



The Selfish Brain

A Layperson's Guide to a New Way of Economic Thinking



Richard B. McKenzie

On Corruption in America

And What Is at Stake

"If you want to save America, this might just be the most important book to read now."
—Nancy MacLean,
author of *Democracy in Chains*

Sarah Chayes

Author of *Thieves of State* and *The Punishment of Virtue*

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Anne Applebaum says any society can turn against democracy. Indeed, she suggests history implies that all societies eventually will. (*Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*, p. 14) That's because authoritarianism appeals to people who cannot tolerate complexity, who are anti-pluralist, suspicious of those with different ideas, and allergic to fierce debates. (p. 16)

However, the latter assertion raises the question of why debates should be "fierce". Beyond the enthusiastic enjoyment of the intellectual challenge itself, wouldn't it be better if debates were logical, based upon evidence, and relatively dispassionate? Doesn't ferocity imply the intent to dominate by will if not also by force? Use of fighting words tends to induce fights.

Moreover, as Richard McKenzie observes, "the brain evolved to work with a mental (and simplified) construction of reality that passed evolution's fitness test for maximum survival and procreation chances ..." (*The Selfish Brain: A Layperson's Guide to a New Way of Economic Thinking*, p. 191) As human beings, our ability to deal with complexity is limited. Regardless of whether we choose to call each other "authoritarians" or not, *all of us* must simplify reality to avoid being overwhelmed by it. What's more, paradoxically, "knowledge is *always* gained by the orderly loss of information." (p. 186)

As McKenzie notes, mistakes "have long been recognized as collateral damage in serial decision-making, but those same mistakes can be part of a decision process that, on balance, can be more rational than would be the case were mistakes never made ..." (p. 160) Nevertheless, while experimenting and learning, the magnitude of unintended adverse effects should be minimized by limiting the scope of the actions taken. That means power should be distributed away from the center, out to the periphery of networks.

Thus, it is ironic, albeit perhaps not surprising, that an authoritarian sensibility has become so prevalent among leftist agitators in our centers of higher learning, where knowledge is supposed to grow and thrive. (AA, p. 18) Yet, Applebaum suggests, "the only modern *clerics* who have attained real *political* power in Western democracies ... are members of movements that we are accustomed to calling the 'right.'" (p. 19) Note her biased framing of the issue, however,

excluding consideration of authoritarian regimes governing from 54 - 94 percent of the world's [population living under less than full democracy](#).

In less biased and overly simplistic terms, Sarah Chayes has noted that corruption is unrelated to which end of the political spectrum is in power. (December 2, 2022, address to the Hilton Head World Affairs Council) As [highlighted by Katherine Gehl and Michael Porter](#), both are part of a systemic problem. (*The Politics Industry: How Political Innovation Can Break Partisan Gridlock and Save Our Democracy*) Moreover, to tie that point back to Applebaum's thesis, Chayes observes that what drove people in Afghanistan into the arms of the authoritarian Taliban was indignation at corruption in their government, together with our role in enabling it. (*On Corruption in America and What Is at Stake*, p. 6)

Authoritarianism is a natural reaction to systems that are perceived to be working poorly, in contravention of the interests of the people. Whether the system is called "democracy" or not matters little, except perhaps to the degree that people may expect more from so-called "democrats," who are supposed to represent all the people but cannot possibly do so, literally speaking. In other words, *representative democracy* is in some sense a public hustle, a ruse on the electorate. When it fails to live up to its ideals, its adherents may be doubly disappointed.

"[I]n modern Britain, America, France, and, until recently, Poland," Applebaum observes that "most assumed that democratic competition is the most just, and efficient, way to distribute power." (p. 23) [According to Wikipedia](#), however, both the United States and France as well as Poland are flawed democracies. Thus, even in countries where democracy is paid lip service, its true meaning is unclear and consequently ripe for misinterpretation by those who feel empowered to evaluate its quality in their own, simplistic, authoritarian terms.

With respect to its current application in the U.S., for example, Gehl and Porter [have argued](#) *The Politics Industry* comprises a duopoly that conspires against the free and open competition among ideas. Moreover, in previous times, Applebaum notes, "In the Bolshevik imagination, the press could be free, and public institutions could be fair, only once they were controlled by the working class – via the party." (p. 24) Does that mean contemporary authoritarian leftists in academia, politics, and the media are Bolsheviks? That seems to be an apt characterization of their words and behavior. Indeed, since they appear to view themselves as a special in-group of "non-deplorable" people, perhaps some of them may proudly claim the Bolshevik banner.

Perhaps that is only to be expected if, as Applebaum suggests, "Unity is an anomaly. Polarization is normal." Moreover, she allows "Skepticism about liberal democracy is also normal" while cautioning "the appeal of authoritarianism is eternal." (p. 56) However, the latter assertion is clearly hyperbolic. Other than masochists, no one would freely choose to be dominated by others, an option to be preferred only if the alternatives are perceived to be even worse, as Chayes experienced in Afghanistan.

