

## Passionate Meanderings: Explorations of Life, Learning, & Relationships



CREDIT: Harold Altman (1962) *Conversations* — From: Whitney Museum of American Art

# Democracy or What?

by Jeff Bloom

---

CATEGORIES: community, complexity, organizations-groups, politics, schooling, social issues.

---

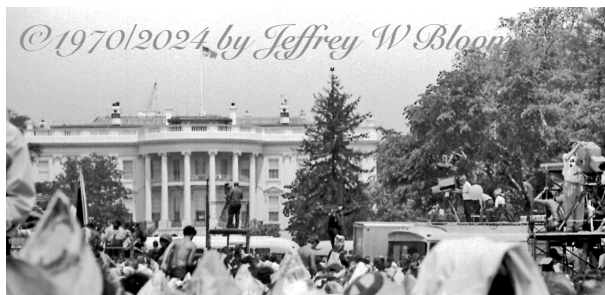
I've been pondering "democracy" lately. I don't know why ... just joking, of course.

What we're witnessing here in the U.S. and in many other "democratic" nations is a test of the limits and flexibility of democratic forms of government and their abilities to deal with subversive processes from within any particular nation. And, we may even be witnessing the collapse of democracy.

Democracy is certainly not a perfect form of government, and is flawed in many ways. But, I can't think of a better form of government, especially for societies that do not have a long history of some alternative way of organizing a society. Graeber and Wengrow, in the book *The Dawn of Everything*, [1] describe a number of alternatives that appeared among pre-1490's Native American nations. But, these approaches to maintaining societies are long gone. I have friends who are adamant anarchists, which, by the way, does not necessarily mean "chaotic." Most societies in the world of hierarchic, which is a way of organizing layers of society, in this case, with the most powerful at the top and the least powerful, you guessed it, at the bottom. Anarchy is basically flat; a society with only one layer. This concept is often used to describe a lawless and leaderless societal context. But, a one layer society is not necessarily lawless, nor leaderless. The Native American nations I just mentioned were very much single-layer societies. They had "chiefs" or some sort of "leader," but if the leader said, "It's time to move to another location," if some people didn't want to leave, they didn't; and it wasn't a big deal to anyone, including the leader. Like many aboriginal societies, they didn't have explicit laws with punishments, but had commonly agreed upon "rules" of behavior. If someone did something that broke these rules, it usually resulted in some sort of negotiated remediation. [2] In one of Maybury-Lewis' examples, a tribal society in Africa, had

unwritten rules about certain behaviors, like stealing. In one case, a young man stole some food from another family. The “punishment” was to be stoned to death by the villagers, unless the perpetrator apologized and asked for forgiveness. Apparently, no one in history had been stoned to death. This examples points to something that is critical to single-layered societies, as well as to all societies, especially to those who aspire to working democracies.

Democracies in our contemporary world are all hierarchical. But, the essence of democracy is not necessarily layered in this way. Arthur Koestler [3] suggested a different type of layering, he called *holarchy*, which involves embedded layers. Tyler Volk [4] further elaborated on this notion of holarchy as found in nature, such as the



layers of the Earth or the layering of rose petals. I’ve elaborated further on holarchies as ways of organizing classroom communities.[5] In my use of the idea of holarchies, the context is flatten with layers of participation through which students or citizens in a holarchic society can move back and forth. in a classroom the full participation[6], which occupies the central layer, is occupied by the teacher, but students are invited and expected to move into that central layer of full participation. This movement across layers is not a “permanent” or even necessarily a long-term commitment, but one that is much more fluid. Students or community members can move across layers as needed or as contextual events change or whatever. In a sense, this is exactly what a pure



democracy might look like. The leader, at least initially or at least initially as a single individual, is more of a model of full participation. After established, such a community, in the case of classrooms, all participants or members of the community share leadership, control, ownership, and other attributes.

The essential “ingredient” in holarchic-type communities is *relationship*. Relationships are not just knowing someone to whatever degree, but involve a number of other attributes or features that we hardly ever discuss or learn in any substantial way. We have to learn how to listen, really listen, to others. We have to learn how to talk to one another in ways that are truly respectful. We have to learn how to disagree and criticize ideas while not criticizing the person who espouses those ideas. We have to learn to be empathetic. other personal and social features or abilities we need to develop include: (a) being responsible and taking responsibility; (b) integrity; (c) questioning; (d) confidence (but not arrogance), (e)

being vulnerable and strong, (f) valuing diversity and variation, (g) caring about and for others and the community, (h) awareness of one's own and others' metamessages and their effect on self and others, (i) awareness of the symbols, signs, or messages that are communicated in one's environments and contexts and their effects of self and others; (j) how to deal with conflict as a learning process and in ways that are respect and value those involved; (k) how deal with emotions in ways that see and appreciate their value, as well as in ways that elucidate their problems and issues in different types of situations; and (l) many other features and abilities.[7] Our schools, religious organizations, and pretty much all other institutions, organizations, and families do not do a very good job, if any job at all, at helping children develop these features and attributes of being a participant in one's society and its sub-groups.

