

Cornel West

Democracy Matters Are Frightening in Our Time

by
Cornel West

A decade ago I wrote *Race Matters* in order to spark a candid public conversation about America's most explosive issue and most difficult dilemma: the ways in which the vicious legacy of white supremacy contributes to the arrested development of American democracy. This book—the sequel to *Race Matters*—will look unflinchingly at the waning of democratic energies and practices in our present age of the American empire. There is a deeply troubling deterioration of democratic powers in America today. The rise of an ugly imperialism has been aided by an unholy alliance of the plutocratic elites and the Christian Right, and also by a massive disaffection of so many voters who see too little difference between two corrupted parties, with blacks being taken for granted by the Democrats, and with the deep disaffection of youth. The energy of the youth support for the Howard Dean campaign and avid participation in the recent anti-globalization protests are promising signs, however, of the potential to engage them.

As I've traveled across this country giving speeches and attending gatherings for the past thirty years, I've always been impressed by the intelligence, imagination, creativity, and humor of the American people, then found myself wondering how we end up with such mediocre and milquetoast leaders in public office. It's as if the best and brightest citizens boycott elected public office, while the most ambitious go into the private sector. In a capitalist society that is where the wealth, influence, and status are. But we've always been a capitalist society, and we've had some quality leaders in the past. Why the steep decline? As with sitcoms on television, the standards have dropped so low, we cannot separate a joke from an insult. When Bush smiles after his carefully scripted press conferences of little substance, we do not know whether he is laughing at us or getting back at us as we laugh at him—as the press meanwhile hurries to concoct a story out of his clichés and shibboleths.

In our market-driven empire, elite salesmanship to the demos has taken the place of genuine democratic leadership. The majority of voting-age citizens do not vote. They are not stupid (though shortsighted). They know that political leadership is confined to two parties that are both parasitic on corporate money and interests. To choose one or the other is a little like black people choosing between the left-wing and right-wing versions of the Dred Scott decision. There is a difference but not much—though every difference does matter.

Yet a narrow rant against the new imperialism or emerging plutocracy is not enough. Instead we must dip deep into often-untapped wells of our democratic tradition to fight the imperialist strain and plutocratic impulse in American life. We must not allow our elected officials—many beholden to unaccountable corporate elites—to bastardize and pulverize the precious word democracy as they fail to respect and act on genuine democratic ideals.

The problems plaguing our democracy are not only ones of disaffection and disillusionment. The greatest threats come in the form of the rise of three dominating, antidemocratic dogmas. These three dogmas, promoted by the most powerful forces in our world, are rendering American democracy vacuous. The first dogma of free-market fundamentalism posits the unregulated and unfettered market as idol and fetish. This glorification of the market has led to a callous corporate-dominated political economy in which business leaders (their wealth and power) are to be worshipped—even despite the recent scandals—and the most powerful corporations are delegated magical powers of salvation rather than relegated to democratic scrutiny concerning both the ethics of their business practices and their treatment of workers. This largely unexamined and unquestioned dogma that supports the policies of both Democrats and Republicans in the United States—and those of most political parties in other parts of the world—is a major threat to the quality of democratic life and the well-being of most peoples across the globe. It yields an obscene level of wealth inequality, along with its corollary of intensified class hostility and hatred. It also redefines the terms of what we should be striving for in life, glamorizing materialistic gain, narcissistic pleasure, and the pursuit of narrow individualistic preoccupations—especially for young people here and abroad.

Free-market fundamentalism—just as dangerous as the religious fundamentalisms of our day—trivializes the concern for public interest. The overwhelming power and influence of plutocrats and oligarchs in the

economy put fear and insecurity in the hearts of anxiety-ridden workers and render money-driven, poll-obsessed elected officials deferential to corporate goals of profit, often at the cost of the common good. This illicit marriage of corporate and political elites—so blatant and flagrant in our time—not only undermines the trust of informed citizens in those who rule over them. It also promotes the pervasive sleepwalking of the populace, who see that the false prophets are handsomely rewarded with money, status, and access to more power. This profit-driven vision is sucking the democratic life out of American society.

