Hope and Democracy

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Democracy rests on a vision. And all visions require hope. But it is not clear whether there is any deep or inherent affinity between the politics of democracy and the politics of hope. This is puzzling since in today’s world, the hope of becoming democratic is offered to many societies, even if this requires them to be invaded and remade at high cost to human life. Yet the relationship of hope, as an ethical and political principle, to the primary values of democracy is unclear.

Let us consider democracy first from the point of view of the slogan “liberty, equality, fraternity.” Each of these values rests on the possibility that they are, in fact, achievable. Indeed, the slogan as a whole rests on the idea that these values are facts that have somehow been concealed or bypassed by human history and require only the sustained operation of reason for them to become transparent, compelling, and victorious. Yet none of these three values has anything special to do with hope, except in the instrumental sense that their appeal rests on the possibility that they are achievable. In this sense, democracy requires hope but does not seem to be built on it.

Let us consider democracy apart from its slogans and more from the point of view of its governing concepts. These concepts include some utilitarian ones, such as those of the greatest good of the greatest number; some practical ones, such as the idea of active participation in deliberation and decision making; and some moral ones, such as the idea of “the rule of law.” None of these governing concepts has anything special to say about hope.

This short argument is elaborated in two books in progress: the first is titled The Capacity to Aspire and is an ethnography of hope in a transnational social movement; the other is The Quality of Life, an argument for a vision of human development that puts aspiration and imagination at the core of sustainable social change. I am grateful to Dilip Gaonkar for provoking me to write on this topic and for many exchanges that have enriched the argument.
Looking back to the twentieth century, the idea of rights — possibly the single most powerful idea to connect ethics, arguments, and mass politics — takes its full place as a central principle of democracy in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights enacted by the United Nations in 1948. After this date, a central strand of democratic politics and of the politics of war and peace has been the question of human rights and its interpretation by individuals, by courts, and by countries. The idea of human rights or the rights of man brings us closer to the field of hope, since it is about claims that rest on universal capacities, aspirations, and possibilities. Even with rights, however, the bearers of rights are regarded as makers of arguments and claimants to public goods rather than as agents of hope. The discourse of rights does not fully engage that space between is and ought that is the address of hope as a collective sentiment.

The need for a deeper articulation between the languages of democracy and the politics of hope grows out of the mass politics of the twentieth century. In fact, if hope is about possibilities rather than about probabilities, it is intimately connected to what José Ortega y Gasset (1932) called “the revolt of the masses.” In the twentieth century — particularly in Europe through the transformation of the working and poor classes, in the United States largely through the efforts of popular, labor-based movements, and in the rest of the world through anticolonial and mass nationalist struggles — the politics of hope became gradually distinguished from utopian, messianic, and millenarian movements for change (which form the prehistory of hope as a democratic sentiment) on the one hand, and the politics of prudence, pragmatism, and policy on the other. Each of these in some way involves hope, of course, but in the utopian case, hope is inflated into hyperconviction, and in the case of planned change, hope is circumscribed by the metrics of the possible. The politics of hope, as such, may be said to emerge in the space between these other ideologies of social transformation.

The link of hope to mass politics is a response to the realization that democracy without full popular participation is a form of oligarchy. The great struggles of the twentieth century, including some of its great wars, were about the meaning of the idea of “the people” in an age of mass politics. The Communist revolutions of Russia and China and Nazism in Germany are examples of special interpretations of mass politics. For all their pathologies, these regimes were built on the idea that the rule of the people is the central ideological justification for the existence of strong states.

There is a deeper reason for the realignment of the politics of participation with the politics of hope in the middle of the twentieth century. This is the new consciousness of global poverty as a measurable social fact (partly produced by
the disciplines of demography, development economics, and social statistics) whose amelioration had been introduced into the core vocabulary of the Enlightenment through the twin languages of development and modernization. These mid-twentieth-century projects, which became part and parcel of the Western answer to post–World War II reconstruction, put a new emphasis on equality as a measure of social welfare and therefore made the elimination of global poverty a fundamental test of universal social policy. Joining with the ideology of human rights, the newly formed disciplines of demography, welfare economics, and developmental-oriented social science created a new foundation for the politics of hope, now understood as the closing of the gap between the poor and the wealthy in all societies.

Thus, starting at the end of World War II, the inner meaning of equality as a fundamental value of democracy became enhanced. Retaining its original sense of fundamental human sameness, and the idea that all humans had a right to rule (the antimonarchic heritage), equality acquired a powerful secondary meaning having to do with the elimination of poverty. While these two meanings have remained broadly compatible in many expert discourses as well as in many popular discourses, there are growing strains between them, as is evident in the gap between the sharp market orientation of liberty as articulated by the Republican Right in the United States along with its allies elsewhere and the welfare orientation toward equality as stressed by many popular social movements throughout the world.

