

The Spirit of Democracy and the future of the Earth.

The most interesting thing about responsibility is that we carry it around everywhere

Vaclav Havel, author of *Living in Truth*, quoted
in Timothy Snyder's introduction to Havel's *The Power of the Powerless*.

In his latest book, *Choosing Earth*, about "*Humanity's Journey of Initiation Through Breakdown and Collapse to Mature Planetary Community*", ¹ Duane Elgin, who wrote the classic *Voluntary Simplicity* back in 1981, ² suggests we - the human race - have three choices this century - **functional extinction, authoritarianism or transformation**. ³ Climate scientists are unanimous about the prospect of a hellish future if we continue with fossil-fuel business-as-usual. Survival would seem to depend now either on giving power to a strong, authoritarian leader, or transforming ourselves to create a society that is based on freedom, truth, and goodwill. Choosing the latter is about seeing democracy as a way of life, not just a political system.

It's a no-brainer, of course. As Elgin notes, where democracies might sometimes be cumbersome and slow in their decision-making, autocratic governments can be swift and decisive because they need take little notice of public views, when faced with a crisis. The disadvantages of authoritarian governments, however, include, as we know, "the oppression of minorities, the suppression of free association and expression, and the stifling of creative innovation". Elgin added that "authoritarian societies also have higher rates of mental illness, and lower levels of physical health and life expectancy". ⁴ Today we also think of them as "digital dictatorships", given the totalitarian use of surveillance - and violent policing - to guarantee the domination of whole populations.

As Ken Wilber, the American philosopher of consciousness and perennial wisdom, insisted, there is a clear distinction between dominator and growth hierarchies. ⁵ We, in the modern West, have outlawed the idea of hierarchy itself, associating it wholly with authoritarianism, but liberal cultures, like nature, have their own natural hierarchies. We might call it difference. And difference doesn't need to divide. On the contrary it can connect. Nor does it imply inequality. We are all

¹ Duane Elgin, *CHOOSING EARTH: Humanity's Journey of Initiation Through Breakdown and Collapse to Mature Planetary Community*, Preface by Francis Weller, Revised Edition, 2022.

² Duane Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life that is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich*, Second Revised Edition, 1993 (1981). This book should be compulsory reading for all politicians, particularly for the view that "austerity" is not just an economic issue.

³ See Elgin, 2022, Part 11, "Three Futures for Humanity", pp 42-57

⁴ Ibid. p 51

⁵ See Ken Wilber, *Trump and a Post-Truth World*, 2017, pp 99-111.

equal in absolute terms. We are all born and die. But in relative terms we are all different, have unique qualities and abilities, and contribute with infinite diversity to the societies we create.

Democracy on retreat

There are more and more books being written today about the “end” - or death - of democracy, with particular reference to the former election of Donald Trump in the States or the rise of authoritarian regimes across the globe. And, as a reaction to the “triumph” of liberal democracy at the crumbling of the Iron Curtain and the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union, hailing, as Francis Fukuyama seemed to do in his premature essay, “The End of History”, there have been analyses of what Edward Luce described as *The Retreat of Western Liberalism*.⁶ In the early 1990s we may have witnessed the end of the Soviet Union but, perhaps, we also have to put to bed our traditional ideas of Liberalism and Democracy for something new to emerge.

In the twenty-first century and towards the end of the twentieth, liberalism has been criticised from both Right and Left, both for the Right’s neoliberal insistence that economic growth is the only sort of growth there is, and for the Left’s tendency to bolster individual identity politics at the expense of any systemic or integrated view. The British Conservative Party, as it is currently constituted, is now, in many people’s views, an anachronism, since its ideological belief in neoliberalist economics - as the very short-lived experimental administration of Liz Truss and Kwazi Kwarteng demonstrated - has been exposed for the inadequate and misguided doctrine it is.

