



1 Frances Moore Lappé

THE STRAIGHTJACKET OF THIN DEMOCRACY

*Democracy—is there a principle more celebrated in the American political imagination? Generally speaking, Americans think they know exactly what democracy is and assume they live in the most vibrant democracy imaginable. But at the risk of sounding absurd, what IS democracy? In this opening article, internationally renowned author and economic development activist Frances Moore Lappé explores the dominant concept of democracy within U.S. political culture and argues that it is, at best, a “thin” version of democracy. Drawing on her 2007 book *Getting a Grip: Clarity, Creativity and Courage in a World Gone Mad* (her 16th), Lappé outlines two major “pitfalls” and four “deeper dangers” of Thin Democracy, which focuses on elections and a market economy as the only relevant factors. Lappé wants us to ponder the “mental straightjacket” Thin Democracy has become in our consciousness, with its negative assumption about human nature and the resulting powerlessness such an assumption engenders. She wants us to return to the empowering potential of democracy’s original promise. Indeed, she thinks the future of the world depends on a rejection of this Thin Democracy.*

Why are we as societies creating a world that we as individuals abhor?

This is the question that’s propelled my life for decades now. It is really bewildering. We know that no human being actually gets up in the morning vowing, “Yeah, today I’m going to make

sure another child dies needlessly of hunger,” or muttering, “Sure, I’ll do my part to heat the planet and obliterate entire species.”

Yet each day over twenty-five thousand young children die of hunger and poverty, and roughly one hundred more species are forever gone. And the crises are not abating; they just keep

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whacking us: global climate chaos, terrorism, racial and religious divides, life-stunting poverty, pandemic disease . . . and now our own government's betrayal of constitutional principle.

Again . . . *why?*

I think for a lot of us, there is no real answer. Things just keep happening. We know *we're* not in control, and it seems like nobody is.

Sure, some people believe the problem is just us—human beings are just screwed up. Whether you call it original sin or simple selfishness, it's just who we are. Others are more targeted in assigning blame. For them, the root cause of our planet's crises is those *particular* people . . . the evil ones. Osama bin Laden, George W. Bush, Saddam Hussein, Dick Cheney. Still others believe we have no choice. We must conform to the now-proven economic laws of the global marketplace or suffer an even worse fate.

For all their many differences, the consequences of these views are similar. They leave us powerless. With no grip on how things got so bad, we have no clue as to where to start to correct them. So we're tempted to seize on any gesture of charity or any burst of protest—any random act of sanity. For a moment, at least, we can feel less useless in the face of the magnitude of the crises. Ultimately, though, acts of desperation contribute to our despair if we're unable to link our specific acts to real solutions.

Feeling powerless, we're robbed of energy and creativity, with hearts left open to fear and depression. No wonder the World Health Organization tells us depression is now the fourth leading cause of lost productive life worldwide—expected to jump to second place in fifteen years. Or that suicides worldwide now exceed homicides by 50 percent.

But what if . . . what if . . . together with our friends, family, and acquaintances, we could probe the root causes of the biggest threats to our planet. What if we were able to grasp something of the common origins of these threats and then identify powerful entry points to interrupt them? And more than that, what if we could then feel we are shifting the destructive underlying patterns towards health?

Now, that's power. Our power.

PEELING AWAY THE LAYERS

Over the years, I've come to sense that blaming the evil other stumbles on what logicians call an attribution error, the misplaced identification of cause. And it's a pretty serious error, for it releases us from asking really helpful questions: What is it about the current order we ourselves are creating that elicits so much pain and destruction? And peeling to the next layer: What are our own unexamined assumptions and beliefs that leave us feeling so powerless?

In the late nineteenth century, for example, Indians outnumbered the British civil servants ruling them by three hundred thousand to one. Yet Indians' widespread belief in their powerlessness continued until Gandhi and others re-framed reality, revealing the power that was theirs all along. In 1930, Indians declared independence and, sparked by Gandhi's example, thousands walked over two hundred miles to the sea to protest the British salt tax. Within seventeen years, the Indian people had ousted their colonial rulers.

