The Search for a Post-Enlightenment Democracy

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Jacques-Louis David, The Tennis Court Oath (1790-4).

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The series, made possible with the generous support of the John Templeton Foundation, will make the case that liberalism has its own distinctive set of virtues and values that are capable not only of responding to the dissatisfaction that drives authoritarianism, but also of restoring faith in liberalism as an ideology worth believing in—and defending—on its own terms. If you haven't already, please subscribe today to receive future instalments into your inbox!

That liberal democracy is in a state of terminal decline I take to be beyond dispute. Like Alice in the rabbit hole, those of us who dwell in democratic societies suffer from a nauseating sense of falling without ever landing on solid ground. The usual suspects blamed for this tumble—populism, inequality, the economy—are mere surface symptoms of an internal breakdown. We have arrived at the conclusion of a world-historical cycle. Liberal democracy is the procedural embodiment of Enlightenment ideology—and after two centuries of dominance, that ideology has lost all purchase and stands utterly exhausted.

Radical alternatives confront us. Either we reorient our system to post-Enlightenment principles or we risk staggering into the nihilist's paradise I have called the Endarkenment.

Enlightenment philosophers placed their faith in reason and science. These are purely critical disciplines: liberal propagandists wielded criticism like a scalpel to dissect conservative laggards and utopian revolutionaries alike. Once triumphant at the "end of history," liberal democracy turned the knife on itself—a process of self-criticism and self-doubt that has shredded its own ideals to ribbons.

The positive values inherited from the Enlightenment—equality, individualism, compassion—were always parasitic on Christianity. But Christianity, like all religions, has no place in a universe ruled by reason and science. Nietzsche long ago brought us the troubling news: the Christian God is dead. Oblivious to the implications of this calamity, liberal democracy kept marching like a cartoon character over the edge of the abyss, until the laws of moral gravity asserted themselves. So began the Great Fall.

Criticism is a force for progress so long as there are blatant irrationalities, like slavery or Jim Crow discrimination, to overcome. But under the hammer of Enlightenment ideals, modern society has been flattened, centralized, and rationalized. Deprived of obvious superstitions to debunk and totalitarian rivals to defeat, liberal democracy has been revealed in all its internal contradictions.

One such contradiction, I contend, pits the cherished principle of equality against the chosen few who actually practice reason and science: let's call this the *problem of the elites*.

A second contradiction finds freedom of the press and of opinion arrayed against the need to protect objective truth: call it the *problem of information*.

Finally, freedom of worship and the life of the spirit collide head-on with the materialist criticism favored by Enlightenment ideology: the *problem of meaning*.

Each of these contradictions could prove fatal to the democratic project, but none is insoluble, and the search for solutions offers an opportunity for renewal. While there are no guarantees, we could emerge from the crisis with a better understanding of the reach and limits of equality, a more transparent information sphere, and even, it may be, a rich infusion of the transcendental into everyday life.

The intellectual founders of the Enlightenment were deeply ambivalent about the relationship between the ruling elites and the public. On the one hand, the ideology was touted as a superior alternative to the old aristocracy of birth. Equality among citizens was literally God-given and "self-evident." The grounds for equality, however, arose in the enchanted world of Christianity, a primary target of Enlightenment hostility and criticism. All of us were said to be "created" equal. Our rights and liberties were "endowed by our Creator"—or as the French would phrase it, "under the auspices of a Supreme Being." That made equality universal and inalienable but also contingent on faith in a vanishing perspective.

At the same time, reason and science imposed a need for special training and produced specialized expertise which the masses lacked. The line between truth and superstition—a crucial distinction for the ideology—conformed to a class division between the enlightened few and the ignorant multitudes. For this reason, the framers of the Constitution feared the tyranny of the majority as much as that of ambitious men. French Enlightenment philosophers made no secret of their contempt for "the rabble." "We have never pretended to enlighten shoemakers and servants," sniffed Voltaire.