Regarding relative systemic demerits, Applebaum notes that democracy and free markets may generate suboptimal results, such as when they are poorly regulated, the regulators are mistrusted, and when the competitive playing field is uneven. She suggests that's because democracy and markets don't define personal or national identities and, thus, "don't satisfy the desire ... to belong to a special community, a unique community, a *superior* community." (p. 59) Those residing in the ivory towers of academia may consider themselves to be such a community. Notwithstanding her concern about authoritarianism, Applebaum seems to tacitly

approve their elitist attitude, under the guise of scholarship, in the hope they win what she perceives to be an inevitable, ego-driven struggle for dictatorial control.

Regardless of which band of elites may gain the upper hand, Raghuram [Rajan has argued](#) that increasing centralization of power in the markets and the state has diminished communities and left them relatively helpless. (*The Third Pillar: How Markets and the State Leave the Community Behind*) The means by which disproportionate influence is acquired may be immaterial. As Lord [Acton said](#), power corrupts. It is the concentration of power itself that corrupts society and subjugates individuals, families, and communities. Winston [Churchill famously observed](#) that all of the alternatives to democracy tried until his time produced even worse results. Yet his time was far from the end of history (ourstory) and we need not condemn ourselves to reliving it. We can and we should do better.

Toward that end, Chayes asks, “What values do we want our society to honor? ... What about democracy? What does that word exactly mean?” (p. 289) According to Applebaum, in spite of their support for democracy in theory, many Brexiteers “were disgusted by the actual democratic institutions of the United Kingdom in practice.” (p. 90) That further highlights the question of what the essence of democracy truly is. If nothing else, it is majoritarianism, which means that majorities dictate to minorities. At best, it is a lesser form of dictatorship.

In overly simplistic terms, Applebaum asserts, “Nobody in the EU imposed rules on Britain: European directives are agreed by negotiation and each one of them has been accepted by a British representative or diplomat.” (p. 65) However, imposition of policies by an elite cadre is not democracy or perhaps even majoritarian; it is oligarchy, regardless of how the elite acquire dominion over others. At best, elitism is soft authoritarianism, i.e., divestment of power and responsibility away from individuals and human-scale communities.

If the concerns of the Brexiteers were well-founded, Applebaum suggests, “then only a profound revolution, even a revolution that might alter the very nature of the state – its borders, its traditions, maybe even its democratic institutions – can stop the rot.” (pp. 89 & 90) If, as Applebaum fears, we are indeed on a course toward authoritarianism, why would we not want to stop that progression? Don’t both sides fear what the other may impose upon them through political power? Isn’t the way to avoid that outcome simply to stop trying to achieve it?

Adding a bit more nuance to her thesis, Applebaum says the “authoritarian predisposition” is not exactly closed-mindedness but rather simple-mindedness. Her argument self-exemplifies her point but, hopefully, she would decline to assume the authoritarian mantle, even if she may be predisposed to it. After all, like those she criticizes, she must simplify reality and may be excused for doing so since such thinking only becomes a problem when accompanied by dictatorial power. Lacking such power, she is entitled to make her own mistakes and, hopefully, to learn from them.

Expanding on her point, Applebaum suggests, “people are often attracted to authoritarian ideas because they are bothered by complexity. They dislike divisiveness. They prefer unity. A sudden onslaught of diversity ... makes them angry. They seek solutions in a new political language that makes them feel safer and more secure.” (p 106) But is diversity really what angers us? Don’t we generally enjoy novelty and celebrate diversity? If differences don’t adversely affect us, why should we care what others say or do? On either the right or the left, isn’t being forced to accept and do things against our will what truly makes us angry, especially if it violates our deeply held personal values and beliefs? Isn’t that the definition of

authoritarianism? Might rational fear of an even worse form of authoritarianism beget the very result that is feared?

Applebaum suggests neutrality is nonexistent in a polarized world because there can be no nonpartisan or apolitical institutions (p. 114) but the reverse is also true. There will be fewer and fewer such institutions if *The Politics Industry* is permitted to continue exerting evermore power over the economy and society. Politics are inherently polarizing and political institutions foment dissension, at least until they reach a tipping point and gain dictatorial control not merely of actions but also minds. Internationally, Applebaum laments that multilateral institutions have difficulty making quick decisions and large changes. (p. 117) However, were they so empowered, they'd be authoritarian, the very thing she fears.

Applebaum acknowledges that democracy "has always been loud and raucous" but suggests that it eventually generates consensus "when its rules are followed." Yet "The modern debate does not. Instead, it inspires in some people the desire to forcibly silence the rest." (p. 117) However, whether democracy has ever resulted in consensus is questionable. Nor to the extent that it is based upon majoritarianism is it designed to do so.

To the contrary, it engenders polarization. The only alternatives are to win or to lose. There is no such thing as consensus in competitive elections. Someone is always up while others are down and the margins between winning and losing may be very small. Often winning doesn't even mean gaining majority support; pluralities may suffice. Within electoral boundaries, the *subjugation* of voters to their anointed leaders is explicitly assumed. The only issue is a matter of degree: How much of our personal freedom and responsibility are we to divest to an authoritarian system?

