Founts of Democratic Erosion: Intolerant Communities

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In *The Road to Serfdom*, Hayek warned against the dangers of collectivist ideologies. He argued that the horrors of Stalin, Hitler, and Mussolini resulted from undue faith in the capacity of government to solve social problems.

Another starting point for democratic erosion, more relevant to the present, is the selective suppression of communications. The suppression comes from citizens who entrust leaders with extensive powers to direct the "right" messages and to treat dissenters as villains. Efforts aimed at blocking ostensibly harmful acts and expressions limit the free exchange of ideas. They also distort knowledge in the public domain and curtail of social experimentation, which depends on the sharing of thoughts. Still another consequence is the impoverishment of people's understandings of social processes. Politicians exploit the resulting combustion of hostility, panic, and ignorance through policies that may seem responsive to grievances but are ultimately counterproductive. By pandering to intolerant constituents, and stoking fear and anger, they enable the rise of an autocrat. Using state resources, the autocrat then deepens the prejudices instrumental in his own ascent.

Putin of Russia and Erdoğan of Turkey offer cases in point. Each identified and then exploited strains of intolerance to solidify power, using his followers' sense of victimization to stoke hostility toward anyone who stood in his way. Their victims include people who, by helping to cleanse public discourse, galvanized the very processes responsible for turning legitimate democratic power into dictatorship.

Intolerant Communities

Whereas in Hayek's transition to dictatorship liberties are lost because of government expansion, in the present case the engine of illiberalism is communities situated in civil society. These communities include associations similar to those that Tocqueville considered vital to American democracy. Sustained by shared interests, Tocquevillean associations constrain individual behaviors by promoting common understandings of right and wrong. They also limit what individuals may say or do. Intolerant communities differ from idealized Tocquevillean associations mainly because of their self-righteous determination to hold outsiders to their own standards, which they consider above criticism. Intolerant communities lay the foundations for tyranny by creating constituencies prepared to suspend the rule of law for some higher purpose.

Intolerant communities thrive in the presence of other intolerant communities, especially those intolerant of them. They exclude because they themselves are excluded. They hate because they are hated. They censor because their own views are dismissed and suppressed. Clashes between intolerant communities undermine freedom of association, extinguish individualities, and weaken democratic institutions. Through these channels they facilitate the rise of dictatorship.

Members of an intolerant community do not consider themselves *intolerant* in any negative sense, because no one is obliged to tolerate intolerance. They define their vigilance not as the denial of others' freedoms but as drawing boundaries that are essential to human civilization. Intolerant communities differ, then, from a Tocquevillean association also in terms of compatibility between their own self-definition and the definitions of others. In Tocqueville's America, the social functions of a parent-teacher association were not in dispute, and they drew no objections. By contrast, an intolerant community's goals are matters of fundamental disagreement; so is its legitimacy.

In any given society, multiple intolerant communities may vie for dominance. This competition may sustain an equilibrium whereby they co-exist in rough balance. In late 2017, the polarized politics of the U.S. exhibits such an equilibrium. At the most basic level, the U.S. has two intolerant communities, each an alliance of overlapping sub-communities that are divided themselves. Each intolerant community has distinct grievances, worldviews, and justifications for silencing others. No single term does justice to the many motives driving the alliances. Precisely because they do not recognize their own existence, they have no self-adopted names.

For analytical purposes, the communities may be characterized as "identitarian" and "nativist". The identitarian coalition connects groups that define themselves according to some form of identity, chiefly gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. The nativist coalition encompasses groups suspicious of economic globalization, technological innovation, cultural change, and cross-border labor mobility. In national politics, identitarians are generally aligned with the left and the nativists with the right. But neither group defines itself in terms of the left-right political spectrum. For identitarians, identity-based matters are more central to the quality of life, and nativists say the same about cultural continuity and the scope of economic freedoms. It is critical the communities disagree on the nature of the key social conflicts. This hinders communication between them.

Each of the two intolerant communities wants to wipe out the other. It could succeed by making the rival community accept, if only tacitly, its worldview and favored policies. Members of the defeated community would stop expressing their own grievances. They would pretend to share the victor's interpretations of events. Public discourses would reflect the victor's prejudices; they would get saturated with claims that the vanquished community privately considers contemptible. Shocks to a social system—business cycles, job-replacing technologies, loss of institutional safeguards—can upset an equilibrium such as that which now prevails in the U.S. They can induce realignments that then feed on themselves. One type of intolerance will then start growing at the expense of the other. Turkey's authoritarian transition exemplifies just such a process. Conditions are present for an analogous transition in the United States.

