) is insistent
that we at least acknowledge that the ascendency of national socialism implied the “ruin of
democracy” not its culmination. On this view, the tragedy which sees democracies self-
destruct should not be lauded or accepted as a natural corollary of democratic politics. It
should be guarded against, lamented and quickly separated from the normal operation of
democracy. After all, what point is there in studying democide if there is nothing we can do to
prevent it in future? And what use is there in espousing and participating in democratic
processes if we cannot avoid the mistakes of our past?

Yet the pessimistic view is only one view of democide. There are others, for example,
which actually believe the tragic nature of democracy to be a positive thing. This is because the
notion of the tragic has the tendency to shake our faith in foundational truths and to push us to
a point where we need not arbitrarily delimit viewpoints that are currently out of vogue. There
are, of course, obvious dangers and hardships involved in allowing menacing ideas and
restrictive initiatives to take hold. But that is a danger which no genuine democracy should
eschew. This is what makes democracy so special and why its existence has been so rare in the
history of human civilization. Indeed, precisely at the point where a democracy is bold enough,
strong enough or stupid enough to sanction its own demolition is where its ethos will have
been realized to its fullest. To put this another way: though the regime of democracy may be
fatally wounded, its culture will continue to thrive. No matter how un-democratic the self-
cancellation of democracy turns out to be, this view holds that the spirit of democracy cannot
be so easily tarnished and destroyed by this radical openness. Even those antidemocratic
proposals which question whether democracy is worth saving nourish the democratic ethos that
does not delimit “tolerance and freedom of thought...at the boundaries of democracy” (Kofmel
2008, 1). Such a conception of democracy will probably court untold disaster and acute
unpleasantness both for itself and those who support it – to the point where, as a last act, it
imposes on itself the sentence of death. Though it will have perished, the life it will have led
will be democratic.
Bibliography