The distance between the “little flock” of hyper-educated sages and a vast cognitive underclass only increased with the passage of time. Yeats noted approvingly that the Duke of Urbino, Renaissance patron of the arts:

> Had sent no runners to and fro /
>
> That he might learn the shepherds’ will

By 2016, Hillary Clinton could blithely write off millions of Americans as “deplorables”—the 21st-century equivalent of Voltaire’s shoemakers and servants, whose bigotry and brutishness placed them beyond the pale of public life.

How could the principle of equality be squared with a hierarchy of expertise? Jefferson, ever the optimist, suggested the “pure selection” of a “natural” aristocracy—one based on merit rather than birth. While this proposition created more conceptual problems than it solved, it nevertheless became the default justification of the ruling elements in democratic societies. To the question, “Why should you perch at the top of the heap?”, the elites have always replied, “Superior merit.” They were more educated, more scientific, and more virtuous than their fellow citizens. To reject their leadership, therefore, was to invite disaster.

In the conflict between equality and elitism, those who already wielded power had the advantage—they could redefine equality down until the concept was virtually drained of meaning. The industrial age, which looked on society as a factory floor to be organized on the precepts of “scientific management,” worshiped at the altar of hierarchy. Mass production, mass consumption, mass media, and mass movements in politics allowed the elites to herd the newly educated, newly affluent millions into fenced enclosures where they could cause no trouble. Progressive government built an immense bureaucracy of regulators and overseers. The deplorables were rendered inaudible. The last century was a golden age of social control.

Fast-forward to the chaos of the present moment. The digital tsunami has obliterated those tidy industrial-age arrangements. The public has gained a voice like thunder—it drowns out the edicts of presidents and the precious phrases of the intellectuals. The deplorables run rampant around the globe, intent, somewhat paradoxically, on electing “authoritarian personalities” to positions of authority. The top-down system has bled out its legitimacy and is now flatlining. The elites and their supporters are gripped by panic and despair, with good reason. The constant lamentations about the end of democracy translate into the existential dread of a class that knows it has lost control.

Media scholar Andrey Mir has observed that every system at the end of its functional life reverses itself. So it is with liberal democracy. Under the influence of the elites, freedom of expression has reversed into censorship, supposedly needed to protect the truth. Democracy has reversed into a guardian state to be ruled in perpetuity by the brightest and best. The open society has reversed into a narrow airless dungeon in which elections are nullified and inconvenient scandals are smothered in silence.

There’s no going back to before, no possibility of a “return to first principles.” The populists believe they are restoring “normie” society, but that’s an imaginary place located in an invented past. The mandarin class desperately craves a return to the hierarchies of the industrial age, but history only moves in one direction.

The problem of the elites revolves around the meaning and justification of equality. The concept is grounded in Christian doctrine and requires a Creator as guarantor—yet the Creator, we know, has been pronounced dead on arrival. We can't return to a lost world. To rescue equality, we must ground it on something new.

The same objections stick to the various doctrines that have attempted to secularize Christian ethics—utilitarianism, for example. The "greatest happiness for the greatest number" begs the foundational question of why other people's happiness should matter. Decently concealed behind a materialist curtain, Christianity delivers the answer. Appeals to nature, natural law, and natural rights also get entangled in old religious formulations: none of these concepts are recognized by science. If we are to believe Richard Dawkins, nature treats each human being as a vessel for selfish genes—which would make Genghis Khan the perfect model of humanity. Arguments based on reason, deprived of transcendental force, fail to yield a credible doctrine of equality.

Yet we don't prize equality because we are compelled to do so by irrefutable arguments about divinity or nature. Equality is a choice. It was first made by our ancestors and it is made by us today in every interaction with our institutions and every encounter with our neighbors. We have transformed ourselves into a society dedicated to a proposition. That entails a permanent revolt against those at the top who, in private life and public affairs, choosing differently, aim to garner special privileges and lasting power. The tension between the many and the few is eternal. The problem of the elites can never be fully resolved—but a settlement of this particular episode can take place only by choosing sides in the struggle. The public must decide the distance it will tolerate between top and bottom. By which I mean: each of us must and will decide.