Signs of Mounting Intolerance

Identitarian intolerance is widely known as political correctness, a term coined in the 1980s as a pejorative. It makes itself felt on college campuses and in entertainment. Its causes include multiculturalism, the sexual revolution, curriculum diversification, and affirmative action based on identity rather than economic status. Such causes face opposition, which identitarians struggle to silence through political correctness. As they see it, policing speech and behaviors offensive to their constituents enhances study and work environments; it levels a playing field that has long been tilted in favor of whites, men, and heterosexuals. In the 2010s, political correctness shifted emphasis from suppressing hate speech targeted at its constituents to creating safe spaces that shelter them from discomforting speech.

The appearance of the political correctness concept reflected resistance to its underlying agenda. Coalitions opposed to identitarian causes were forming, many centered in conservative churches. Televangelists such as Oral Roberts, Jerry Falwell, and Pat Robertson, and talk-radio hosts such as Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck were ringing alarm bells about the prevailing social trends. In the mid-1990s, Fox News became this opposition's face on television. Fox News also championed the interests of big business, which favors globalization. This created tensions. The advent of the Tea Party following the 2008 presidential election was the first sign of a serious split within the Republican coalition that Fox News championed. The Tea Party charged the Republican leadership with hidden political correctness. Trump's political surge owes much to his unprecedented ability to mesmerize the media through outrageous behaviors. But also critical was

his savvy exploitation of tensions within the Republican coalition. His candidacy provided an outlet for the anger of constituencies that have done relatively poorly in recent decades.

What is certain is that Trump's supporters feel more empowered to speak their minds and also to intimidate, silence, and chase away people whom they consider traitors. Just as conservatives speak cautiously on university campuses, so in distressed towns that voted heavily for Trump self-identified progressives know that the climate of opinion is hostile to their own viewpoints. Some Trump supporters are willing to pursue extra-legal means to achieve their objectives. The Charlottesville demonstration of August 2017 provides an illustration; the marchers included armed white supremacist groups. In the eyes of such supporters, Trump has legitimized law breaking through diatribes against the establishment-rigged system. He has done so also by flaunting the law routinely, whether in ignoring conflicts of interest, inviting Russia to interfere with American elections, questioning the loyalty of immigrant citizens, or dismissing traditionally bipartisan U.S. commitments.

Just as political correctness demonizes its detractors as racist, misogynist, and homophobic, so Trump's crowds disparage his critics as un-American and crooked. Supporters of nation-building abroad, free trade, and amnesty for undocumented aliens should all be treated with disdain. And they are all the more deserving of opprobrium insofar as they exhibit political correctness. Throughout his campaign, Trump lambasted political correctness as a cancer destroying America. Friend or foe, everyone knew what he meant. He would not coddle undeserving minorities, put foreigners ahead of Americans, or keep the U.S. in trade treaties that ship jobs abroad. He would not cosy up to Hollywood bosses whose products rarely show Evangelicals or conservative whites in a positive light. Furthermore, in reversing established social policies, he would remind America-hating elites that most Americans reject their values.

Mutually Reinforcing Intolerances

Identitarians see the nativist agenda as a reaction to privileges slipping away, as another gasp to undo progress made toward equalizing rights and opportunities across genders, ethnic and racial groups, sexual classifications, and citizenship categories. It proves that the struggle for justice will be long and painful. The extent of the reaction shows that massive work is required just to maintain gains of the past half-century. It also proves the wisdom of censoring sexist, racist, and nationalist expression. It reconfirms that when speech is poorly monitored, offensive discourses

spread like cancer. Identitarian intolerance thus derives vitality from nativist intolerance. The boost that nativists received from Trump's presidency has energized identitarians as well.

For their part, nativists depend on identitarian activism. Without identitarian policies or political correctness, they would be attributing their misfortunes mainly to technology, trade, and immigration. These are all factors resolvable through bargaining within the left-right political spectrum. The identitarian agenda infuriates them by privileging the problems of groups from which they are mostly excluded. An American-born heterosexual white male miner fits no victim category of the identitarians. As he sees it, universities, the mass media, Hollywood, government agencies, and the non-profit sector ignore his own problems, and they do so because the identitarian worldview blinds them to all but a sliver of human sufferings. Adding insult to injury, identitarians also look down at him as uneducated, superstitious, and unpolished—as a freak who does not deserve a hearing.

Positions on each side harden, then, because of the other's reactions. Perceived indifference to deep grievances fuels anger, which then undermines empathy for others. The political system can reinforce the illustrated polarization. For one thing, polarized voters are more likely to nominate extreme candidates and to take the trouble to vote. For another, politicians whose career depends on pleasing an extreme constituency are less likely to make compromises. Polarized politicians inflame animosities between citizen blocs that scarcely communicate with one another. Legitimizing intransigence, they also strengthen the logic for pressing one's own causes and dismissing those of the other side. Institutional devices designed to tilt the political playing field, such as gerrymandering and voter-registration restrictions, can complement these effects, partly by narrowing the voter base that the politicians feel obligated to serve, but also by fueling perceptions of partisan mischief.