Applebaum says the questions at the core of her book include: How is a nation defined? Who gets to define it? Who are *we*? (p.178) Shouldn't *We the People* – each of us, individually – be allowed to answer the latter question for ourselves, based upon our personal values? Why should an elite cadre of "representatives" be empowered to tell us who we are? If that is "democratic" is it not simultaneously autocratic?

And with respect to the first two questions, why should we be expected to honor [boundaries established by authoritarians in the aftermath of World War I, if not centuries ago](#)? Are we whatever geopolitical boundaries dictate we must be? What makes that "democratic"? If it is not for Putin to dictate to Ukrainians that they have always been and must forever remain Russian, what gives anyone the right to dictate nationality to anyone else?

Indeed, as Applebaum notes, "No political victory is ever permanent, no definition of 'the nation' is guaranteed to last, and no elite ... rules forever." (p. 186) Moreover, "Europe, America, and the world are full of people ... who have creative and interesting ideas about how to live in a world that is both more fair and more open." (p. 182) Yet she cautions, "Throughout history, pandemics have led to an expansion of the power of the state: at times when people fear death, they go along with measures that they believe, rightly or wrongly, will save them – even if that means a loss of freedom." (p. 184)

Thus, she wonders if we may be experiencing the twilight of democracy, heading toward anarchy and tyranny. (p. 185) Perhaps, she suggests, information technology will further undermine consensus, divide us, and increase polarization until violence is the only option to

determine who rules. Conversely, on a more optimistic note, perhaps international cooperation will expand as we discover new ways to collaborate, *above and beyond politics*. (p. 186)

Indeed, it is not social media per se that are undermining consensus but rather majoritarians who insist upon imposing their will upon others with respect to more and more of the affairs of life. Otherwise we could simply laugh at the simple-minded ignorance of those with whom we disagree. We might even enjoy having them around as village dunces, sources of mirth and greater confidence in our own points of view.

For Applebaum, however, our options seem to be quite limited. “All we can do,” she says, “is choose our allies and friends ... with great care, for it is with them, together, is it possible to avoid the temptations of different forms of authoritarianism ... Together we can make old and misunderstood words like *liberalism* mean something again; together we can fight back against lies and liars; together we can rethink what democracy should look like in the digital age.” (p. 188) Here Applebaum seems to be suggesting that we need to reinforce our human tendency to simplify issues and form elite cliques to fight those who differ from us. If so, how is that different than what has brought us to this point?

Wouldn't it be better to try something new and different, like:

- refraining from trying to control so many of the thoughts, words, and behaviors of others through politics and voting;
- remaining open to novelty and diversity, particularly viewpoints that diverge widely from our own;
- listening more and speaking less, certainly less ferociously; and
- using more mature, *business-quality* networking services to engage allies and partners in pursuit of common and complementary objectives while minimizing the impacts upon others.

Applebaum, says “Liberal democracies always demanded things from citizens: participation, argument, effort, struggle. They always required some tolerance for cacophony and chaos, as well as willingness to push back at the people who create cacophony and chaos.” (p. 189) However, to whatever degree that may have formerly been true, it now seems that less is being expected of individuals while more is being expected of bigger and more intrusive government. Individual rights are being *nationalized* while personal responsibilities are *minimized*, in favor of collective guilt. As the saying goes, when everyone is responsible, no one is. In the long run, the effect cannot be good.

With reference to Applebaum's thoughts about choosing our friends, Chayes observes that efforts to combat corruption are commonly personalized, as if weeding out a few bad apples will suffice. However, "Corruption is better understood as the deliberate mode of functioning – the operating system, you might say – of sophisticated, astonishingly successful networks. What makes these networks so effective is their ability to weave across what most people think of as separate, even antagonistic segments of society ... These apparent foes in fact work arm in arm within the powerful webs that promote corrupt practices." (p. 14) “Kleptocratic networks hold sway in military dictatorships and in apparent democracies, under leftist regimes and in countries whose leadership champions ultra-free-market capitalism.” (p. 15)

Around the world she says, “citizens have been demanding an end to government in service of governing cliques.” Moreover, “it's not hard to find corruption at the root of most crises afflicting

the globe ...” (p. 7) Indeed, she has found the link between corruption and violent extremism to be compelling. (p. 6) Given those dynamics, it would not be surprising to see the masses turning to authoritarians pledging to clean it up.

As a personalized example of the problem, despite her concern about authoritarian creep, [Applebaum has said](#): "My problem with Hunter Biden's laptop is, I think, totally irrelevant. I mean, it's not whether it's disinformation. I mean, I didn't think Hunter Biden's business relationships have anything to do with who should be president of the United States. So, I don't find it to be interesting. I mean, that would be my problem with that as a major news story."

As Chayes observes: "This is how corruption gets overlooked in the United States... how the wealthier and better educated Americans downplay it." (p. 14) To the degree they may continue to do so, they should not be surprised if others, longing for simpler times, may feel the need for revolution against them and their elitist, authoritarian, all-encompassing, politically driven institutions.

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