True equality, once chosen, will have a shocking effect on our stratified society. It will diminish equally our institutional overlords, who will be brought into close proximity with the rabble, and the populists who have thrived by condemning the remoteness of the ruling class. All institutions, including government and corporations, will be radically flattened—AI can assist with this task. The distance between the president and the crowd milling outside the White House perimeter will be near enough for conversation, whether virtual or real.

Elected offices at every level of government will be strictly term-limited—the goal isn't to abolish hierarchy but to render it impermanent. Federal legislation will allow for local variation—and local decisions will often be settled by Swiss-style referendums. Certain offices will be filled by lot. The surveillance state will be dismantled—citizens will no longer accept being treated like the enemy by their own government.

AI apps, available to all, will structure political debates at every level, inform the agendas of political parties, and serve as incubators of new political movements. The Trump administration's recent launch of America.gov, the first federal AI application for public use, should be considered a humble first step in an indefinitely long march. And every advance in the direction of equality, we may be sure, will be accompanied by doomsday warnings from displaced and discontented elites.

The liberation of truth from superstition was the supreme objective of the Enlightenment program. In theory, the gift of truth would allow the sovereign citizen to make enlightened public choices. In practice, the relationship between truth and information is, and must always be, problematic. The Old Regime polluted

truth with religious fables. Totalitarians mastered the art of propaganda. Venal con artists sold snake oil to the unwary. Much news, for various reasons, was not "fit to print."

In any case, the ideal of the "omnicompetent citizen," Walter Lippmann observed in the 1920s, was a romantic myth. The average citizen dealt not in truth but in crude "stereotypes" that were often manipulated by commercial and political interests. The news business, to make money, could be little more than the mass production of stereotypes. In a remarkable sentence, Lippmann, founder and editor of *The New Republic*, concluded that "news and truth are not the same thing, and must be clearly distinguished." News served to "signalize" a sensational event like a terrorist attack. Truth, on the other hand, was the province of "specially trained men."

Long before the internet, the problem of the elites seeped into the problem of information. The mass audience was conceived as a voracious, primitive organism, the equivalent of Clinton's "deplorables." It preferred the sports pages in newspapers, silly sitcoms on TV, and loud music on the car radio. In 1961, Newton Minow, chairman of the FCC, characterized television as "a vast wasteland." Specially trained men like Minow and Lippmann despised the public's tastes and watchfully patrolled the parameters of truth. Their credentials vested them with authority and, as meritorious vessels of reason and science, they spoke with uncommon certainty. Walter Cronkite, twice voted the most trusted person in the country, closed his 30-minute newscast with the extraordinary claim, "And that's the way it is."

The consequence of this ideology was a world in which the elites held a monopoly on truth. The digital revolution, which turned the mass audience into an unruly public, made that world untenable. The elite class in democratic countries has been driven to imitate the methods of authoritarian regimes—censorship, arrest of dissidents, cancelation of elections. The ideal of equality has been discarded. This "revolt of the elites" reached maximum force during the Covid-19 pandemic, when a health bureaucrat like Anthony Fauci could maintain that public criticism of him was "dangerous" because "I represent science."

The problem of information concerns the determination of truth—and by extension, the shared understanding of reality. Enlightenment ideology demanded, simultaneously, the free flow of information and decisive top-down control. The advent of the web exploded that contradiction. Billions of online voices, in a deafening uproar, asserted every conceivable claim on every possible subject, based on every kind of evidence and none. Institutional gatekeepers were soon overwhelmed and overthrown.

Americans, favored children of the Enlightenment, tend to think of truth as a gift from science. In fact, "truth" is largely mediated: we receive our knowledge of the world and all its wonders from trusted authorities. When trust in the mediators evaporates, that world flies apart into unintelligible fragments—and truth is up for grabs.

Life in the digital age, including politics, transpires under the condition of what has been justly termed *post-truth*. The consequences depend on what that condition entails. For the intellectuals who first gave the term currency in the aftermath of Brexit and Trump's 2016 election, "post-truth" signified the ruinous tendency of the deplorables to swallow populist lies. Oxford Dictionary made post-truth the word of the year for 2016 and defined it thusly: "circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion

than appeals to emotion and personal belief." British journalist Matthew d'Ancona equated the label with "a new and alarming collapse in the power of truth as an engine of electoral conduct."

