Democracy is Bankrupt

CrimethInc.
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Whathappenedtoalltheoptimismofthelastelectionseason,allthatbusinessabouthopeandchange?Fordecades,we’vepinnedourhopesononecandidateafteranother,butnowitseemslikepeoplearefinallygivinguponthewholecharade.Theonlyoneswhostilltaketheseriouslyaretheprotestersplayingdemocracyinthestreet.

Whyhaddemocracyfailedus?IsittheElectoralCollege,votingmachines,gerrymandering—the sort of thing that could be remedied by electoral reform?Thatwouldn’texplainwhyw’re stilldisappointedwiththeresultsevenwhenourfavoritecandidategetsin.

Isitcorporateinfluencepervertingpoliticians’agendasandcontrollingthemedia?Sure—but whenpowerisdistributedaccordingto_whorakesinthemostprofit,thecan’thelpbutaffect politics.Aslongasperivatepropertyexists,therichwillalwayshavemoreleverageoveroursociety,whetherornottheycanliterallybuyvotes.


Wekeepblamingspecificpoliticiansandpoliticalparties,asifitwerejustamatterofpersonal failings. But any system that doesn’t work unless the people using it are perfect is a bad system. What if some politicians really do mean well, but there’s nothing they can do? All the good intentions in the world won’t help if the structure is broken.

Solets’tryanotherquestion:

Why do we talk about changing our rulers when we really want to change our lives?

Theanswerisobvious:becauseourrulershave morecontroloverourlivesthanwedo. But changing rulers isn’t going to fix that. Is getting to choose the lesser of two evils really the best of allpossibleworlds?

Imagineifwecouldhavecompletecontroloverourownlives. That’s something that will never appear on a ballot. What kind of decisions can be made by voting—and what kind of structures does it take to impose them?

ThinkaboutwhatgoesoninthePentagonandtheKremlinandtheofficesofeverytown hall. Those day-to-day activities are the same under Democrats as under Republicans; they’re not muchdifferenttodaythantheywereahundredyearsago.Whoeverhappensbeatoreoperating it, the machinery of the state imposes its own logic: administration, coercion, control. Politicians promise us the world, but their job is to keep it out of our hands—to govern it.

Ourancestorsfoughthardtooverthrowthekingswhoruledthem. When they finally succeeded, they kept the structures the kings had established—the same ministries and courts and armies—imagining that these could be run for the common good. But whoever is on the other side of that apparatus—be it a king, a president, or an electorate—those on the receiving end of
governing experience the same thing. The laws, administrators, and police of a democracy are just as impersonal and coercive as the laws, administrators, and police of a dictatorship. The problem is the institution of government itself, which keeps the governed at a distance from their own power.

As Oscar Wilde put it, democracy is “the bludgeoning of the people by the people for the people.” The essence of democracy is not just collective participation in decision-making, but also the apparatus to force decisions on everyone whether they voted for them or not. If we make our ideal a miniature version of this—“direct democracy”—it will never deliver the freedom we desire. We have to dream bigger, looking back to how our ancestors did things before they were ruled by kings, and around at all the parts of our lives that are still free from top-down political control.

Let’s do away with representation; the gulf is always too wide between what we would do ourselves and what is done in our name. Let’s do away with the idea that there can only be one legitimate decision-making body, one bottleneck through which all decisions must pass. Let’s build new structures that promote autonomy and free association, making decisions by consensus where we choose to come together and retaining our independence otherwise. Freedom means nothing less.

Decentralizing power means that all of us can take our lives in our own hands and realize our potential as we see fit. When our social structures are voluntary, only the ones that are truly in everyone’s best interest will persist. This might not be easy at first, but it beats pandering to the fear-mongering of those who benefit from control and hierarchy.

Wait, Let’s Be Pragmatic Here!

All this sounds great in theory, but doesn’t it leave us on the sidelines? Maybe democracy is rotten to its core, but it’s the only game in town. How can we have any influence in our society if we refuse to participate?

Again, let’s ask this question the other way around. What incentive do politicians have to grant us what we want if we only ask nicely? Corporations will always have more money with which to buy them; back-room deals will always be more appealing. The only way we can get leverage on the ones who hold power is by threatening to take that power away from them.

This has to mean more than shuffling back and forth between different parties. When we build our own grassroots momentum, developing the capability to make the changes we need directly, politicians are forced to hurry to keep up with us, scrambling to grant our demands before they lose legitimacy altogether. If we want to have leverage on the government, the most effective way for those of us who aren’t millionaires or party bureaucrats to do that is to bypass the established channels and contest their authority. So the same principles that could take us beyond democracy—direct action, mutual aid, liberty and autonomy—are also the only ones that can help us wield any real power while it persists.

Beggars can’t be choosers. When we only petition, we give up the power to determine what the choices are in the first place. Let’s stop reacting to our rulers and set our own agenda.
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Retrieved on 2017.02.14 from

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