In short, the dangerous dogma of free-market fundamentalism turns our attention away from schools to prisons, from workers' conditions to profit margins, from health clinics to high-tech facial surgeries, from civic associations to pornographic Internet sites, and from children's care to strip clubs. The fundamentalism of the market puts a premium on the activities of buying and selling, consuming and taking, promoting and advertising, and devalues community, compassionate charity, and improvement of the general quality of life. How ironic that in America we've moved so quickly from Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Let Freedom Ring!" to "Bling! Bling!"—as if freedom were reducible to simply having material toys, as dictated by free-market fundamentalism.

The second prevailing dogma of our time is aggressive militarism, of which the new policy of preemptive strike against potential enemies is but an extension. This new doctrine of U.S. foreign policy goes far beyond our former doctrine of preventive war. It green-lights political elites to sacrifice U.S. soldiers—who are disproportionately working class and youth of color—in adventurous crusades. This dogma posits military might as salvific in a world in which he who has the most and biggest weapons is the most moral and masculine, hence worthy of policing others. In practice, this dogma takes the form of unilateral intervention, colonial invasion, and armed occupation abroad. It has fueled a foreign policy that shuns multilateral cooperation of nations and undermines international structures of deliberation. Fashioned out of the cowboy mythology of the American frontier fantasy, the dogma of aggressive militarism is a lone-ranger strategy that employs "spare-no-enemies" tactics. It guarantees a perennial resorting to the immoral and base manner of settling conflict, namely, the perpetration of the very sick and cowardly terrorism it claims to contain and eliminate. On the domestic front, this dogma expands police power, augments the prison-industrial complex, and legitimates unchecked male power (and violence) at

home and in the workplace. It views crime as a monstrous enemy to crush (targeting poor people) rather than as an ugly behavior to change (by addressing the conditions that often encourage such behavior).

As with the bully on the block, one's own interests and aims define what is moral and one's own anxieties and insecurities dictate what is masculine. Yet the use of naked force to resolve conflict often backfires. The arrogant hubris that usually accompanies this use of force tends to lead toward instability—and even destruction—in the regions where we have sought to impose our will. Violence is readily deployed by those who cloak themselves in innocence—those unwilling to examine themselves and uninterested in counting the number of innocent victims they kill. Note the Bush administration's callous disregard for both the U.S. soldiers and innocent Iraqis killed in our recent adventurous invasion. The barbaric abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib is a flagrant example.

The third prevailing dogma in this historic moment is escalating authoritarianism. This dogma is rooted in our understandable paranoia toward potential terrorists, our traditional fear of too many liberties, and our deep distrust of one another. The Patriot Act is but the peak of an iceberg that has widened the scope of the repression of our hard-earned rights and hard-fought liberties. The Supreme Court has helped lead the way with its support of the Patriot Act. There are, however, determined democrats on the Court who are deeply concerned, as expressed in a recent speech of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg: "On important issues," she said, "like the balance between liberty and security, if the public doesn't care, then the security side is going to outweigh the other." The cowardly terrorist attacks of 9/11 have been cannon fodder for the tightening of surveillance. The loosening of legal protection and slow closing of meaningful access to the oversight of governmental activities—measures deemed necessary in the myopic view of many—are justified by the notion that safety trumps liberty and security dictates the perimeters of freedom.

Meanwhile the market-driven media—fueled by our vast ideological polarization and abetted by profit-hungry monopolies—have severely narrowed our political "dialogue." The major problem is not the vociferous shouting from one camp to the other; rather it is that many have given up even being heard. We are losing the very value of dialogue—especially respectful communication—in the name of the sheer force of naked power.

This is the classic triumph of authoritarianism over the kind of questioning, compassion, and hope requisite for any democratic experiment.

