

# THE PROBLEM IS US

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I'm increasingly convinced that the crisis in liberal democracy in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom is fueled substantially by the people who are worried about the crisis in liberal democracy. That likely is you and me, dear reader, and other folks like us. This isn't self-flagellation or self-hatred. It is an honest, level-headed description of the facts. The "us" is the so-called elite, educated, technocratic class that has financially and psychologically benefited from globalization. "We" also are predominantly white, an issue to which I will return. My point is not that there isn't a genuine crisis. There is, and it is alarming. It is a crisis that increasingly is pushing many nations closer to authoritarianism, and this includes nations that have significant democratic pasts, structures, and commitments. To a great extent, however, the crisis is the fruit of our own labor, we who say we want to sustain liberal democratic structures and commitments and thus are distressed about liberal democracy's decline. As much as we wish that it were, the crisis is not something alien to our inclinations and desires foisted upon us by

democracy's tyrannical foes. To a large degree, the problem is us.

It is not new news that globalization has exacerbated inequalities in wealth—for example, it has greatly increased the value of 401k, 403b, and other stock-based retirement funds even for those of us who do not consider ourselves the financial upper crust of society. (That is likely you and me again, dear reader.)

But what we often do not focus on enough is the psychological benefit that globalization also has provided. That benefit is provided by an uplift in social status for some people, who are seen as successful in today's world, in contrast to other people, who are seen as failures. By psychological, I do not necessarily mean a consciously felt or endorsed benefit. In fact, I think that the psychological benefits of globalization often are experienced unconsciously, or at least subconsciously. The benefit in question here is much like what W.E.B. DuBois (1962) described in 1935 when he analyzed the psychological and public wages of whiteness. These are “wages” paid in the form of social respect and esteem in place of better monetary

wages and economic opportunities. It turns out that having less money is worth it if (and perhaps only if) one is treated by others with dignity and respect. Of course, having both money and respect would be ideal, but the trade-off is worth it if the ideal is unachievable. What is key to these psychological wages is that they are paid publicly. This means that everyone sees the societal respect being paid to some people, for example, through cultural customs, societal rituals, and even formal laws that accord dignity and access to public goods to them and not to others. This process establishes what Michael Sandel (2020: 191) has called a “hierarchy of esteem.” In that hierarchy, everyone acknowledges and observes, via their behaviors and actions, where their—and other, “lower” people’s—places are on the societal ladder of respect.

Globalization puts the class of educated, technocratic, cognitively elite people at the top of the hierarchy of esteem. (It also tends to put them at the top of the hierarchy of financial remuneration, but again the ladder is not identical to levels of wealth—witness the situation of academics.) At the risk of sounding tautological, let me point out that this

effect of globalization is worldwide. It has taken and continues to take place in many different nations, not just relatively wealthy ones. The class of top people has been labeled the Anywheres: comfortable with high levels of social change and who “generally favour openness and individual autonomy and have identities based on educational and career achievements” (Goodhart 2017: vii). They have portable identities and thus are geographically mobile, going where their careers and laptops take them and enjoying global vacation travel to boot. In contrast, those at the bottom of the twenty-first century ladder of social esteem are the Somewheres: less educated and less comfortable with rapid social change and who are “more rooted, people who usually favour stability and familiarity and have identities based on group and place” (vii). Because of their livelihoods and their community and family connections, their identities are not highly portable, and they generally do not value or experience geographical and vocational mobility the way or to the degree that Anywheres do.

The Anywhere world is significantly supported by belief in meritocracy. Because everyone in a meritocratic society supposedly achieves their place on the ladder through individual merit (= intellect plus hard work), everyone is seen as deserving the psychological wages that they receive—or, alternatively, as deserving their lack of wages (Sandel 2020). Anywheres are perceived as meritorious winners who are granted respect because of their success in a globalized world, while Somewheres are perceived as worthless losers who can be dismissed because of their inability to succeed. Each group gets what they legitimately are worth, and each can be praised or blamed for what they got since their own merit determined it.