If this interpretation is correct, we have a plausible explanation for the Great Fall: voters in large numbers have been struck blind to reality. Elite reversals away from liberal rights appear as emergency measures to salvage something of value from the wreckage. If, under the condition of post-truth, genuine liberal democracy has become too dangerous, those in charge of the institutions seem determined to deploy state power to play-act a simulation: "our democracy."

Philosopher Steve Fuller has a different take on the question. Fuller holds that "in the post-truth condition, what matters is not whether something is true or false but how the matter is decided." The present epistemic crisis, that is to say, extends beyond the facts to the *predicates* of facts—the implicit historical frames of reference on which facts must hang. There are no rules to the game because the name of the game has yet to be decided. Fuller compares our moment to the Reformation. The truth-assigning authority of the Church of Experts has been lost, probably forever. Who or what will inherit that authority isn't yet clear.

I find Fuller's account convincing—and its implications far-reaching. The grounds not only of truth but of the institutions that sanctify it have been placed in doubt. Super-credentialed administrators, caught in fraud and falsehood, can no longer adjudicate reality. The Counter-Reformation of the elites, for all its abandonment of liberal ideals, will never close the breach in the public's trust. A great culling of institutions is at hand, propelled by a Darwinian need for structural adaptation. Strange new voices come and go, some of them brilliant and useful, while others resemble the rantings of mad prophets, would-be messiahs, and pirate kings.

The diffusion of AI will compound the turmoil. In most of its possible iterations, AI will be the opposite of a truth machine. To the extent that the platforms acquire a subjective will of their own, they will simply join the melee and seek to impose their preferred frames on their creators. Superior intelligence may exalt them to a status equal to that of the oracles of the Olympian gods—attended, it may be, by a priestly caste of technologists. But to the extent that AI is a mere tool, it will place the totality of human knowledge in the hands of the least educated persons and so hasten the demise of the expert class.

In a post-truth world, every fact and text will be "contested." That is by no means the same as a world ruled by lies. Command over frames of reference, and therefore over the validity of facts, will pass from the institutional producer of information to the humble consumer. It's the ultimate democratization of truth conditions. Specialists and scientists will no longer speak with the voice of God. They will have to persuade. The Enlightenment political style, so full of aggressive certainty and utopian projects, will be replaced by a rhetoric of modesty and plainer but more practicable proposals. There will be less braying about "solving" social or economic "problems," and more talk of trial and error.

I note that a state of perpetual questioning is the true mindset behind the scientific method. From Fuller's explanation, nothing about post-truth refutes or nullifies liberal democracy. On the contrary: it places all citizens on the same epistemic plane and makes democratic agreement on the facts necessary. Under such conditions, the art of persuasion will be developed to the highest degree. Future elites will join rhetorical

mastery to technical expertise. Debates will avoid specialized jargon and will have something of the Athenian assembly about them—ordinary persons will feel emboldened to speak and will be heard attentively. It isn't a paradox to say that the way out of the post-truth condition may be to embrace it.

Born out of the slaughter of the Wars of Religion, Enlightenment ideology was a flight from the transcendental to the instrumental. Christianity, the faith that held Western civilization together, had lost its binding force, provoking sectarian carnage. Only an extreme reorientation of society could prevent a new Dark Age.

Enlightenment thinkers and propagandists successfully grafted Christian ethics onto a world liberated from Christian metaphysics. Reason and science became the new Scripture. The pursuit of happiness took the place of salvation. The goal of society was now, in Steven Pinker's words, "human flourishing." Codified in the procedural arrangements of liberal democracy and the welfare state, all of this came to be interpreted in materialistic terms. Happiness was to be measured in per capita GDP.

The lingering sense of the transcendental—church-going, prayer, an enchanted world—was converted into a matter of personal taste. Meaning was privatized. In time, inevitably, the instrumental swallowed the transcendental. The materialist worldview, invested with the prestige of modern science, was simply too powerful and persuasive for a rival outlook to survive. One was free to believe that angels fluttered in Heaven—but not if one wanted to be taken seriously. The trouble wasn't the death of God but that nothing filled the void. A human being was officially a bundle of dead matter, obedient to the laws of physics—a machine somehow desperate for happiness.