In Britain we have lived in a two-party state, and now that the Conservative Party is finally exposed and it’s policies hopelessly out of touch - austerity as a failed ethical and economic policy, growth interpreted only in economic terms - that leaves only Labour, which, in one of its progressive and practical politician’s, Lisa Nandy’s view, can hopefully present us with “a government that works”.⁷ But, at the same time, Labour needs to move beyond pure two-party oppositional politics and relinquish its traditional tribalism and symbiotic relationship with the Tories. What we need is a representative, multi-party state. Perhaps it is time for real proportional representation. And for a truly progressive alliance,⁸ not simply as a political party apparatus, but some kind of consensus amongst all parties about what a fair, just, ethical, democratic society should be.

⁶ Edward Luce, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism*, with an *Afterword: Present at the Deconstruction*, 2018.

⁷ Lisa Nandy, *ALL IN: How We Build a Country that Works*, Manchester: HarperNorth, 2022

⁸ Lisa Nandy, Caroline Lucas, and Chris Bowers (editors), *The Alternative: Towards a New Progressive Politics*, 2016. A “Progressive Politics” shouldn’t forget that economic growth is important, but not the whole meaning of growth, nor that there aren’t also progressive politicians in the Conservative Party’s ranks.

Liberalism and its transformation

The political philosopher, John Gray, in *Enlightenment's Wake*,⁹ could be said to have recognised this and argued that “the Enlightenment Project”, as it is now known and which still underpins much of contemporary thinking in Britain, is an outdated European answer to problems of a global nature. He also proposed, however, that liberalism has “two faces”, one with a limited, European and purely Christian outlook, while the other takes a more pluralist, tolerant and multi-cultural view in the twenty-first century.¹⁰

Fukuyama, himself, in his latest book, *Liberalism and its Discontents*,¹¹ has owned his former celebration of “the end of history” as misguided, but defended the historical importance of the European and North American liberal tradition, embracing, as it does, the crucial principles of the rule of law, independence of judges, freedom of the press, and equality of respect. The point surely is that we are witnessing, not the end of liberal democracy so much as its potential transformation.

Lessons for democracy

One of the qualities of democracy is that it can learn from its mistakes but, as David Runciman points out in *The Confidence Trap*,¹² this can lead to complacency and the belief that all crises can be muddled through - until democracy meets one that cannot. Perhaps democracy, as modern culture perceives it - in its political form - is no longer adequate to the challenges of the twenty-first century. The climate emergency, rather than authoritarian regimes alone, may yet be its nemesis. In *How Democracy Ends* Runciman develops this theme further and wonders if there might be “something better after democracy”.¹³

What I am arguing is, not that we look for something better after democracy but that we transform democracy itself. In doing this, several insights in particular need to be faced. Firstly, that an authoritarian, or totalitarian, politics needs to be seen for what it is - not something over against us in the West, but a mirroring of something within ourselves. It is perhaps difficult to view ex-President Trump as reflecting something in our own image but he has, unwittingly and, perhaps paradoxically, drawn the attention of the West to the consumerist short-comings of its “freedom”.

⁹ John Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake: Politics and culture at the close of the modern age*, 2007 (1995)

¹⁰ John Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism*, 2000.

¹¹ Francis Fukuyama, *Liberalism and Its Discontents*, 2022

¹² David Runciman, *The Confidence Trap: A History of Democracy in Crisis from World War 1 to the Present*, 2013

¹³ David Runciman, *How Democracy Ends*, 2019, 2018

It was also the press which was obsessed with Trump as a phenomenon and helped to get him elected. Again, his insistence on “fake news” brought many to the speedy realisation that there is such a thing as truth, even if we have difficulty deciding what it is. Pankaj Mishra, in his early book, *The Temptations of the West*, identified the consumerism and brand obsessiveness of Western, modern culture in 2006. ¹⁴ In looking in the cultural mirror, the West would do well to think again, from a systemic point of view, about the part it plays in the rise of all authoritarian figures, yes, including dictators such as Hitler and Stalin, a point which Mishra makes in his more recent *Age of Anger*, a book written about Western culture from an Eastern perspective. ¹⁵ The same would apply to Vladimir Putin, whose paranoia gives credence to that well-known saying of Lord Acton that “All power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely”. Perhaps we could use the psychological knowledge of the modern world to analyse our own unconscious states of paranoia, as well as see it in the minds of others across the world.