We have witnessed similar developments in our schools and universities—increasing monitoring of viewpoints, disrespecting of those with whom one disagrees, and foreclosing of the common ground upon which we can listen and learn. The major culprit here is not “political correctness,” a term coined by those who tend to trivialize the scars of others and minimize the suffering of victims while highlighting their own wounds. Rather the challenge is mustering the courage to scrutinize all forms of dogmatic policing of dialogue and to shatter all authoritarian strategies of silencing voices. We must respect the scars and wounds of each one of us—even if we are sometimes wrong (or right!).

DEMOCRACY MATTERS ARE FRIGHTENING IN OUR TIME PRECISELY because the three dominant dogmas of free-market fundamentalism, aggressive militarism, and escalating authoritarianism are snuffing out the democratic impulses that are so vital for the deepening and spread of democracy in the world. In short, we are experiencing the sad American imperial devouring of American democracy. This historic devouring in our time constitutes an unprecedented gangsterization of America—an unbridled grasp at power, wealth, and status. And when the most powerful forces in a society—and an empire—promote a suffocation of democratic energies, the very future of genuine democracy is jeopardized.

How ironic that 9/11—a vicious attack on innocent civilians by gangsters—becomes the historic occasion for the full-scale gangsterization of America. Do we now live in a postdemocratic age in which the very “democratic” rhetoric of an imperial America hides the waning of a democratic America? Are there enough democratic energies here and abroad to fight for and win back our democracy given the undeniable power of the three dominant dogmas that fuel imperial America? Or will the American empire go the way of the Leviathans of the past—the Roman, Ottoman, Soviet, and British empires? Can any empire resist the temptation to become drunk with the wine of world power or become intoxicated with the hubris and greed of imperial possibilities? Has not every major empire pursued quixotic dreams of global domination—of shaping the world in its image and for its interest—that resulted in internal decay and doom? Can we committed democrats avert this world-historical pattern and possible fate?

Our fundamental test may lie in our continuing response to 9/11. With the last remnants of the repressive Soviet empire (North Korea and Cuba) proud yet weak, the postimperial European Union in search of an identity and unity, the Asian powers steady but hesitant, and African and Latin American regimes still grappling with postcolonial European and U.S. economic domination, the American empire struts across the globe like a behemoth. We have built up uncontested military might, undeniable cultural power, and transnational corporate and financial hegemony—yet with a huge trade deficit, budget deficit, and intensifying class, racial, religious, and ideological warfare at home. During the cold war, these internal conflicts were often contained by focusing on a common external foe—Communism. Then, for a brief decade, Americans turned on one another in “the culture wars.” The well-financed right wing convinced many fellow citizens that the Left—from progressive professors to neoliberal Clintonites, multicultural artists to mainstream feminists, gay and lesbian activists to ecological preservationists—was leading America over the abyss. After 9/11, unity seemed possible—but only if it fit the mold of a narrow patriotism and a revenge-driven lust for a war on terrorism. And as the old-style imperialism of the new hawks in the Bush administration made manifest—through subtle manipulation and outright mendacity—the newly aggressive American empire would not only police the world in light of its interests but also impose its imperial vision and policy—by hook or by crook—on a sleepwalking U.S. citizenry.

Ironically, this vision and policy is, in some ways, continuous with those of earlier administrations that rarely questioned the dogmas of free-market fundamentalism (look at the disaster of Clinton’s NAFTA on Canada and Mexico), aggressive militarism (abusive police power in poor communities of color at home), and escalating authoritarianism (targeted crime fighting and mandatory sentencing for incarceration). But the coarse and unabashed imperial devouring of democracy of the Bush administration is a low point in America’s rocky history of sustaining its still evolving experiment in democracy. And now instead of Communism as our external foe we have Islamic terrorism. In addition, the prevailing conservative culture has made the Left—progressives and liberals—internal enemies. They are considered out of step with the drumbeat of patriots, who defer to the imperial aims, free-market policies, cultural conservative views, and personal pieties of the Bush administration. To put it bluntly, we have reached a rare fork in the road of American history.