It's pretty easy to see how mental concepts—ideas about reality—disempower others, whether it's belief in a ruler's "divine right" or a conviction about the inferiority of a lower caste. It's much harder to perceive the mental straightjackets we ourselves don every day.

Our future, though, may well depend on giving it a try.

In *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, social philosopher Erich Fromm observes that all human beings carry within us "frames of orientation" through which we make sense of the world. They determine—often literally—what we can see, what we believe humans are made of, and therefore what we believe is possible. In other words, just about everything.

Now this trait might be just fine . . . *if* our frames are life-serving, but, Fromm warns, they aren't always. To stir us to realize the danger within this unique aspect of our humanness—our filtering through socially determined frames—Fromm came up with this mind-bending

declaration: "It is man's humanity that makes him so inhuman."

Cultures live or die, Fromm is telling us, not by violence, or by chance, but ultimately by ideas. And unfortunately for our precious planet, much of the world appears locked within sets of ideas, including our ideas about democracy, that actually contribute to our "inhumanity"—whether that means inflicting or ignoring the suffering and loss mounting worldwide.

Please see what I call a *Spiral of Powerlessness*. It is the scary current of limiting beliefs and consequences in which I sense we're trapped.

Its premise is "lack."

There isn't enough of anything, neither enough "goods"—whether jobs or jungles—nor enough "goodness" because human beings are, well, pretty bad. These ideas have been drilled into us for centuries, as world religions have dwelt on human frailty, and Western political ideologies have picked up similar themes.

"*Homo homini lupus* [we are to one another as wolves]," wrote the influential seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes. Repeating a Roman aphorism—long before we'd learned how social wolves really are—Hobbes reduced us to cutthroat animals.

Private interest . . . is the only immutable point in the human heart.

—ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE,
DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA, 1835

From that narrow premise, it follows that it's best to mistrust deliberative problem-solving, distrust even democratic government, and grasp for an infallible law—the market!—driven by the only thing we can really count on, human selfishness. From there, wealth concentrates and suffering increases, confirming the dreary premises that set the spiral in motion in the first place.

What this downward spiral tells me is that we humans now suffer from what linguists call "hypocognition," the lack of a critical concept we need to thrive. And it's no trivial gap! Swept into the vortex of this destructive spiral, we're

missing an understanding of democracy vital and compelling enough to create the world we want.

Democracy? Why start there?

Democracy is *the* problem-solving device much of the world now embraces as the way to meet common needs and solve common problems. So if our definition of democracy is flawed, we are in big trouble.

ELECTIONS PLUS A MARKET . . . THAT'S DEMOCRACY?

To see what's missing, let's explore a bit more the dominant conception of reality in which our nation's culture, especially our view of democracy, is grounded. As just noted, its foundational premise is scarcity—there just isn't enough of *anything*—from love to jobs to parking spots. In such a world, only one type of person thrives. So if you peel away all the fluff, humans must have evolved as competitive materialists, elbowing one another out in a giant scramble over scarce stuff.

Absorbing this shabby caricature of humanity, we understandably see ourselves as incapable of making a success of democratic deliberation—assuming a selfish nature, we're sure somebody will always muck it up. Not to fret, though. We've been assured with ever-greater intensity since the 1980s that if real democracy—deliberating together to shape a common purpose and strategies—is suspect, there's a perfect solution: Just turn over our fate to an impersonal law that will settle things for us. Privatize and commoditize all that we can—from health care to prison management to schools—in order to take full advantage of what Ronald Reagan called "the magic of the market."

And government? It's something done *to* us or *for* us by taking "our money," so the less of it the better.

From these assumptions, it is easy to see why most Americans grow up absorbing the notion that democracy boils down to just two things—elected government and a market economy. Since in the United States we have both, there isn't

much for us to do except show up at the polls and shop.

I like to call this stripped-down duo Thin Democracy because it is feeble.