Today, as a consequence, the politics of hope has an ambiguous relationship to the core values of democracy, since the relationship of freedom to equality in core democratic discourse has itself become ambiguous. Insofar as the market is seen as one road to freedom (and thus to some version of equality), it is not especially reliant on the politics of hope, substituting for hope such virtues as risk taking, institution building, enterprise, and calculation, all prime virtues in the early lexicon of industrial capitalism. Insofar as social development (including a deeper consciousness of rights, broader access to knowledge, and fuller participation in the public sphere) is taken to be the best road to equality (seen as the reduction or elimination of poverty), the politics of hope has become essential to democratic theory and practice on the ground.

The best place to see this new linkage of participation to social transformation is in the currency of such terms as participation, empowerment, and capacity building in the mainstream discourses of the World Bank and in a host of national, international, and multilateral institutions committed to the reduction of poverty. Each of these terms implies a general politics of hope, built on the
premise that human suffering and misery require primary ethical and practical attention, and that their amelioration cannot be viewed as a by-product of the free workings of the light of reason or liberty.

This is the major ethical shift that has occurred in the theory and practice of democracy between the late eighteenth century and the late twentieth century. The underlying enemy of the great eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers was the exclusion of most people from politics—the problem of tyranny. By the late twentieth century, this strand of democratic thought remains vital (as can be seen in the widespread agreement that Saddam Hussein deserved to be brought down as a tyrant). But the far more widespread, popular, and varied version of the eighteenth-century view is that the real enemy is poverty, poverty on a scale that fundamentally alters the very conditions of bare life—health, security, bodily integrity—for vast portions of the world’s population. This second view of the biggest obstacle to democracy—which amounts to a change in the very meaning of democracy—is the basis for a politics of hope that has also transformed the currency of democratic practices.

This fundamental change should not be confused with a much older tradition in democratic thought, going back to the Greeks, that regards economic well-being as the prerequisite for autarchy, a view that can be seen as recently as Thomas Jefferson’s ideas about the yeoman farmer as the backbone of democracy. It is true that democratic thought long had a deep resistance to mass or universal participation on the grounds that the deficits that accompanied lack of economic independence were a fatal drag on the power of citizens to deliberate, legislate, and govern. In this tradition of democratic thought, either poorer citizens (workers, laborers, slaves, women, children, migrants) were viewed as unfortunate victims of the play of the market (what later becomes the hard republican position about winners and losers), or they were viewed as worthy of education and social welfare so as to improve their (long-term) capacity to become full citizens. In both views, economic equality was not an end but rather a means to the creation of a more inclusive deliberative citizenry.

The twentieth-century revolution that I am concerned with does not take this instrumental view of economic equality. Rather it makes participation (and its particular expressions in deliberation, legislation, and governance) a right without regard to current capacity, and thus it eliminates altogether the idea of any sort of privileged group of citizens. Put in the sharpest terms, the new currency of democratic politics, stimulated by the emergence of poverty as a primary and measurable social ill and by the worldwide growth in mass agitational politics, makes participation the path to capacity rather than the reverse. By putting participation
first, the road is opened for the mass electorate to define its own politics of equality, without the prior requirement of acquiring special capacities or qualifications. The engine of this ethical reversal, which puts a primary normative value on mass participation, is the idea that economic equality cannot be achieved without mass politics. This reversal places a new value on the politics of hope, since it promises that mass participation in democratic politics can provide a more direct route to economic equality than the path of gradually improved qualifications for citizenship.

Today, this politics of hope is best seen in the galactic explosion of civil society movements that frequently involve alliances between highly localized movements. These networks, organizations, alliances, and movements (each of these words captures only some of the new reality) make some use of the conventional practices of democracy, such as open legislative deliberation, regular elections at multiple levels of the polity, fair and full representation, and a vigorous sense of the accountability of rulers to the ruled. But they also have brought into being a whole new range of practices that allow poor people to exercise their imaginations for participation. These practices include techniques for self-education; methods for gaining economic dignity through devices such as micro-credit; affordable technological practices (such as rain harvesting and cooperative buying and selling); community-based organization of health, security, and infrastructure; and ways of pressuring state and party officials to act on basic needs without falling into one or other version of machine patronage and vote-bank politics. In all these forms of democratic politics, hope is tied up with scaled exercises in building what I have elsewhere called “the capacity to aspire” (Appadurai 2004), with strategic techniques of alliance across national borders and with affordable methods for building up local resources for self-government and poverty reduction. I have also elsewhere described examples of such practices as involving the politics of patience (Appadurai 2002).

The patience required to engage the daunting scale and effects of mass poverty is the key to the special relation between hope and democratic politics at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Hope now is a collectively mobilized resource that defines a new terrain between the temptations of utopia and the arrogance of technocratic solutions to change. Thus, in the many transnational civil society movements that seek to bring about a new relationship between the quality of life and the standard of living, especially for the world’s poorest populations, democratic theory has been forced to account for a problem that it did not originally regard as susceptible to human intervention—the ubiquity of human misery. As a form of ethics and of politics, democracy must now measure its suc-
cess not only against tyranny but also against misery, while adding to its methods the strategies of hope.

References