The contemporary crisis in liberal democracy can be understood as an attempt to blow up the hierarchy of esteem by those who are at its bottom. Likewise, the handwringing about the crisis on the part of those at the top can appear as merely one more way to dump on those at the bottom—and, in that way, keep the hierarchy in place. From that perspective, it is no wonder that a significant section of the population in the United States and the United Kingdom

would be happy to see a change to, if not the end of liberal democracy. And given the uneven but worldwide effects of globalization, both meritocratic hierarchies of esteem and angry desires to destroy them are not limited to those two countries. Certainly, for example, they can be seen in France—witness the political strength of Marine Le Pen and the National Rally (formerly the National Front)—and other examples of “illiberal democracy” in Central Europe, such as Turkey, easily can be found. In South Asia, Sri Lanka recently has joined India and Bangladesh as so-called illiberal democracies, with popular support for democratically elected authoritarian strongmen. However widespread, any genuine solution to the crisis in liberal democracy must involve dismantling, or at least minimizing the hierarchy of esteem, and that will require that “we” respect, listen to, and work with those who currently are at its bottom to tackle a nation’s problems.

And yet, the solution is not that simple. (As if what is outlined above would be simple or easy, which is not the case.) The solution also will vary somewhat from one liberal democratic nation to another given different nations’ racial

and colonial histories. In the United States, for example, the group at the bottom of the hierarchy that tends to be angry about the reduction of its public, psychological wages is predominantly white. So too is the group at the top of the hierarchy that has benefited from globalization. The antagonism between Somewheres and Anywheres being played out today is primarily an intra-white fight, a fact that needs more examination than it often receives. Their current fight is an extension of the intra-white struggle that took place in the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, which the wages of whiteness largely ended. The stability of liberal democracy, at least in the United States, has depended heavily on those wages. This is so even if that dependence often went unacknowledged by the defenders of liberal democracy—and perhaps it had to go unacknowledged if liberal democracy was to remain a shiny ideal.

In the last few decades, however, the (white) people at the top of the hierarchy stopped fully paying those wages to the (white) people at the bottom. In that respect, a deal was broken and the people at the bottom were wronged. But this wrong must be put into context: the deal was rigged

from the get-go. It was never fair even when it was honored. This is because it never involved respect and esteem (or high monetary wages) for Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, even from the white people at the top of the ladder. Although they tend to voice support for issues of diversity, their words generally have not been matched with actions that would address land ownership, inequalities of wealth and health, and other forms of racial and decolonial injustice. The good white people at the top of the hierarchy are more interested in using the idea of anti-racism as a way of securing their social standing and moral bona fides (Sullivan 2014). As a result, the topic of racial and decolonial justice generally has come to be seen, especially by Somewheres, as a partisan issue designed to maintain the dominance of the Anywheres. Extending educational opportunities and other aspects of meritocracy to non-white people (and women of all races) who historically have been excluded appears like a trick for securing meritocracy, which continues to disadvantage Somewheres. From this perspective, fighting for racial and decolonial justice is not fighting for Black, Indigenous, and other people of color. It

is fighting for (white/light skinned) Anywheres. On top of that, the fight is disguised with fancy words like “justice” that can be used as weapons against Somewheres, sneering at them for supposedly being backwards, racist, and so on. If this is the game, why would Somewheres want to get on board with social justice?

The United States and other liberal democracies are in big trouble if they cannot move toward genuine racial and decolonial justice. They also are in big trouble if they cannot stop dumping on the Somewheres who have not benefitted from the globalization with which liberal democracy currently is aligned. Making any one of these two changes would be monumental. Asking for both is asking a lot. For example, one way to stop dumping on the Somewheres would be to direct more public funding and financial support to technical education, trade schools, and apprenticeships, rather than to university education (Sandel 2020). To work toward genuine racial and decolonial justice, however, such a shift in funding must not become a renewal of the wages of whiteness for white workers at the expense of, e.g., reparations for Black, Indigenous, and

former colonized peoples, as historically it almost always has been. Asking for a lot cannot be avoided, however, since the two changes are related. Both require dismantling the hierarchy of esteem and the toxic form of meritocracy that supports it. This means that the prospects for easing the crisis in liberal democracy are not good. It likely will advance to the next boiling point, and an important question is whether “we” will continue to fuel it.

## References

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