We breathe in this definition like invisible ether, so it's easy to jump over an unpleasant fact: Real democracy and our peculiar variant of a market economy are based on opposing principles. Democracy derives from the Greek: *demos* (people) plus *kratos* (rule). Thus democracy depends on the wide dispersion of power so that each citizen has both a vote and a voice. But our particular market economy, driven by one rule—that is, highest return to shareholder and corporate chiefs—moves inexorably in the opposite direction. By continually returning wealth to wealth, a one-rule economy leads to an ever-increasing concentration of power.

LIZZIE'S LESSONS

In the early 1900s, Lizzie Maggie tried to warn us. Lizzie was a concerned Quaker, worried that one-rule capitalism would do us in. So she came up with a board game she hoped would entertain us but also serve as an object lesson: It may take all night, but the rules of the game eventually drive property into the hands of one player, ending the fun for everybody.

Well, Lizzie's idea got into the hands of Parker Brothers. They called it Monopoly, and the rest, as they say, is history—history that, in this case, reveals just what Maggie was trying to tell us about one-rule economics. Just five companies sell well over half of all toys in America. More generally, in 1955, sales of the top five hundred corporations equaled one-third of the U.S. gross domestic product. They now account for two-thirds.

As corporate wealth concentrates, so does private: Here in the United States, between 1979 and 2001, family income among the wealthiest 5 percent leapt by 81 percent, but families in the bottom 20 percent saw virtually no gain. The gap separating America's average CEO's compensation and average worker's pay has widened

tenfold in a generation, so today the CEO earns as much by lunchtime on the first day of the year as a minimum wage worker earns the entire year.

In the United States over the last four years, the share of economic growth going to corporate profits increased by over two-thirds, while the share rewarding workers fell, even as their productivity continued to rise. Today America's biggest employer, Wal-Mart, pays its workers in inflation-adjusted dollars only 40 percent as much as the biggest employer in 1969, GM, paid its employees—not to mention the workers' benefits now stripped away.

For the first time, the four hundred richest Americans are all billionaires, with combined wealth of \$1.25 trillion, roughly comparable to the total annual income of half the world's people. Worldwide, the number of billionaires is exploding. Growing eight times faster than the global economy, it is now at 946 people with a total wealth almost 40 percent greater than the entire GDP of China.

So we didn't learn from Lizzie. We didn't get it—that to keep the game going, we citizens have to devise rules to ensure that wealth continually circulates. Otherwise, it all ends up in one player's pile. (In my household, it was usually my brother's!)

Yet under the spell of one-rule economics, most economists ignore this truth, as well as new jaw-dropping evidence that markets, by themselves, don't create livable societies.

Worldwide, during the 1990s, every one hundred dollars in economic growth reduced the poverty of the world's billion poorest people by just *sixty pennies*.

Denial runs so deep, though, that the pro-corporate British journal, *The Economist*, apparently with a straight face, can describe inequality deepening worldwide as a “snag” in the system. And well-meaning academics, with Columbia University's Jeffrey Sachs in the lead, can rally us to end global poverty by exporting our assumed-to-be successful economic model to them.

So we remain blind to Thin Democracy's pitfalls.

THIN DEMOCRACY'S PITFALLS

Death to Open Markets

Despite the myth of competitive capitalism, writes economist James Galbraith, “[C]orporations exist to control markets and often to replace them.” Two companies have succeeded in controlling roughly three-fourths of the global grain trade; one, Monsanto, accounts for 88 percent of the area planted worldwide with genetically modified seed and/or seed with biotech traits. Six corporations control most global media, from publishing to movies, and five control almost two-thirds of U.S. gasoline sales.

In our one-rule economy, concentrated economic power is inevitable, destroying the very open, competitive market that was the rationale for the whole set-up to begin with. Wasn't it? Competitive, fair markets cannot be sustained, it turns out, outside of a genuinely democratic polity.

Just as with the protection of civil liberties, open markets depend on *us*, on our creating and continually monitoring rules that keep them open. Corporations want the opposite; they seek control over markets to ensure highest returns—not because they're run by bad people, but because the rules we've set up encourage them to.