Your reaction to a flatter organization, such as the brief description of a holarchic classroom, is, and probably should be, "that'll never work." If you reacted that way, you're probably right, at least in terms of our present political situation in time and space. Holarchic classrooms and schools do exist, but scaling up is another story. Viable and long-lasting social organizations can not just be created and expected to work from the get-go. The aboriginal societies that had such organizational schemes developed over centuries. And, they had a consistency within their cultures that provided a sort of theoretical and social belief framework that manifested in all aspects of their lives. However, once contact occurred across widely different cultures, that consistency of belief and activity was strained, and often collapsed rather quickly.

That still present, but shrinking, optimistic part of me, still holds out some hope for creating a better way of organizing our societies. Tinkering with social structures generally has no positive lasting effect, and usually creates more unanticipated problems. Such failures are usually due to trying to find a "fix" to a specific problem, without really addressing the multiple contexts and systems at play in any seemingly "specific" problem. The singular fix or solution approach that we take, over and over again, just makes a further mess. We haven't learned that lesson, and find our selves on a perpetual quest for one solution to each problem.

So, here we are with societies under incredible pressure towards collapse, which is made worse by the repeated attempts to find a quick fix. And, even a complete, multi-contextual or transcontextual approach to addressing all of the intertwined and interdependent issues across all contexts won't work, at least not immediately or even on short order. And, maybe that's why some people think that authoritarian rule is a solution. But, such authoritarian schemes suffer from the same pressures of potential collapse, and usually while most of the citizens in such contexts suffer in any of a variety of ways, and certainly lack the basic freedoms most of us cherish. But, in an authoritarian society, you don't have to think, in fact, you are best off not to think or express your ideas, especially if they may undermine authority in any way. If you're a woman, you're likely to have even fewer rights. If you're gay, lesbian, or transgender, you'd better suppress all expressions and actions related to these. If you believe in some

spiritual or religious tradition that is not the single one supported by the authority, you'd better hide that one, too. If you're a poet, artist, actor, musician, novelist, non-fiction writer, etc., you'd better be very, very careful.

But, my optimism lies in the potential of humanity... the core of what it means to be alive, to be human, and at its very best. We all have that potential. But, if we want provide contexts that will move us in the direction of a flatter, but not necessarily flat, organization, we have to be patient and move slowly and steadily toward flatter ways of living together. Any such efforts have to take into account all of the interdependent and intertwined contexts of our lives, including economic, community, workplace, schooling, healthcare, and all the rest of the contexts in which we reside and participate in one way or another.

As I mentioned, there is no singular quick fix. And, as we enlarge the scale, the level of difficulty of even small adjustment increases exponentially. However, there are some things we can do at a very small scale that may set up a cascading effect over time. A few of these approaches are described briefly here:

- In our families, we can begin slowly flattening the layers. We could begin with negotiating “rules.” The key here is *negotiating*, which is a flattening process. This process can be expanded over time to include all sorts of decisions.
- We also can slowly introduce discussions about how it feels not to be listened to. Then, we could brainstorm strategies that would make it easier to listen to others, while selecting one or two to try.
- We can have discussions about anything, while engaging in ways that do not put down or dismiss the ideas of others. We follow such discussions with a mutual assessment of how the discussion made us feel and what could be done to improve discussions.
- We can introduce similar sorts of efforts in various social groups.
- We also can make similar efforts with our children's teachers, and talk about how to begin flattening the hierarchical layering of schools.

There are a number of resources for teachers on how to start making such small steps to de-layering. [8] But, teachers need the support of parents to initiate different approaches that may appear to be contradictory to the messages they get from school and school district administrators.

However, we may need to take more direct action at making certain kinds of changes to provide a stop-gap to collapse. At this very moment, in the U.S. and many other nations, we are faced with huge problems that can cause collapse, if not within one year, but certainly within a decade, if we not careful. I have no specific plans of action or other strategies, but I will suggest a few things that need to be considered, if we can hobble our shaky democracy or democracies towards a longer future of survival. I will offer no

further commentary, but I do hope you will consider these and others you may have, and then start conversation with friends and co-workers, and your local, state, and federal legislators and politicians.

### **The List:**

- **Money and politics don't mix** — We need to move towards removing any use of personal (maybe beyond a certain very low maximum) or social funds. Require all media to provide free and equal time and/or space for politicians to communicate to the public, especially during campaign seasons (this used to be done, early in my lifetime). All other necessary funding should be allotted by federal, state, or local governments. Maybe we can move money from the over-funded military budgets to support our democratic processes. No other money, in any form, can be used or received by politicians while campaigning or while in office. Any receipt of other funding, goods, services, or other forms of value should result in immediate removal from office and prevention from holding any political office or position. All PAC's and organized lobbying groups need to be disbanded. Strict monitoring and auditing needs to be established. This item may be the single most important step to take.
- Corporations should be stripped of "person-hood" status (as per the Citizens United case) and strictly regulated in terms of corporate use of funds for political purposes, corporate interactions with politicians and other government entities, etc.
- Each branch of the U.S. government needs to be carefully re-worked to prevent anti-democratic processes and subversion of our democracy. The current situation is pathological, dysfunctional, and a danger to our form of government. Add constitutional amendments to clarify and strengthen the democratic principles.
- Establish rapid response and remediation (or punishment) to all breaches of democratic principles across all three branches.
- Establish term limits to the legislative and judicial branches.
- Establish strict ethical and behavioral standards for the judicial branch. Any breach should result in immediate removal and prevention from serving in any judicial or legal activity.

