ESSAY 1 - INTRODUCTION

This series will introduce you to constructing and using a '**Web of Ideas'** by working with an illustrative example.

We first consider some preliminary matters, then move to constructing a Web with the first step, Orientation, and at the end provide some developmental questions for reflection and conversations.

> 'The most notable distinction of living beings is that they maintain themselves by renewal.'
>
> adapted from John Dewey

Prelude

The **Web of Ideas** is a tool to help us form and use the 'lenses' through which we look into the world – it is a tool for thinking with.

The key to using the Web of Ideas effectively as a tool of though - for the purpose of forming a 'lens' - is to start our thinking by focussing on a particular concrete problem.

We have to find a starting point for our thinking, if one is not already given to us from some external purpose.

That is, we need somehow to formulate a question to which we will seek an answer through working with ideas and which itself will guide us towards ideas we can use for thinking with. Focusing on a specific question surfaces and draws together the ideas we have in us so that we can use them in combination to think through the issue.

We are busy, so we usually want to focus on work-related matters for personal development. We don't make space and time to invest in ourselves by attending to *how we think*.

We would ask that you take a few moments to consider the disadvantages of that approach and, better still, to consider the advantages of stepping out from work for a while when undertaking personal development -for *thinking exercise* just as we do when it comes to physical exercise such as walking.

> "Minds need at least as much exercise as bodies, but all too many people get stuck lifting light weights."
>
> Susan Nieman in *Why Grow Up? Subversive Thoughts for an Infantile Age*

A work-related focus keeps us at work and involve pressures and concerns which are obstacles - we need a change of scene for growing ourselves. There are opportunities and benefits for personal development from attending to ourselves through working on something not immediately tied to our daily work.

These include a sense of release, of freedom and re-vitalisation – minds are more relaxed and open - which comes from intentionally and deliberately taking on another standpoint than our work-related roles.

Also, for this series, we need to use something that would be of interest to many others in a way that some specific, narrow work matter would not. We need a standpoint which implicates us all, a standpoint that we share with each other.

We are all citizens with our responsibilities and duties as such for our society. Therefore, we will take the standpoint of being a citizen for the purposes of this series. The approach we demonstrate can be extended in many other directions, including work-related directions.

We take, as the example to work with, the current issue of 'democracy in crisis' to provide the focus for our purpose of illustrating the construction and use of the Web of Ideas.

The ideas we select to work with are illustrative; we do not offer them as definitive in any way - rather the main point is to see how to think effectively with ideas about a complex issue.

Orientation

When we look around us in the world in which we are living we see that one of the biggest concerns today, one which has implications for all of us even if we mostly shut it out of our daily lives, is the seemingly sudden 'collapse of democracy' and its replacement by autocratic and authoritarian regimes and heads of government in many countries that seemed not long ago to be well established as democratic entities.[i]

By now there have been a large flow of books and articles, scholarly and journalistic, from many writers who have given us an extensive range of answers as to why this phenomenon has been occurring, and is continuing to occur, in recent years. Most of these explanations centre in some way around the idea of 'populism'. These explanations are essentially using a theory of the 'mob' being responded to by opportunistic politicians. Most

writers, by and large, are satisfied with that level of explanation and leave it at that.

There is, however, the matter of whether they are good enough. Are they satisfying as explanations? There is also the matter of whether we just accept them or, rather, which one(s) we accept and, if more than one, how do we relate them to each other. There is also, of course, the matter, of whether we care about the threats to our democratic way of life.

In other words, first of all, there is the matter of whether we think for ourselves. Of course we do not have time to think about everything that comes at us daily in our lives and so we operate on habits and conventions to make our lives simpler and efficient.

Every so often, however, an issue comes along that requires that we think for ourselves and, if we are not practiced in thinking for ourselves, we are unlikely to be able to respond to that requirement. Thinking is not something that can be taught or learned; it must be practised; and that raises the question: when do I practise my thinking? How often do I practice playing the piano, welding, typing, or footballing? But thinking? People mostly take for granted that they can do their own thinking. Also, they tend to confuse 'thinking' with, for example, the use of *logical or calculating operations* such as they *were taught and learned* in geometry class or with the practice of recalling what has been committed to memory in school.

> "A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices"
>
> William James

Since, 'thinking' has to be practiced, the practicing must be done by ourselves because obviously no one else can do our practice for us as that would amount to thinking for us.

And we need to practise on something – some issue that attracts us because of it connects to our well-being, our security, our way of living, something that is personally important to us. Questions about the 'collapse of democracy' and its replacement by autocratic and authoritarian regimes meet those criteria.

We can note that one difficulty in accepting the widespread 'populism' answer is that the type of 'remedies' advanced for addressing the 'demise of democracy' do not seem adequate enough to match the surge and scale of the problem.[ii] One is left with the feeling, an unease, that there 'must be something more', something in common across the landscape of the crisis where particular circumstances differ. We need to be able to think about this.

> "The difficulty lies not so much in developing new ideas as in escaping from old ones."
>
> John Maynard Keynes

So we step back from the flood of explanations offered and start from some basics to do our own thinking.

An alternative perspective has recently been posed by Adam Gopnik in his *A Thousand Small Sanities - The Moral Adventures of Liberalism* [iii] when he says:

> "Strongman politics and boss-man rule, in simplest form, is the story of mankind…[and] the lure of a closed authoritarian society is one permanently present in human affairs...".[iv]

Gopnik suggests that we should accept the truth that 'boss-man rule' can always arise instead of searching for the special circumstances that bring it about. Thus, in his view, "…the real question is not what makes it happen but what, for brief periods of historical time, has kept it from happening."

