

Haim Harari's answer to the 2006 Annual Edge Question: "What is your dangerous Idea?"

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Democracy may be on its way out. Future historians may determine that Democracy will have been a one-century episode. It will disappear. This is a sad, truly dangerous, but very realistic idea (or, rather, prediction).

Falling boundaries between countries, cross border commerce, merging economies, instant global flow of information and numerous other features of our modern society, all lead to multinational structures. If you extrapolate this irreversible trend, you get the entire planet becoming one political unit. But in this unit, anti-democracy forces are now a clear majority. This majority increases by the day, due to demographic patterns. All democratic nations have slow, vanishing or negative population growth, while all anti-democratic and uneducated societies multiply fast. Within democratic countries, most well-educated families remain small while the least educated families are growing fast. This means that, both at the individual level and at the national level, the more people you represent, the less economic power you have. In a knowledge based economy, in which the number of working hands is less important, this situation is much more non-democratic than in the industrial age. As long as upward mobility of individuals and nations could neutralize this phenomenon, democracy was tenable. But when we apply this analysis to the entire planet, as it evolves now, we see that democracy may be doomed.

To these we must add the regrettable fact that authoritarian multinational corporations, by and large, are better managed than democratic nation states. Religious preaching, TV sound bites, cross boundary TV incitement and the freedom of spreading rumors and lies through the internet encourage brainwashing and lack of rational thinking. Proportionately, more young women are growing into societies which discriminate against them than into more egalitarian societies, increasing the worldwide percentage of women treated as second class citizens. Educational systems in most advanced countries are in a deep crisis while modern education in many developing countries is almost non-existent. A small well-educated technological elite is becoming the main owner of intellectual property, which is, by far, the most valuable economic asset, while the rest of the world drifts towards fanaticism of one kind or another. Add all of the above and the unavoidable conclusion is that Democracy, our least bad system of government, is on its way out.

Can we invent a better new system? Perhaps. But this cannot happen if we are not allowed to utter the sentence: "There may be a political system which is better than Democracy". Today's political correctness does not allow one to say such things. The result of this prohibition will be an inevitable return to some kind of totalitarian rule, different from that of the emperors, the colonialists or the landlords of the past, but not more just. On the other hand, open and honest thinking about this issue may lead either to a gigantic worldwide revolution in educating the poor masses, thus saving democracy, or to a careful search for a just (repeat, just) and better system.

I cannot resist a cheap parting shot: When, in the past two years, Edge asked for brilliant ideas you believe in but cannot prove, or for proposing new exciting laws, most answers related to science and technology. When the question is now about dangerous ideas, almost all answers touch on issues of politics and society and not on the "hard sciences". Perhaps science is not so dangerous, after all.