---

### **ENDNOTES**

[1] Graeber & Wengrow (2021)

[2] Many aboriginal peoples had "flat" or flat-ash societies, which have been described in Maybury-Lewis, D. (1992) — The book is based on a documentary series with the same name. The whole series is available for free on YouTube: [https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLtbPqxr-6136G--GhjutrvorE5RHU7MEe\\$si=axCEF6yJPncp9iC7](https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLtbPqxr-6136G--GhjutrvorE5RHU7MEe$si=axCEF6yJPncp9iC7)

[3] Koestler (1968)

[4] Volk (1995)

[5] Bloom (2006)

[6] Wenger (1998)

[7] Many authors have discussed various features of how to establish and maintain communities or groupings of various sorts, and the problems of maintaining such groupings. A selection of sources includes, **Arendt** (1958/1998); **Benedict** (1934/1989); **Bloom** (2006); **Bly** (1996); **Dobson** (2008); **Donaldson** (1993); **Fromm** (1941/1972); **Gallas** (1995); **Judson** (2008); **Miller** (2011); **Rieber** (1989); **Ruesch & Bateson** (1951/2008); **Thelen** (1954/1977); **Villarreal** (2008).

[8] Here are a few references that may be useful for teachers, and maybe even parents: **Bracer** (2006); **Butcher & McDonald** (2007); **Calderwood** (2000); **Dobson** (2008); **Gallas** (1994, 1995, & 1998); **Gatto** (2001); **Kimble, et al.** (2008); **Kohn** (2000); **Wenger** (1998).

---

## REFERENCES

Arendt, H. (1998). *The human condition* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.

Benedict, R. (1989). *Patterns of culture*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Bloom, J. W. (2006). *Creating a Classroom Community of Young Scientists* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.

Bly, R. (1997). *The Sibling Society*. New York: Vintage.

Bracher, M. (2006). *Radical Pedagogy: Identity, generativity, and social transformation*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Butcher, J., & McDonald, L. (Eds.). (2007). *Making a difference: Challenges for teachers, teaching and teacher education*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.

Calderwood, Patricia E. (2000). *Learning community: Finding common ground in difference*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Dobson, D. (2008). *Transformative teaching*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.

Donaldson, M. (1992). *Human minds*. New York: Allen Lane/Penguin.

Fromm, E. (1969). *Escape from freedom*. New York: Discus Books/Avon Publishing.

Gallas, K. (1994). *The languages of learning*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Gallas, K. (1995). *Talking their way into science: Hearing children's questions and theories, responding with curricula*. New York: Teachers College Press.

- Gallas, K. (1997). *Sometimes I Can Be Anything: Power, Gender, and Identity in a Primary Classroom (The Practitioner Inquiry Series) (Language and Literacy)*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Gatto, J. (2001). *A different kind of teacher: Solving the crisis of American schooling*. Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Hills Books.
- Graeber, D., & Wengrow, D. (2021). *The dawn of everything: A new history of humanity*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Judson, G. (Ed.). (2008). *Teaching 360': Effective learning through the imagination*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
- Kimble, C., Hildreth, P. M. & Bourdon, I. (Eds.). (2008). *Communities of practice: Creating learning environments for educators. Volume 1*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Kimble, C., Hildreth, P. M., & Bourdon, I. (Eds.). (2008). *Communities of practice: Creating learning environments for educators, Volume 2*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Koestler, A. (1968). *The Ghost in the Machine*. New York: Macmillan.
- Kohn, A. (2000). *What to look for in a classroom: And other essays*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Maybury-Lewis, D. (1992). *Millennium: Tribal wisdom and the modern world*. New York: Viking Adult.
- Miller, J. P. (2011). *Transcendental learning: The educational legacy of Alcott, Emerson, Fuller, Peabody and Thoreau*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Rieber, R. W. (Ed.). (1989). *The individual, communication, and society: Essays in memory of Gregory Bateson*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ruesch, J., & Bateson, G. (2008). *Communication: The Social Matrix of Psychiatry*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishing.
- Thelen, H. A. (1954). *Dynamics of groups at work*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Villareal, L. P. (2009). *Origin of group identity: Viruses, addiction, and cooperation*. New York: Springer.
- Volk, T. (1995). *Metapatterns: Across space, time, and mind*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.