History bears out this truth: it was only when Americans did step up to the plate, especially in the period from 1933 to 1945, and created fairness rules—including the right of workers to organize, Social Security, and a legal minimum wage—that our country experienced a dramatic narrowing of the gap between most of us and a tiny minority at the top. The approach fostered broad-based economic prosperity for decades: Our median family income grew four times faster between 1947 and 1973 than it has since—as America has forsaken Lizzie's commonsense insight.

Unfortunately, Thin Democracy's pitfalls don't stop here.

Warping of Politics

Concentrated economic power, flowing inevitably from a one-rule economy, ends up infecting and warping our political system, as well. Sixty-one lobbyists now walk the corridors of power in Washington, D.C., for every one person we citizens have elected to represent our interests there.

[T]he liberty of a democracy is not safe if the people tolerate the growth of private power to the point where it becomes stronger than their democratic state itself. That, in its essence, is fascism . . .

—FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT, 1938

When citizens are outnumbered sixty-one to one, private power supersedes public power—as FDR warned us seven decades ago. Little wonder! To pick just a few frightening examples:

- for almost six years after 9/11, the chemical industry lobby was able to resist measures needed to secure fifteen thousand chemical plants against attack.
- while five thousand Americans die annually from food-borne illnesses, the food industry is able to block mandatory recalls.
- ex-oil lobbyist Philip Cooney was so tight with the Bush White House that he edited official reports to downplay climate change.
- pharmaceutical lobbyists helped craft a healthcare law that forbids Medicare to negotiate drug prices—while we pay double what Europeans do for identical drugs.

So more and more Americans feel their democracy has been stolen, and they know by whom. Ninety percent of us agree that corporations have too much influence in Washington.

DEEPER DANGERS

More than unworkable, Thin Democracy is dangerous. The power it gives corporations to put

their own short-term gain ahead of our survival is only one danger.

The Fragility of Centralized Power

Contrary to lessons drummed into us, concentrated power is often not resilient, efficient, or smart. The Inca and the Aztecs, huge civilizations, fell to conquistadors in no time, while the leaderless, decentralized Apaches fended off harsh attacks for two centuries. Concentrated power often isolates itself and thus fails to learn. Think only of the, “I’m in the decider” bunker stance of the Bush White House that led the U.S. into Iraq, one of our country’s most horrific foreign policy blunders.

Missing Problem Solvers

The flipside is that the centralized power of Thin Democracy leaves most of us feeling powerless, robbing the planet of just the problem solvers we most need. It encourages us to look to the “market” or to CEOs or to government higher-ups for answers, but our planet’s problems are too complex, pervasive, and interconnected to be addressed from the top down. Solutions depend on the insights, experience, and ingenuity of people most affected—all thwarted when citizens are cut out and manipulated, and when decisions get made secretly by the few.

Put slightly differently, solutions require in-the-moment inventiveness and widespread behavior changes, and both depend on the engagement and “buy-in” of citizens. So Thin Democracy undermines precisely the broad-based commitment our world so desperately needs.

Misaligned with Our Nature

Thin Democracy can’t create healthy societies because it is misaligned with human nature in two ways. Denying our rich complexity, it fails to tap the best in us and fails to protect us from the worst.

By “best” I mean several innate needs and capacities. They include our needs to connect with others, for basic fairness, and for efficacy,

as well as the need to feel that our lives matter, which for many people means contributing to something grander than our own survival.

Forcing us to buy these needs, Thin Democracy fuels paralyzing despair and alienation.

Ironically, Thin Democracy doesn’t register our really negative potential, either. Let me be clear. I don’t mean the capacity of a tiny minority of us; I mean the vast majority. The Holocaust doesn’t prove what a crazed dictator and some sadistic guards will do. Actually, it proves the depravity most normal people will express, given the “right” conditions.

To bring home this unhappy truth, British historian Christopher Browning reports that as late as March, 1942, the vast majority—75 to 80 percent—of all victims of the Holocaust were still alive, but “a mere eleven months later” most were dead.

