

THE PERILS OF ‘HYPERDEMOCRACY’

The Trouble with Democracy: A Citizen Speaks Out

William D. Gairdner

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Reviewed by Mark Wegierski

As a businessman, former Olympic athlete, and humanities scholar with a Ph.D. in English Literature from Stanford University, William D. Gairdner (born in 1940) is the best-selling author of *The Trouble with Canada: A Citizen Speaks Out* (1990). His previous books include *The War against the Family* (1992) and *On Higher Ground: Reclaiming a Civil Society* (1996), a collection of his columns that originally appeared throughout 1995 in *The Edmonton Journal* newspaper. (Gairdner has subsequently given up a regular newspaper column and devotes his time to other projects.) He is also the editor of *After Liberalism: Essays in Search of Freedom, Virtue, and Order* (1998) and coeditor of *Canada's Founding Debates* (1999), which consists mostly of succinct extracts from the various political debates occurring around the time of Confederation (1867) in Canada.

Gairdner is one of Canada's leading contemporary social conservatives, and one of the more eloquent paleoconservative theorists in North America. His latest book, *The Trouble with Democracy* is the capstone of decades of painstaking intellectual effort. Gairdner takes the reader on a bold and daring journey through virtually all of world-history—examining its diverse meanings and ways of life—as interpreted through his own, very intense, social-conservative theoretical framework.

In this book, Gairdner closely examines the term “democracy”—that cliché of current-day political debate. He begins by looking at the roots of democracy in ancient Athens and Rome. In both those societies, democracy was exercised only by a small percentage of the population, and with various restrictions that would make it seem extremely “undemocratic” by today's standards. A large proportion of the population were slaves. The height of Athenian democracy was very brief, and the Roman Republic ended seemingly at the zenith of its success in uniting the Mediterranean world, when the emperors seized control.

Although the founding of the American Republic is often considered a revival of democracy, Gairdner shows that neither America nor Canada was, until comparatively recently, enamored of unrestricted democracy. The United States embraced a republicanism that was suspicious of the excesses of mass-democracy, while Canada looked to the British parliamentary model to rein in what were seen as the often dangerous passions of the mob. Only in recent times has the exercise “of the will of the people” been conceptually identified by most American and Canadian conservatives with a “democratic conservatism” that reacted against juridical, bureaucratic, and interest-group impositions.

According to Gairdner, there were a number of diverse strands of development—such as the ancient gnostic heresies, the Christian millenarian impulse, and Romanticism—that eventually pushed the West in the direction of contemporary progressive “hyper-democracy.” Gnosticism contributed the notion of a select elite united by “special insight” (i.e., the enlightened group “in the know”), as well as the idea of “the authentic self within”—rather than the orthodox Christian view of an imperfect human being with God’s authority above mortals. Gairdner argues, following conservative theorist Eric Voegelin, that gnosticism has been a shadow-outlook almost continually present in Western history.

The Christian millenarian impulse, unlike most established forms of Christianity, wanted to bring about the Kingdom of God on Earth—usually by whatever means necessary. One of the main bridges between Christian millenarianism and dreams of political revolution was the Puritan revolutionaries of Cromwell’s ascendancy (which occurred in the aftermath of the English Civil War and the execution of King Charles I in 1649), especially the Diggers, Ranters, and Levelers. The Gnostic and Christian millenarian strands were eventually secularized into radical ideologies like Marxism, which called for “total transformation” led by a “vanguard”—regardless of any human and social costs. For Gairdner, Romanticism is typified by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau believed in the primacy of emotion over reason; that human beings are inherently good, but corrupted by imperfect social structures; and postulated a democratic General Will, that lent itself to being interpreted in a “totalitarian” fashion. According to Gairdner, the result of Romanticism was a belief in the primacy of the environment in determining human behavior—and that, if only there were massive social transformation, the human person would emerge as naturally good and harmoniously living with his fellows. Romanticism also removed blame and responsibility for wrongdoing from the individual person, placing it instead upon society or generalized social forces, which meant, in theory at least, that no one was accountable for his or her actions. Romanticism buttressed the utopian longings for “total transformation” that was capable of bringing about “Heaven on Earth.” This fanciful desire for a utopian existence, rather than living by a more realistic and modest outlook, has been termed “immanentizing the eschaton” by conservative theorist Eric Voegelin.

According to Gairdner, the blood-soaked twentieth century is characterized by struggles between ideologies that all claimed to be democratic. One of Gairdner’s arguments seems rather paradoxical, namely that both Soviet Communism and Nazism could be viewed as the *culmination*, rather than a repudiation, of “total democracy.”