Progress meant affluence, education, personal freedom, equality, inclusion, mobility, "experiments in living," better health, longer lives. The existential and material success of liberal democracy was without precedent in history. Technology and commerce transformed the human condition. Contemporary society would be paradise to past generations.

Yet something was missing. At every step of its pilgrim's progress, Enlightenment ideology met fierce opposition from reactionaries, Romantics, religious believers of every kind, and totalitarians of both left and right. Between the French Revolution and the fall of the Soviet Union, these multifarious groups waged a 200 Years' War to reinsert a higher meaning on a transactional way of life. Hundreds of millions perished; even more lives were stunted or enslaved. The conflict isn't quite over, and likely will never be, but after the discrediting of communism liberal democracy was the last ideology standing—and, free from the fog of war, it could be seen clearly for what it truly was. And something was missing: the system was hollow at the core.

Metaphysics is a mold into which everything in the universe is poured—a form in which every particle of existence finds a place. To the materialist mind, such grand schemes are useless fictions, but they have provided final explanations and spiritual sustenance to the human heart since our remote ancestors crawled into caves and cast their longings at the walls. Liberal democracy makes strong claims on behalf of tolerance, equality, compassion, etc., but such humanistic virtues lack any metaphysical ground. They feel arbitrary and, when tracked to their origins, turn out to be a legacy from the enchanted world of Christianity that reason and science long ago criticized out of existence.

Can a civilization subsist in a vacuum of transcendental meaning? This is an empirical question. The answer is all around us. Starved of spirit and deprived of models, personal identity has disintegrated: we don't know who or what we are—man or woman, oppressed or oppressor, hero or villain. Anxiety, depression, addiction, obesity, homelessness, and "deaths of despair," have taken a terrible toll, particularly among the young. Forty-five percent of Americans aged 14 to 29 "report lacking meaning or purpose or both in their lives." Greta Thunberg, grim archangel of this misbegotten generation, confessed that she "just sat alone at home, with an eating disorder" until by organizing climate protests "I have found a meaning, in a world that sometimes seems shallow and meaningless to so many people."

Thunberg's trajectory is symptomatic: the emptiness must be filled somehow. Women across democratic countries have stopped having babies and flocked to radical causes. Many swoon before a cold-blooded murderer like Luigi Mangione and turn Lindsay Clancy, who strangled her three kids, into a victim of society deserving hugs rather than punishment. The meager emotional payoff from politics merely fuels the sense of grievance and the will to sterility. In South Korea, young women's leftward lurch has opened up a 50-percentage-point ideological gap with young men; not coincidentally, the current fertility rate in that country stands at 0.76 children per woman. The problem of meaning may well be resolved by a civilizational extinction event.

No institutional fixes are available. The old religions are as exhausted as the Enlightenment and increasingly measure their own worth by profane, even pagan, standards. Nor can we will ourselves into a state of grace, any more than we can will a belief in angels. We can't summon a metaphysical revolution as we might a political one.

So what is to be done?

The first, obvious step is to move the question to the center of our shared conversations. The most capacious thinkers of the age should contemplate first principles and ultimate goals with at least as much intensity as they invest in Donald Trump or the latest economic report. There's nothing artificial about this. Science and reason are necessary for modernity. Meaning and moral aspiration are necessary for humanity. A balance must be struck that preserves the one and gives full weight to the other.

Materialism, we must understand, is a valuable perspective for science but not a realistic appraisal of the human condition. Scientists work as if on a geometric point, abstracted from nature and indifferent to its dispositions. In reality, however, we come from nature, we are *of* nature, and we are far from indifferent to our place in it. Our intuitions are internal to the system: humanity's spiritual quest is, in every sense, nature reflecting on itself. One such intuition is agency—the belief that, at the crossroads, I am free to go right or left, and I alone make the choice. Another is faith in causation. These stances are irrational, or rather pre-rational, but without them liberal democracy as well as science itself would be impossible.

