

Quote number 4 by Martha Nussbaum

When people have a lack of confidence regarding the government and the institutions, no certainties and no stability, they will be prone to believe lies and will be more vulnerable for demagoguery. This is because of both the naïve nature of people and in case of a feeling of general malaise, their despair. Yet, not only the people should be blamed for this mistrust. Nowadays, constitutions and former certitudes have vanished. Our society is no longer a community but rather a collection of individuals. Also the conception of truth is no longer as fixed and solid as it used to be. People have also been granted liberty, which requires experience deal with. Since our freedom is still relatively young this also leaves people disorientated. All these forms of alienation definitely cause circumstances in which people will be more vulnerable for demagogues promising radical change.

Next to that, also the economic circumstances should be taken into account. History has shown us that poverty is always a breeding ground for demagoguery. When the people are desperate, demagoguery is on the rise. Economic certainty entails political serenity.

After having found out what the sources of this phenomenon are and who is responsible for it, it is possible to proceed to the question how this problem can be solved and how the influence of feelings and of demagoguery can be reduced. But first of all we should ask ourselves if this problem can be solved at all.

Despite the fact that Nussbaum might be right on the Ancient Greeks being easy to mislead, it should be noted that modern day democracies have very few in common with the Athenians, both regarding the political system and the people's state of mind.

First of all, the Athenians did not elect politicians, but voted laws themselves. The fact that we elect people who will represent us is a considerable difference. It is true that we can elect demagogues and incompetent people, but the parliamentary system can be considered as a barrier against demagoguery, since it definitely prevents the so-called 'rule of the masses'.

When in a situation of powerlessness, people turning towards demagoguery is a quasi-natural reaction. Nowadays, there are many things that can prevent people from believing everything they hear. A very ambiguous one is the fact that everyone has because of the internet almost immediate access to knowledge. Ideally, this would mean that everyone can check if things presented as facts really are and is able to inform himself on what they are voting for. On the other hand, this is one of the factors that gave rise to the so-called 'post-truth-era' (next the shading meaning of the conception of 'truth'). Since everyone can spread his opinion, without having to document it, it is no longer clear what is true and what isn't. Secularization entailed a climate in which people have to give shape to several things such as

moral values and truth by themselves and are no longer part of a system that arranges all that.

Demagoguery influences society in two ways: first of all, it affects the minds of the people and as a consequence of that, their ideas will be translated into policies. In order to restrict the influence of superficial political opinions, there can be two 'lines of defense'. First of all, it should be made harder to let people be convinced of these ideas and secondly extreme and dangerous ideas should be prevented from being made into laws. This all sounds quite simple, but it should all happen without affecting the basic values of a democracy.

Among those basic values, governing according to the will of the people, respecting the rights of minorities, guaranteeing free speech and a general respect of human rights, are the fundamental ones. One could say that democracy has the same structure as a Greek temple, since it is supported by multiple pillars. The absence of one of those pillars causes the collapse of the entire temple.

It is, as I said, important to avoid the so-called 'rule of the masses', which contains imposing no restrictions to the voice of the people at all. On the other hand, it should be noted that a democracy also implies a constant 'battle of ideas'. This 'battle' is not fought in politics, but rather on a higher, meta-political level. Restricting ideas that are being considered 'aberrant' would be an enormous mistake, since there always is one 'paradigm' that is dominant and, as Gramsci put it "possesses the cultural hegemony'. Nowadays, democracy is evident and only few will really question its value, but in the past, democracy, freedom of speech, the abolishment of slavery and so on all were the 'aberrant' ideas. Progress can only be made by allowing new ideas to gain popularity. All moral values depend of the ruling paradigm, but, as I said, it should not be questioned that democracy is superior. A parliamentary system offers an equilibrium between the different values

A major problem rises when the will of the people does not correspond to the other values. If a majority is willing to disrespect human rights, a paradox comes into being, since respect of human rights and the sovereignty of the people, which allows people to govern over themselves, are equal. The question if there should be made a distinction between more and less important would be impossible to answer. Therefore, it should be prevented that the will of the people doesn't correspond to human rights. This can only be done by raising people's awareness.

The decline of the Greek city-states after Alexander's conquest left the people shattered and desperate, since participating in politics gave their life meaning. Today, the ideologies and philosophies that tried to enclose every aspect of people's life, have lost. Nussbaum used the descriptions of the problems Athenian democracy suffered from to criticize our society and there are indeed a lot of comparable situations. Nevertheless it is wrong to use people's vulnerability for demagoguery in ancient Greece as a pretext to say that demagoguery is inherently connected to democracy.

Nussbaum is very pessimistic since she believes there can be no democracy without demagoguery. It would be naïve to believe people will always be able to distinguish truth and manipulative rhetoric disguised as truth, but it definitely is wrong to state that they are fully responsible for this. I believe demagoguery is not part of democracy, it only appears in its early stages. If we look at the world history, democracy is still very young, so it is normal that it faces problems. By raising the political and moral consciousness people will not be as vulnerable to empty rhetoric as they were in times when only the wealthy could afford education and information. The solution to the question how to deal with demagoguery is not unambiguous, but raising the economic standards definitely is a necessary part of it. By doing so, people will first of all have less reasons to believe smooth talkers promising heaven. Next to that they will, education also be better armed against what Nussbaum calls "moving rhetoric but bad arguments". This proves philosophy has an important role to play in raising the awareness of people, providing tools to unmask empty rhetoric and let democracy grow up by answering still unsolved problems.