

## On A. C. Grayling: *Democracy and Its Crisis*<sup>1</sup>

The book of the well-known philosopher, historian of philosophy and writer on public affairs for the general public is an explicit reaction both to the Brexit-referendum in the UK and to the US general elections in 2016, bringing into office one of the „by a long chalk ... worst qualified and worst equipped individuals ever to be voted into the White House“. (11)

Grayling sees representative democracy as the solution of a dilemma between the attempt to give the populace, as the basic sovereign, a say in a nation's politics and the attempt to care for sound and stable government. Representation is said to operate as a filter and transforming mechanism between immediate and short-term wishes and interests in the electorate and the common good of the nation as a whole. Its proper functioning is seen at risk from three sides: the voters when wanting to have their immediate interests satisfied by their representatives as mere delegates, not subjects acting on their own judgement about what is best for the state; the politicians acting like mere delegates in their interest to be re-elected, and the operation of the political and judicial institutions tending to let the executive branch to have its way without being controlled effectively. In this respect Grayling complains extensively about the >whipping<-practices in parliament making the party-fractions subservient to the government they support or oppose. (132 sqq.; 189-197) As a result of these Grayling even speaks of the British Prime Minister as an elected dictator, quoting the authority of Lord Hailsham QC on this point (134 sq.)

### I

Grayling sees that democracy by general elections is only a necessary condition for representative government, not a sufficient one. The representative system he sees fit to solve his dilemma is affirmatively compared to Aristotle's *Politeia* and therefore a >mixed constitution< (20). Nevertheless he continues to call the system of western liberal societies by its self-congratulatory designation >democracy<.

These are the reasons he sees for its contemporary crisis:

One relates to the operation of the institutions and practices of the dilemma-solving model itself. The second relates to those in whose hands lies the ultimate source of legitimation of the democratic order. The third relates to manipulation of both the former by agencies with partisan interests which would not have

---

<sup>1</sup> One World 2017; (2018: updated edition, <sup>4</sup>2024). The page-references for quotes are given in brackets in the text.

much chance of succeeding in the open competition with other political orientations on the hustings. (131)

His main example for the last-mentioned agencies is the right wing of the UK Conservative Party pushing for Brexit, which he shows to have been, by constitutional standards, a coup (189-197).

Grayling's main interest is in the second problem:

to equip the *demos* for their part in the process; this is particularly so regarding the civic education required to make representative democracy work. More to the point: the problem here is the absence of such education. Both horns of the dilemma of democracy relate to the *demos* – the desire that it should be the giver of the imprimatur for government, and the problem of its actual or alleged unfitness to do so. (131-2)

He therefore proposes the following steps for overcoming the crisis. A reconfiguration of the institutions by redirecting them to the common good to be pursued cooperatively, which he thinks mainly need a reorientation of the staff operating these institutions by a turn-around and repentance. And relating to the *demos* – making voting obligatory from the age of 16, because >if voting begins at sixteen in the context of civic education there will be a greater chance of responsible and thoughtful voting continuing thereafter.< (161) He sums his proposals for bettering the situation as follows: >a proportional system of representation, compulsory voting as a civic duty, independence of representatives from overarching party discipline, and clarity in constitutional provisions.< (203) The first point is directed against the >First Past the Post< (FPTP)-system of voting in the UK; the third point against the >whipping< practises even in cases where no election-manifesto issue is put to vote; and the fourth too is addressed to the British situation without a written constitution. In the following section I want to discuss critically mainly the second point by means taken from the rational theory of action.

## II

The problems of the unfitness of the electorate Grayling at one point sums up so: >electorates are irrational and insufficiently informed, and their self-interest and short-termism results in their making poor choices from the point of view of what would most benefit the state, the economy, the entire community.< (124) Let us sum up these gravamens further by saying: The unfitness of electorates consists in their lack of civic common sense. (I here take >common sense< as non-native speaker meaning in fact what the German >Gemeinsinn< means.)

In terms of the rational theory of choice civic common sense can be seen as a public good and the electorates lacking them as free-riders.

Now, conditional on the probability of being detected and/or punished (which in most cases might be pretty low), free-riding is rational in anonymous situations of action. In such situation the agent has every reason to take his lead from his own wishes and interests (as he understands them), because he does not need and cannot communicate with others, especially those affected by his course of action, and following his own interest makes his behaviour at least predictable to the others. Following his own short-term interests in anonymous situations is far from being irrational. (I, of course, do not want to deny that people sometimes behave irrationally – but when they do we usually have problems so much as to understand their behaviour as action, because we do not get his intention.)

An example of an anonymous situation of action – defined by the impossibility of communication – is much behaviour in automobile traffic. There can be and is communication by signals, but only in supplementary way to the prevalent >maximizing< behaviour, the point of traffic being to get most quickly from some A to some B.

It can now easily be seen that the situation of casting a ballot is anonymous too. It is designed to be so to keep the voter free from influence by others and his vote to remain secret.

It therefore is not to be expected what Grayling expects in the remark from p. 161 quoted on p.2 before. Grayling wants responsible voters to act like legislators should act but according to his own analysis do not because of the want and need to be re-elected. Turning out to vote is itself to be seen as an expression of *Gemeinsinn*, for, other than Grayling pretends, the vote does not give a real say in the nation's dealings – the single vote is powerless and so the voter has to be taken as being motivated by the moral question >What if everyone did not vote due to the single vote's powerlessness?<. Turning to moral considerations, again, is an expression of *Gemeinsinn*.<sup>2</sup>

This proposal by Grayling to overcome the crisis of >democracy< to me seems futile as a remedy, although civic education is always to be welcomed.

© E.M. Lange 2024

---

<sup>2</sup> Cp. my discussion of James Buchanan's >paradox of voting< in the section on politics in my *Understanding Life* (on academia.edu).