A further insight for democracy is, not just to wake up to the climate emergency we all face, but to be honest about the feelings associated with it. Denial about climate change may be masking fears and terrors, as well as a felt sense of inadequacy in meeting the challenge, but before we can think creatively about how we might respond, we first need to own these feelings, including the massive sense of sorrow at the present condition of the Earth and the immense fear at the danger of our apparent exit from it. ¹⁶

The democratic spirit

It is a considerable irony that the one country that values a democratic way of life, not just because they are dying for it in numbers, but because the very actual landscape of their nationhood stands to be erased, is a European country that is not in the Union. Ukraine is not afraid of the Russian dictatorship and is showing the West that the latter’s fears, if not ungrounded, are, at the least, exaggerated. Professor Timothy Snyder, an authority on the history of Eastern Europe, in his arguments against the power of tyranny and in his historical Yale lectures about the political and cultural background to Putin’s criminal invasion of Ukraine, emphasises what democracy has to offer in the face of authoritarian rule, by way of truth and ethics alone. ¹⁷ This also partly explains why Ukraine appears so resilient against Russian aggression. The Yelenskis - man and wife - appear to be remarkable leaders of a resolute and single-minded democratic people.

¹⁴ Pankaj Mishra, *Temptations of the West: How to Be Modern in India, Pakistan, Tibet, and Beyond*, 2006

¹⁵ Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger*, 2017.

¹⁶ See Elgin 2022, the “Preface: At the Threshold: Grief, Initiation, and Transformation” by Francis Weller.

¹⁷ See Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, 2017 and *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*, 2018.

When thinking about the resourcefulness of a democratic mind and way of life, it is well to remember the spirit that emerged out of the twentieth century wars that culminated in the defeat of Totalitarianism in 1945 - for example, the Marshall plan in America, the progressive global values of the UN, and the Welfare State in Britain. At the same time, Jean Gebser, the German poet and cultural philosopher, wrote a large book in the early nineteen fifties - comparable to Oswald Spengler's *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*¹⁸ after the First World War - which was optimistic rather than pessimistic. In his book Gebser illustrated how we could be experiencing, despite all the conflict in the world, a new form of consciousness that sounded an integral note rather than cultural divisiveness.¹⁹

Jean Gebser and a new consciousness

Gebser's view of history emphasised the evolution of forms of consciousness rather than simply the cyclical birth and death of civilisations. He identified these as ranging from archaic, magical and mythic structures to rational and integrated cultures and suggested how, by embracing an integral consciousness, we could see ourselves moving from the modern twentieth century to a truly post-modern and integral twenty-first. In Gebser's view these structures were not essentially discrete in any linear sense, but nested, one within another. Nor were they subject to finite time. Magical, mythic, or rational thinking, for instance, were characteristic of all cultures throughout, though dominant themes could, of course, be discerned in any particular society.

The twentieth century explored magical and mythic phenomena, but separated them from the scientific and rational thought of modern times. The structure of consciousness in an integral age seeks to re-synthesise them all and show how the spirit of the twenty-first century is an inclusive one. "Politics", for instance, is not separate from other human activities and values. Moreover, economics, politics, science, the arts, psychology, and ethics - every human endeavour - might be transformed by a new integrative spirit. Elgin identifies how this transformation of values is happening with a series of what he calls "uplifts". He suggests, for instance, how we might "choose" to communicate better - with maturity and reconciliation - and establish a new sense of community and simplicity of living but, in case the word "uplift" may be felt to be merely aspirational, he emphasises how a new sense of aliveness and of consciousness gives these

¹⁸ Oswald Spengler *The Decline of the West*, English translation, abridged edition, prepared in English by Arthur Helps from the translation by Charles Francis Atkinson, introduced by H. Stuart Hughes, 1991/1926.