In the end, materialism is self-defeating. To say, "I choose to be a materialist" is to fall into an absurd fallacy. Either our bodies, which consist of matter, obey unchanging laws, or the mind, transcending matter, is capable of choice. There can be no middle ground.

Politics, in a metaphysical age, will resume its traditional place as a secondary activity—a means to an end.

This will leave liberal democracy vulnerable to false prophets who are willing to trample on individual rights in pursuit of some apocalyptic scheme. The interesting question is whether the post-truth condition will make the peril greater or lesser. On the one hand, the lack of universal firewalls might make it easier for a fanatic to flood the system. Yet post-truth itself, I believe, is the strongest kind of firewall. In our fractured, eternally contested environment, the progress of any totalizing doctrine will be painfully slow. The quest for meaning and the struggle over frames of reference are, in the end, really one and the same.

We have inherited a rich and evocative spiritual vocabulary, but it belongs to a worldview thousands of years old. “King of kings,” to cite just one example, should sound archaic in a democratic age. Can we awaken the scientific world to the spirit? Is it possible to sanctify our largely instrumental relations? This shouldn’t entail a belief in fairies and goblins, or even necessarily in religion. Any good empiricist will admit that the richest human lives are lived symbolically. Can we climb the symbolic ladder to the mountaintop, where meaning and modern humanity come harmoniously together—anchoring, it may be, a loftier understanding of equality and social life, and of the sanctity of truth?

We won’t know until we try. Pessimism, let me suggest, is unwarranted. History moves in mysterious ways. We may be due for a second coming of historian Karl Jaspers’ “Axial Age”: preachers and philosophers who conceived a drastically updated transcendental vision, with the rational and the sacred, truth and meaning, reconciled with political freedom.

For 200 years, we placed society under the sway of universal principles. That’s gone with the wind. We have entered an era of radical contingency, in which even truth is indeterminate. The natural tendency is to retreat to the certainties of the past—but there’s no going back. If we hope to preserve the gains from Enlightenment society, and resolve its many contradictions, we’ll have to do so within a new and wildly unstable conceptual framework.

With the spell of the Enlightenment broken, liberal democracy will have to redefine what “created equal” means. This process could end in a rigid caste system, with the institutions in the hands of self-selected mandarins who wield the power of the state to impose their “solutions.” Preferably, and more likely given the thrust of the new technology, we’ll see a flattening of the institutions and the continued trampling by the public into the sacred spaces of politics and communication.

Equality, however understood, will be forged in the will of the citizenry rather than granted by a benevolent God. That will make it contingent like everything else, and so liable to variation and in constant need of defense. And if perfect equality is an impossible dream, eternal inequality requires impossible discipline. The current elite class, already under enormous pressure, may lose its cohesion and melt into the impermanence of the age, divided among the various schools and sects and frames of reference.

The structure of information will follow the definition of equality. The commanding heights will be control over AI. If AI development and deployment is a closed game, the elites could set themselves up as intermediaries in the oracle of an omniscient divinity. If AI is a competitive product, the public will gain the upper hand. In that case, we can expect a flowering of eccentric applications, the individualization of commerce and industry, and the final overthrow of the expert class. The information sphere will remain the

mirror to our passions, divisions, and metaphysical longings. Freedom of speech, no longer “endowed by our Creator,” will become the battleground on which the question of equality is ultimately settled.

Here I finally reveal myself in my true colors. I’m an analyst. My task is to describe reality, and that’s what this essay is about. But I also lead an active life inside the world that I’m describing—and I have preferences. I see equality as a factor of opportunity, law, and human dignity, not of perfect outcomes. I think truth emerges from examining a subject from a large number of perspectives, even those that may seem disturbing or false. I hope that my story—as a person, a father, a grandfather—connects to other stories in the past and will connect to more in the future, in a pattern that is not entirely devoid of meaning. And I believe fervently in liberal democracy, because—born in Cuba—I have tasted the alternative.

The breakdown of Enlightenment ideology is only the latest challenge liberal democracy has faced in my lifetime. I’m not entitled, as an analyst, to downplay the perils ahead, but I’m allowed, as an American, to have faith that they will once again be overcome.

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