

The Right Way to Defend Democracy

By

Barton Swaim - The Wall Street Journal

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Hand-wringing among progressives over the supposed rise of fascism in the U.S. was, to my mind, one of the least attractive responses to the election of Donald Trump. Some of this country's most accomplished intellectuals drew risible comparisons between America in 2016 and central Europe in the 1930s; recall the many allusions to Sinclair Lewis's satirical novel about American fascism, "It Can't Happen Here."

At least "Can It Happen Here? Authoritarianism in America" (Dey St., 481 pages, \$17.99) frames the subject as a question rather than a conclusion. The book, edited by former Obama adviser Cass R. Sunstein, collects essays by scholars and journalists asking whether America may soon give up on democracy and plump for authoritarianism. Most entries are measured and civil in tone, although those that respond affirmatively concentrate almost exclusively on Mr. Trump's statements rather than his actions. Contributors who answer "No," on the other hand, don't always reassure even when they convince: Economist Tyler Cowen, for instance, contends that neither fascists nor any other radical group could commandeer the U.S. government: It's simply now too big. "No matter who is elected," he writes, "the fascists cannot control the bureaucracy, they cannot control all the branches of American government, they cannot control the judiciary, they cannot control semi-independent institutions such as the Federal Reserve, and they cannot control what is sometimes called 'the deep state.'" Well, it's terrific to know fascists can't control the government: How about the American people?

Yascha Mounk in “The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It” (Harvard, 393 pages, \$29.95) answers Mr. Sunstein’s question with a hearty “Yes.” “Donald Trump’s election to the White House has been the most striking manifestation of democracy’s crisis,” Mr. Mounk writes. “It is difficult to overstate the significance of his rise.” It may be difficult, but Mr. Mounk has a go: “For the first time in its history, the oldest and most powerful democracy in the world has elected a president who openly disdains basic constitutional norms—somebody who left his supporters ‘in suspense’ whether he would accept the outcome of the election; who called for his main political opponent to be jailed; and who has consistently favored the country’s authoritarian adversaries over its democratic allies.”

Mr. Trump is guilty of some appalling demagoguery, true enough (though note again the heavy emphasis on rhetoric and attitudinizing rather than action: “disdains,” “called for,” “consistently favored”). But versions of all these accusations might have been, and indeed were, leveled against previous presidents—both Roosevelts and Nixon, for sure—and constitutional norms held up just fine.

It’s true, though, that Mr. Trump doesn’t seem to care all that much about the Constitution or American democratic institutions. Is that a reflection of the American electorate’s own attitude? Mr. Mounk amasses a great deal of evidence indicating that Americans are losing faith in those democratic institutions. We’re told, for instance, that in the U.S. “close to one in four millennials now think that democracy is a bad way of running the country—an increase of over 100 percent compared to the oldest cohorts in the sample.” But surely this is only evidence that people change opinions over time. That the youth develop greater regard for a nation’s institutions as they grow older is hardly unusual. And, in any case, weren’t the democracy-loving older Americans more likely to vote for Trump, not less?

Mr. Mounk suggests one way liberals can counter Mr. Trump’s right-wing “ethnocentric” nationalism with a nationalism of their own. The trouble, as he

puts it, is that American liberals are “increasingly directed toward a radical rejection of the nation and all its trappings.” If I may put the point in my own words: It’s going to be pretty hard for progressives to offer a patriotic alternative to right-wing nationalism when they’ve spent the past half-century placing their hopes in transnational bodies and arguing that national borders are arbitrary constructs. Mr. Mounk proposes what he calls “inclusive patriotism,” which after many pages of description sounds like ordinary left-liberalism but with an admission that securing a nation’s borders isn’t a terrible idea.

The title of William A. Galston’s “Anti-Pluralism: The Populist Threat to Liberal Democracy” (Yale, 158 pages, \$30) led me to believe it might be another panicked appraisal of Mr. Trump’s victory. It’s true that Mr. Galston, a Brookings Institution scholar and a columnist for this paper, is no fan of the 45th president. But his book is a calm and charitable reflection on the latest form of populism to roil our republic.

The book’s theme is that liberal democracy is a valuable but fragile achievement that must be constantly guarded and maintained. That’s as true now as it was a century or two ago: Liberal democracy, he contends, has been severely tested many times before and, thanks to the efforts of conscientious citizens and public-spirited statesmen, emerged from those crises basically intact.

“The constitutional order has survived the no-holds-barred battle between the Federalists and the Jeffersonians, the Civil War, the Great Depression of the 1930s, the assassinations and cultural upheavals of the 1960s, and the security panic that swept the country after the 9/11 attacks,” he writes. “During the two world wars of the 20th century, both of which evoked national mobilizations, liberal restraints on government were weakened only temporarily. Freedom of the press survived the Alien and Sedition Acts of the 1790s, the Espionage and Sedition Acts of 1917-18, and the clashes of the Nixon era. The ethos of individual liberty has always been a powerful countervailing force.”

Mr. Galston makes an excellent case that the populist surge of 2016 was rooted in the economic stagnation of the past two decades. I find some of the remedies he

proposes more sound than others, but that's unsurprising inasmuch as he is a liberal and I am not. His is the right way for any liberal to think and write about a victorious right-wing populist insurgency: not with terror and dismay that democracy has met its match, but with patient, informed arguments about why it happened—and what to do about it.