The original example was the Jacobins of the French Revolution, who unleashed the Reign of Terror, executing King Louis XVI and his wife, Marie Antoinette (and tormenting the royal son to death), as well as massacring aristocrats, priests, and those peasants of the Vendée and other parts of France who had chosen to cling to their ancestral loyalties to God and king. Prefiguring twentieth century extremisms, the Jacobins introduced a ridiculous new calendar, and tried to create a new “rational religion,” compelling the populace of Paris to worship the Goddess Reason in the defiled Notre Dame Cathedral.

Today, the West and most of the world is awash in “hyperdemocracy,” which Gairdner identifies as “Democracy against Community: Attacking Society from Below.” In his second-to-last chapter, which is on “the politics of sex,” Gairdner argues that, as political correctness diminishes genuine freedom of speech, sexual freedom increases. He writes:

[A] sexually liberated citizenry will do the work of atomizing its own society, and... a mass of autonomous individuals newly obedient to correct political behavior can be made to emerge by itself (p. 443.)

According to Gairdner, abortion rights are the touchstone of the current-day political and sexual order—and the moral equivalent of slavery in ancient societies, which consigned a certain proportion of the population to non-personhood. Because of widespread abortion and breakdown of traditional sexual norms, many Western societies are failing to maintain their population at replacement levels. Another modern form of slavery is the abject enslavement of the individual to his or her passions. However, Gairdner perceives another type of slavery in the present-day West: “tax-slavery” (e.g., high taxes), as well as the “debt-slavery” of future generations (because of chronic deficit-spending by governments).

Gairdner expresses a hope for “organic democracy”—which would be more imbued with moral norms, and with greater public spiritedness. He argues pointedly that there can be no true sense of community without moral judgment and exclusion. In an “organic democracy,” the intermediary institutions of family and civil society would be enhanced against the current-day bureaucratic leviathan state, and against “amoral individualism.” Following well-known conservative thinkers like Edmund Burke, Gairdner claims that, if we do not exercise moral self-control at the individual and family level, we will likely become controlled by an increasingly tyrannical, overarching, behemoth state.

The book would probably make for highly infuriating reading for almost everyone within the main currents of the prevailing political spectrum. However, some conservative theorists might also strenuously object to Gairdner’s portrayal of Romanticism. Some have argued that Romanticism—especially on the European continent—was a *conservative* response to the basically liberal Enlightenment. In Britain, if one looks at figures like Percy Bysshe Shelley, Romanticism can be seen as more clearly radical. However, it also had a conservative side in persons like Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey. Some would argue that by criticizing Romanticism and figures like C. G. Jung, Gairdner is actually cutting current-day society off from some of the redemptive possibilities and sources from whence a possible future revival might arise. While Gairdner’s critique of Romanticism fits well into the overall arguments he has made,

rather different interpretations of Romanticism by conservative theorists are certainly possible—for example, in Paul Gottfried’s *Conservative Millenarians: The Romantic Experience in Bavaria*.

Some conservative theorists might also object to Gairdner’s too-close identification of conservatism with orthodox Christianity, the anti-abortion movement, and sexual Puritanism. They might place more hope in a revival of more secular identifications with patriotism and localism. One wonders if a resurgence of national or local identity, or a revival of Christian religion, are more likely, in Western countries today. Some conservative theorists are suspicious of current-day Christianity’s ultra-universalism, which exists both among Protestants and Catholics. However, most conservative theorists would acknowledge—unlike some right-wing radicals—that such ultra-universalism (which most real conservatives must find hurtful to their respective national and local traditions) certainly appeared to be far less prominent in most Christian denominations before the 1960s.

Gairdner’s is a highly complex, often breathtakingly refreshing and seemingly radical work—“radical” in the best sense. He seeks to overturn the conventional wisdom of the contemporary period, and pursues the truth no matter what uncomfortable conclusions Gairdner may encounter. His writing often reaches a prophetic tone, especially when describing, in near-apocalyptic terms, the dystopic aspects of the declining West. Gairdner is boldly exploring what the real “pre-modern” or most consistently conservative outlook could consist of. Unfortunately, the few political theorists who are capable of fully understanding Gairdner’s elaborate arguments are almost certainly going to vehemently reject them; whereas the socially conservative common person to whom the book’s arguments would probably appeal is likely to be highly confused. Gairdner attempts a magisterial summing up of the meanings and significance of Western and world history. Although many are likely to disagree with him, he is to be commended for his audacious endeavor, in an age so often given to picayune arguments and trivial debates.

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