> "Progress is impossible without change; and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything."
>
> George Bernard Shaw

In other words, we look to the interruptions to *the normal course of human affairs being authoritarian* - to what those interruptions are and how they work – to think about the current round of 'collapse of democracy'. [v]

If we take the Gopnik reading of history, the question of how autocracy 'revives and recovers from' a 'democratic interlude' would be a different one to the one generally being posed at present of how democracy is suddenly collapsing.

Thus, for our orienting question, we have two sides of the same coin of the 'collapse of democracy' – the two questions of whether we are in a temporary phase of interruption of the trend towards 'democracy' by autocratic impulses or a return to the 'natural order' of 'autocracy' following a democratic interlude? [vi]

We will bring these two aspects of the question with us as we think about the 'democratic crisis' we are facing today.

We come now to the matter of *How to Think* about an issue like this as the starting point for our thinking. How can we think about both versions of the question about the current 'crisis of democracy'?

When we want to think about what is going on, we can ask, as our first step: To whom can we turn for help, for useful ideas with which to work? There are ideas out there which can help us with our thinking if we wish to avail of them.

For this exercise, the purpose of which is only to illustrate how to make up and use a **Web of Ideas** - to form a lens through which to view this particular issue of the world in which we live - we will confine ourselves to three ideas as constituents of the lens.

Next week we shall start into the **Web of Ideas** itself with its first element.

In the meantime,

Suggested Questions for Reflection and Conversation

1. What 'company' - those with whom people wish to 'spend their thinking lives' - do you see people you know choosing to form their 'lenses', their ways of looking at the world in which you live?

   'Company' Examples: radio presenters, authors, social media influencers, television personalities, celebrities, friends, work colleagues, persons 'in your head' whether dead or alive, real or fictional.

2. What do the examples you see people choosing for their 'company' suggest to you about them?

3. How do see people going about answering for themselves 'the questions' they have about the world as it is today?

4. What would someone not having questions about the world suggest to you about them?

5. What does it suggest to you about people when you observe them in the habit of being judgemental, critical, or negative about others in the world in which they operate?

5. What do you observe when you see people 'thinking for themselves' about the world in which you live?

ⁱ The list continues of countries, where the *democratically elected* heads of government are undermining the rule of law, democratic institutions, and freedom of speech and abusing the power of the state, to grow at every election at present. Countries as diverse as U.S.A. (Trump), Hungary (Orban), Poland (Morawiecki), Austria (Kurz), Italy (Salvini), Turkey (Erdogan), Brazil (Bolsanaro), India (Modi) and, perhaps, most recently, U.K. (Johnson), now (as of 2019) have fallen into the category of 'democracy in crisis' with authoritarian or autocratic (white, male) heads of government. To these, of course, can be added the perennial autocratic, authoritarian, and dictatorial regimes of Russia, China, Myanmar, Iran, Egypt, Vietnam, Syria, North Korea, Philippines, Cambodia, Venezuela, Ethiopia, Uganda, Tanzania, and a depressingly long list of others. There are electorates and citizens in a number of countries which appear to be pushing back against this authoritarian and autocratic tendency ---- and there are 'uprisings' currently going on in Russia, Hong Kong, Sudan and some other places as people pursue freedom.

ⁱⁱ There are others problems, such as single-cause explanations for complex phenomena or the idea of 'cause' rather than 'source' as the mode of historical explanation, which we set aside here.

ⁱⁱⁱ Adam Gopnik, *A Thousand Small Sanities- The Moral Adventures of Liberalism,* Riverrun/Quercus Editions, London, 2019.

^{iv} Gopnik, 2019: 110

^v An alternative point of view is that 'history', as the story of human affairs, is, as in the title of Benedetto Croce's discussion of history and writing of history, *History as the Story of Liberty* (Meridian Books, New York, 1955, originally published in 1938). The great exponent of such a viewpoint was David Hume who, in his *History of England: From the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution of 1688* (Liberty Fund, Indianapolis, (1778) 1985) proposed that the story of human affairs was a process of evolution from a 'government od will' to a 'government of law'. Hume is not suggesting, however, that the growth of liberty in the political, social, and economic spheres of life in England was (is) the outcome an inevitable and necessary movement. Rather, he sees the preservation and continuation of this movement as being contingent and dependent on peoples' understanding of the conditions that gave rise to this direction of movement and to the institutional arrangements sustaining it. Thus, the Hume -Croce perspective would point us to look for the propensies in people and societies that bring about this movement towards freedom and to seek to strengthen them to defend against – indeed to destroy - the emergence of 'boss-man rulership'.

^{vi} Our focus here is on' autocratic' and 'authoritarian' kinds of government and without making a distinction for present purposes between them. We do, however, distinguish these types from the unprecedented type of 'government' which emerged as the 'totalitarian' state under the Nazi regime in Germany with the collapse of democracy in the first third of the twentieth century. Many of the issues arising with the question here are related to this type of regime. Nevertheless, there are specific features which would require more extensive consideration that we can or need to go into for this exercise. Writers such as Hannah Arendt, Friedrich Hayek, Raymond Aron, and Erich Fromm and others, including the famous Frankfurt School on the 'authoritarian personality', who have addressed these special features can be consulted. We are concerned here with the more 'normal' occurrence of autocratic and authoritarian governments in democratic states.

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