These murders happened, Browning says, because “ordinary” people became killers. He tells, for example, of Reserve Battalion 101—about five hundred men from Hamburg, Germany, many of whom were middle-aged reservists drafted in the fall of 1939. From working and lower middle-classes, these men with no military police experience were sent to Poland on a bloody mission—the total extermination of Jews in Poland’s many remote hamlets.

Within four months, they had shot to death, at point-blank range, at least thirty-eight thousand Jews and had another forty-five thousand deported to the concentration camp at Treblinka.

“Though almost all of them—at least initially—were horrified and disgusted,” over time, social modeling processes took their toll, as did guilt-induced persuasion by buddies who did the killing, until up to 90 percent of the men in Battalion 101 were involved in the shootings.

I first learned about Battalion 101 from Philip Zimbardo. You might recognize the name. Zimbardo is the professor who organized the infamous “prison experiment” at Stanford in 1971. He put young people who’d “tested normal” into a mock prison setting where they were divided into prisoners and guards, dressed for their roles, and told the experiment would last two weeks.

But on the sixth day, Zimbardo abruptly halted the experiment. He had to. Using some techniques eerily similar to those in Abu Ghraib prison over three decades later, the “guards” had begun brutalizing their “prisoners” causing severe emotional breakdown. Professor Zimbardo has since acknowledged that one reason he stopped the experiment is that his girlfriend told him he himself had begun behaving like a warden—“more concerned,” as he put it later, “about the security of ‘my prison’ than the needs of the young men entrusted to my care . . .”

In the last one hundred years, humans have killed roughly forty million other humans not in war, as we normally define it, but in massive assaults on civilians, from the fifteen million lost in the Russian Gulag to almost one million in Rwanda. Whether we’re talking about a psychologist’s carefully designed experiment or the current genocide in Darfur, the inescapable proof is in: Decent people do evil things under the “right conditions.”

And what is one condition certain to bring forth brutality? Extreme power imbalances that arise inevitably in a range of social orders. One of these is Thin Democracy.

Failure to Bring Meaning

Finally, Thin Democracy is dangerously vulnerable because its materialistic premise can’t satisfy our higher selves’ yearning for transcendent meaning.

Thin Democracy’s narrow, insulting assumptions about human nature cannot sustain dedication and sacrifice. Many U.S. soldiers now risk their lives in war, believing they’re serving a high calling. But the built-in logic of one-rule economics mocks their idealism. Since 9/11, thousands of American soldiers have made the ultimate sacrifice in Iraq, while executives of U.S. armament corporations have made a killing, doubling their own compensation.

At the same time, Thin Democracy’s demeaning materialism and its concentrated wealth help to swell the numbers of excluded people who feel humiliated and angry. Understandably, these feelings open some hearts to extremist, violent ideologies—both religious and secular—that claim high moral ground and offer adherents everlasting glory.

“My grandmother’s gone to heaven because she shot the Israelis,” explained six-year-old Israa, as she played beneath a photo of seventy-year-old Fatima Najjar, who blew herself up in Gaza in 2006. Young men have long seemed most susceptible to violent ideologies, but a sixty-five-year-old in Gaza told the British *Observer*, “I know at least twenty of us [elder women] who want to put on the [suicide bomber’s] belt.” They’ve “found a use for themselves,” she said.

How deep runs our need to feel useful, a need unmet for so many people in today’s world. Ultimately, Thin Democracy can’t hold a candle to the fanatics’ uplifting, absolutist visions—right or left. In all, Thin Democracy gives democracy itself a bad name.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Lappé describes our dominant mental image of democracy as “thin.” Explain in what sense democracy, as we tend to think of it, can be viewed as “thin.” Discuss how we might make democracy “thicker,” or stronger.
2. According to Lappé’s analysis, the popular board game Monopoly explains a lot about what is wrong with American democracy. How can economic assumptions and economic power inhibit democracy as a *political* ideal?