Defining Democracy Down

In an introductory essay within this collection of commentaries, an effort was made to define what we think of as a democracy, with the understanding that it is a word with an almost protean ability to become something altogether different than we might have imagined democracy to be.

Under the heading of democracy we can distinguish different "kinds" of democracy, though in some cases we will find that the term only masquerades as a government of the people. One such term is an illiberal democracy, referred to as *illiberalism*. Illiberalism is defined as being opposed to liberal principals; the restricting of freedom of thought or behavior. That sounds a lot like authoritarianism, totalitarianism, or tyranny to me.

Illiberalism would seem to be merely a euphemism that allows a government to call itself a democracy, when it is not. Indeed, one definition of an illiberal democracy states: "An illiberal democracy describes a governing system that hides its "nondemocratic practices behind formally democratic institutions and procedures." We should keep in mind that there is a lack of consensus among experts about the exact definition of illiberal democracy or whether it even exists. If illiberal democracies do exist, what would one look like? Perhaps a government that perverts its own laws to allow for minority rule, though the majority opposes such legislation? Sounds like a non-democratic practice to me.

Yet some political theorists argue that illiberal democracy should be counted as a type of democracy because it is "democratic in a *plebiscitarian* (*Plebiscite* comes from the Latin *pleb- or "people"*) sense; that is, the people vote on referenda in a direct vote on a proposed law or political issue. Other theorists say that classifying illiberal democracy as democratic is overly sympathetic to the illiberal regimes and therefore prefer terms such as *electoral authoritarianism*, *competitive authoritarianism*, or *soft authoritarianism*. All of which leads me to the conclusion that we should leave the term *illiberalism* to political scientists and well-educated eggheads who make their living by hiring themselves out to media outlets to explain things in a way that makes things sound more complicated than they need to be.

Then there is the term *neoliberalism*. Let's begin with available definitions of the term: "Neo-liberalism (*noun)*. A political approach that favors free-market capitalism, deregulation, and reduction in government spending." And then there is this: "Neoliberalism is contemporarily used to refer to market-oriented reform policies such as 'eliminating price controls, deregulating capital markets, lowering trade barriers' and reducing, especially through privatization and austerity, state influence in the economy."

For those of you who are neophytes to the English language, the prefix *neo-* comes from the Greek word *neos*, or "new", so *neoliberalism* is, literally, "New liberalism." Which causes me to ask myself, "What's wrong with the 'old' liberalism"? And why does the "new" liberalism appear to be cloaking untrammeled and rapacious capitalism of the conservative kind in more euphemistic language? Good question, I think.

In fact, neoliberalism is not anything so "new." The term arose in the late 1800's in Europe. A prominent factor in the rise of conservative and right-libertarian organizations, political parties, and think tanks, and predominantly advocated by them, neoliberalism is generally associated with policies of economic liberalization, including privatization, deregulation, globalization, free trade, monetarism, austerity, and reductions in government spending in order to increase the role of the private sector in the economy and society.

All of that sounds a lot more like conservativism than it does liberalism. Oh, but it's not liberalism; it's *neoliberalism*, which, if you are a conservative or a libertarian, makes it so much easier to discuss politics in mixed company without making a spectacle. In the natural world, the terms camouflage and mimicry are used to describe ways in which predator and prey seek to gain advantage. In our civilized human world, it is language that decides fates.

The word neoliberalism is an impressive sounding word. But in fact, if you attach the prefix "neo-" to most any suitably abstract term, it will give you an aura of superiority and gravitas and a reputation that will open doors for you—more often than not, the exit.

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