

German and American Views of Freedom and Democracy

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During the time I travelled in Germany as a part of the delegation of the United States Youth Council, my attention was occupied with the communication and understanding which was achieved between the American delegates and our German hosts. Looking back after the tour had ended, however, I was struck by misunderstandings which never quite surfaced but which heavily influenced our communication.

Americans tend to assume that Western Europe is much like the United States, and the young people whom we met similarly based their ideas of America on their own society. In fact, substantial differences in outlook exist between the two countries which lead to differences in the social and

political systems and a corresponding misperception of the other society.

Two incidents from the tour serve to illustrate the difficulties this produced: While in Berlin, I was asked by a member of the youth arm of the Free Democratic (Liberal) Party whether it would be possible for Americans to prevent the CIA from seizing the United States and establishing a fascist regime. (That the CIA would do so given the chance was taken for granted.) Yet the question was asked in all seriousness.

On another occasion, one of the members of the delegation who works in voting registration asked if it was necessary to register to vote in Germany. We were told that, no, there was no special registration; on Election Day everyone could simply go to the polls and vote.

For a moment, the air was thick with euphoria about this enlightened policy -- then it was clarified that if a German citizen resides anywhere for as long as three days he has to register his address with the local police. And the Germans could not understand why some of the Americans found such a practice objectionable. One hears a great deal in the United States about how America is the "land of the free" and the "only truly revolutionary society," etc. Those are great ideals, but the materialism and selfish individualism that have eroded our society had often led me to think that it's been 199 years since many Americans had really concerned themselves about freedom. In Germany, however, I discovered that the American concept of freedom and democracy not only was not shared by many of the young people I met, but was unbelievable, if not inconceivable to them.

Inalienable Rights

In the United States, the central premise of our democracy is that each individual possesses innate "inalienable" rights. The historical reasons for this view begin with the fact that many of America's early settlers came here to escape persecution, especially religious intolerance. These early settlers sought the freedom to worship God as they saw fit.

Similarly, our revolution was not based on a desire for "national liberation," or for "popular democracy," but on a desire for freedom from certain oppressive abuses by the British crown. In declaring independence from colonial rule, Jefferson cited not concepts of social or geographical self-determination, but the failure of the British government to deal justly and fairly with its subjects in the colonies. Having failed to fulfill the obligations of a legitimate government toward its citizens, he reasoned, the government in England had forfeited its legitimacy in regard to America.

This led to the establishment of a government with "inalienable rights, endowed by their Creator... among them... life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" as the founding principle. Democracy -- in the narrow sense of popular election of the government -- was not valued as an end in itself so much as it was held to be the best means of safeguarding the civil and religious liberties against the possibility of future despots. Judging from the young people I met, German society has not thrown off the monarchical concept of the state to the extent that American society has. Within this context, democracy comes to mean replacing control by the ruling elite with control by the broad masses, rather than reducing the extent of governmental control absolutely. Civil freedoms correspondingly occupy a subservient position: they are the means by which democracy (i.e. widespread participation in the political process) is achieved.

Cause and Effect Reversed

Understanding the reversal of the cause/effect relationship between freedom and democracy sheds light on many of the differences between the German and American societies. There is, of course, in Germany a political spectrum. The Christian Democrats, on the one hand, explain the use of "Christian" in their name by referring to the Christian concept of the dignity and importance of the individual. The Social Democrats, on the other hand, favor the Marxist view that the individual derives his significance from the society.

The whole spectrum, however, is well left of the American political spectrum. No counterpart exists, for example, to Ronald Reagan. One reason for this is that the personal liberty which American conservatives seek to defend is considered illusory, at least by many German young people. Another factor is that safeguards against governmental abuse are very different between the two societies: here we limit the power of government to interfere in the lives of the people. (Even if fascists or Communists controlled the government, it would take years to make the legal changes necessary for a totalitarian state.) In Germany the government has powers far exceeding anything that Americans would allow, but they involve as much of the population as possible in the political system as their safeguard.

I attribute much of the anti-Americanism which exists among German youth to this lack of understanding of the motives behind our policies. Of course for some "fascism" or "capitalist imperialism" is the explanation for everything America does; but we have the same here, even without the influence of the East German radio. More generally though, a mistrust of the United States is born out of incomprehension. Another result of the freedom/democracy inversion is that the East European regimes appeared less revolting to the German youth than they were to the American delegation. Even those who criticized the suppression of rights in the Communist states were often inclined to give them credit for having "some kind of democracy."

Totalitarian "Democracy"

The relationship between freedom and democracy is part of a much greater philosophical question. Materialistic philosophers from Rousseau to Marx saw man as a mere animal whose individual existence was meaningless. To give meaning to history they turned to the "popular will," endowing it with omniscience and omnipotence, and sacrificing to it individual liberties in a sort of totalitarian democracy.

Posing as the incarnation of this "popular will" despots such as Robespierre, Hitler, Stalin and Mao have made this materialistic "democracy" the justification for tyranny, oppression and genocide. In contrast, religious and idealistic philosophers have seen man as a spiritual being who has innate value which cannot be rescinded by the "popular will" of the masses, any more than it can by the "divine right" of kings or by "feudal privilege."

Democracy is fragile; it does not survive where governmental power is not balanced by individual liberty. Not by accident are the democratic nations those based on Western Christian civilization, while those based on Marxism-Leninism are without exception brutal tyrannies. Ideologically, as physically, West German society is closer than the United States to Eastern Europe -- but still very much on the same side of the iron curtain as ourselves. Having perceived these differences, therefore, we are faced with the question of how to relate with Germany.

Isolationism would be the worst alternative at any time because it only increases misunderstanding and suspicion, but in the face of Communist expansionism, such a policy would be suicidal. Instead, we must reach out, explain ourselves and seek to understand.

Historical Reasons

There are historical reasons for the Germans to hold their view of democracy, just as we have historical reasons for ours, and it would be chauvinistic of us to expect them to accept our view. But we can ask them to understand us; and, through understanding, lay a foundation for trust.

Personally, I found the differences challenging in yet another way. It is easy to see that America has been blessed by God materially -- both in natural resources and in economic prosperity -- but also America has received God's blessing politically.

We do not enjoy our freedoms because we are smarter, or more loving, or morally superior to the people of other lands. This freedom and the heritage on which it is based is, no less than our material wealth, a gift of God. And like our economic blessings, we have the responsibility to share this gift with all the people of the world.