Regime Change through Intolerance

The literature on regime change deals mostly with transitions from autocracy to democracy. Under one widely studied scenario, the analysis begins with a state that oppresses the masses. For self-survival, many individuals endorse the regime's policies. In most cases, though, the support is feigned. Vast numbers are ready to turn against the regime and reject its policies if ever it seems safe to do so. Under the right circumstances, unobservable in advance, an intrinsically minor shock will trigger a cascade through which public opposition feeds on itself. If public opposition grows

sufficiently, the regime loses control of the citizenry and it collapses. Millions of people who had publicly supported the toppled regime feel free to air their long-suppressed grievances.

The regime changes in Russia and Turkey have also involved preference falsification. Putin and Erdoğan championed the interests of groups that felt expressively oppressed by liberal, secular, and Westernizing elites. And under their dictatorships, their opponents are unable to speak freely or honestly. Conditions in the U.S. present similarities to those that led to the authoritarian transitions in Russia and Turkey. Depending on where they live or work, millions of Americans hide their reservations about the identitarian or nativist agendas. Public discourses on identitarian-dominated college campuses are more extreme than the underlying distributions of private preferences. The opposite distortions occur in nativist-dominated small towns, where public discourses conceal reservations about nativist policies. In both contexts, preference falsification feeds on itself, as in repressive autocracies.

One basic difference between the two types of regime transition lies in the fount of the incentives that generate widespread preference falsification. In communist regimes, Arab dictatorships, and other autocracies, punishments are directed by the state, which decides who must be silenced; individuals assist state-led oppression by ostracizing dissenters in an effort to signal loyalty to the regime. By contrast, in the U.S. today, punishments come directly from intolerant communities situated within civil society. Insofar as the state is involved, it is through elected officials responding to the desires of their voter base.

Another basic difference involves the substance of the transition. As an authoritarian regime collapses through a cascade that exposes hidden dissent, preference falsification diminishes (though the regime's sincere supporters, typically a small minority, start pretending that their support was never genuine). Under the type of democratic erosion identified above, each intolerant community aims to take away its rival's right to speak honestly. The triumph of one of the rival communities results in massive preference falsification on the part of the vanquished community.

Trump is a Symptom, Not Basic Cause

The U.S. was already a hyper-polarized society before Trump's meteoric political ascent. In a 2008 YouGov poll, a fifth of both Democrats and Republicans indicated that they would be "somewhat upset" or "very upset" if a son or daughter married someone of the other party. In the 1960s, very few people were offended about the party choice of their relatives. Political scientists

of that era repeatedly demonstrated that Americans did not view parties in ideological terms, as most do now.

If the status quo is awful, the worst may lie ahead. Any number of plausible developments could undermine the prevailing equilibrium and start a cascade favoring one intolerant community or the other. The possible triggers include emerging labor-displacing technologies, such as driverless cars and automated stores. Just as foreigners are blamed for industrial job losses, so the unfolding automation could heighten xenophobia and anti-globalism, swelling the numbers of nativists. For another alarming scenario, imagine that the collapse of a pivotal Arab state makes Middle Eastern wars spread, dragging the U.S. into a Vietnam-style quagmire. The resulting refugee flows would energize nativists, and casualties would energize identitarians, especially if ethnic minorities suffered disproportionately. Depending on specifics, then, either coalition could be the main beneficiary. Yet another possible destabilizing trigger consists of multiple shocks that sow panic. Several synchronized mass killings by white supremacists could trigger cascading intolerance against non-identitarians in general.

As of mid-2017, the U.S. appears far from a bona fide dictatorship. Its institutions designed to prevent tyranny safeguard the liberties of Trump opponents. The press and social media overflow with critical commentary. Major initiatives face resistance from Congress, even from elected officials of Trump's own party. Hyphenated Americans still enjoy legal protections. But the erosion of American democracy continues, and the mutual intolerance at its roots has only intensified. Respectful discourse between the two sides remains the exception. Both nativists and identitarians think that the system favors the other side, and they deem each other guilty of double standards. Trump opponents see in his initiatives mounting evidence of solidifying autocracy. For their part, his supporters think that their hero gets skewered for exercising powers that Obama exploited routinely. In fact, double standards lie at the core of both nativist and identitarian modus operandi. If a major global crisis were to erupt, identitarians would rush to blame Trump, and nativists would see it as confirmation of mismanagement by global elites. Whoever is in power could use the crisis as an excuse to curtail the other side's liberties. In all likelihood, the governing team's illiberal policies would receive enthusiastic support from millions of people accustomed to considering their opponents subhuman.