¹⁹ Jean Gebser, Jean Gebser, *The Ever Present Origin. PART ONE: Foundations of the Aperspectival World. A Contribution to the History of the Awakening of Consciousness. PART TWO: Manifestations of the Aperspectival World. An Attempt at the Concretion of the Spiritual.* Authorised Translation by Noel Barstad with Algis Mickunas, Ohio University Press, 1985. The original German was entitled *Ursprung and Gegenwart*, the two parts published in 1949 and 1953. See also Georg Feuerstein, *The Structures of Consciousness. The Genius of Jean Gebser. An Introduction and Critique.* Lower Lake, California: Integral, 1987, for a clear account of Gebser's innovative thinking.

“choices” a new reality that goes beyond the individual and fragmented endeavours of modern materialist culture.

“Aliveness”

In 2009, Elgin published a book entitled *The Living Universe* in which he suggested that, far from being purely material and mechanical, the universe was very alive and much more interesting and mysterious than orthodox twentieth century science had led us to imagine. ²⁰ In other words, the universe was not a dead and lifeless phenomenon, and nor are we. We are a part of, rather than apart from it. For Elgin - and many others - this was a transformative breakthrough, a new awareness of consciousness. From “choosing” an alive universe and a transformed consciousness, other breakthroughs in a transformed world could emerge.

Waking up and growing up

Wilber offered the insight that enlightenment today involves the combination of “waking up” and “growing up”. ²¹ Waking up is a contemplative practice, known by most non-Western or non-modern cultures as an awakening tradition, whether through shamanistic practices or theist or non-theist religions. It is a sense of the sacredness of all things, which modern cultures have lost a connection with. Elgin’s sense of “aliveness”, the experience of a “living universe”, is the West’s return to this awareness. It is an awakening to the Universe as a unified, living process.

What is often overlooked, however, is the sense in which the modern West - since the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment, but particularly in the twentieth century - grew up. Science, in particular, has examined the world and the universe microscopically and cosmologically, accumulating considerable material knowledge and imaginative insight thereby. At the same time, politically and socially, the European Enlightenment, as the historian, Jonathan Israel, described, was responsible for a *Revolution of the Mind*, which challenged traditional feudal or mythic regimes with their theocratic and aristocratic beliefs. ²² Wilber makes the point that the twenty-first century is the first time the two principles of waking up and growing up are joined as an evolutionary breakthrough. This is a new enlightenment. We live, as Elgin reminds us, in a regenerative universe and are constantly regenerated ourselves. Evolution is not just a biological phenomenon of nature, but a mind and cosmic process, and we are ourselves an integral feature of it.

²⁰ Duane Elgin, *The Living Universe: Where Are We? Who Are We? Where Are We Going?* 2009

²¹ Ken Wilber, *The Religion of Tomorrow: A Vision for the Future of the Great Traditions*, 2017. See the Introduction and Part 1: “A Fourth Turning of the Dharma” in this serious update on “the structures of consciousness”, “shadow work”, and “integral spirituality”.

²² Jonathan Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy*, 2010.

If extinction is truly, as Elgin asserts, one of our possible futures, then, just as we are the cause of the climate and ecological emergency, so we could be its salvation. An integral consciousness is aware of the powerful effect small actions can have, as chaos theory confirms. Everyone can play his or her part. Just, as in a heating system, the thermostat can change everything. Perhaps the thermostat for the Earth's temperature today is *Homo sapiens* itself - a transformed men and women.

A regenerated democracy is more powerful than we realise. The puffed-up claims of a narcissistic Trump or the paranoid cruelty and delusion of a Putin, are really no match in the end for a true democracy and its essential values, as Ukraine is demonstrating and Biden has shown. We need to have faith in it. Immanuel Kant, the founder of modern consciousness, drew attention in his Critiques of Practical (ethical) Reason, Pure Reason, and Judgement to what the ancient Greeks called the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. But these values must be allowed to be generated and reside in the hearts and minds of all the people - the actual *demos*, women and men, all races, all classes - who embody the unified principles of ethics, truth, and the sublime in all their creative activities, not just in the political realm. Democracy can then be a true and powerful way of life.

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