Democracy matters require that we keep track of the intimate link between domestic issues and foreign policies. Like the empires of old—especially the Roman and British ones—what we do abroad affects what we can do here and what we do here shapes what we can do abroad. Probably the most difficult challenge facing our democracy, in the near term at any rate, is that of the centrality of Middle East politics for the American empire. If we are to stabilize the world and enrich democracy in the world, we must confront the anti-Semitic hostility of oil-rich autocratic Arab regimes to Israel's very existence, as well as Israelis' occupation and subjugation of Palestinian lands and people. We must act more decisively to stop both the barbaric Palestinian suicide bombers' murdering of innocent Israeli civilians and the inhumane Israeli military attacks on unarmed Palestinian refugees. These explosive issues test the capacity of all Americans to engage in a respectful and candid dialogue; indeed, they may be pivotal in determining the destiny of American democracy.

The ugly terrorist attacks on innocent civilians on 9/11 plunged the whole country into the blues. Never before have Americans of *all* classes, colors, regions, religions, genders, and sexual orientations felt unsafe, unprotected, subject to random violence, and hated. Yet to have been designated and treated as a nigger in America for over 350 years has been to feel unsafe, unprotected, subject to random violence, and hated. The high point of the black response to American terrorism (or niggerization) is found in the compassionate and courageous voice of Emmett Till's mother, who stepped up to the lectern at Pilgrim Baptist Church in Chicago in 1955 at the funeral of her fourteen-year-old son, after his murder by American terrorists, and said: "I don't have a minute to hate. I'll pursue justice for the rest of my life." And that is precisely what Mamie Till Mobley did until her death in 2003. Her commitment to justice had nothing to do with naïveté. When Mississippi officials tried to keep any images of Emmett's brutalized body out of the press—his head had swollen to five times its normal size—Mamie Till Mobley held an open-casket service for all the world to see. That is the essence of the blues: to stare painful truths in the face and persevere without cynicism or pessimism.

Much of the future of democracy in America and the world hangs on grasping and preserving the rich democratic tradition that produced the Douglasses, Kings, Coltranes, and Mobleys in the face of terrorist attacks and cowardly assaults. Since 9/11 we have experienced the niggerization of America, and as we struggle against the imperialistic arrogance of the us--

versus-them, revenge-driven policies of the Bush administration, we as a blues nation must learn from a blues people how to keep alive our deep democratic energies in dark times rather than resort to the tempting and easier response of militarism and authoritarianism.

No democracy can flourish against the corruptions of plutocratic, imperial forces—or withstand the temptations of militarism in the face of terrorist hate—without a citizenry girded by these three moral pillars of Socratic questioning, prophetic witness, and tragicomic hope. The hawks and proselytizers of the Bush administration have professed themselves to be the guardians of American democracy, but there is a deep democratic tradition in this country that speaks powerfully against their nihilistic, antidemocratic abuse of power and that can fortify genuine democrats today in the fight against imperialism. That democratic fervor is found in the beacon calls for imaginative self-creation in Ralph Waldo Emerson, in the dark warnings of imminent self-destruction in Herman Melville, in the impassioned odes to democratic possibility in Walt Whitman. It is found most urgently and poignantly in the prophetic and powerful voices of the long black freedom struggle—from the democratic eloquence of Frederick Douglass to the soaring civic sermons of Martin Luther King Jr., in the wrenching artistic honesty of James Baldwin and Toni Morrison, and in the expressive force and improvisatory genius of the blues/jazz tradition, all forged in the night side of America and defying the demeaning strictures of white supremacy. The greatest intellectual, moral, political, and spiritual resources in America that may renew the soul and preserve the future of American democracy reside in this multiracial, rich democratic heritage.

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