
Anabaptism and Democracy: A Constructive or Deconstructive Relationship?¹

Matt Hamsher

I thank Ted Grimsrud for his insightful article and for continuing the conversation on the issue of Anabaptist engagement with the wider culture and with the political process in particular. The relationship between the Anabaptist, Democracy, and Empire Stories is crucial for contemporary Christian discipleship and ethics. I doubt whether anyone would argue with placing the Anabaptist Story and the Empire Story on opposite ends of the continuum, but I have reservations about the placement of the Democracy Story. On the basis of that Story's advocacy of noncoercive participation, Grimsrud seems to be placing it without qualification closer to the Anabaptist Story on the continuum, in opposition to the Empire Story's "conquest, domination and widespread violence."² Yet the Democracy Story, even in its radical form, has much more in common with the Empire Story, as both share presuppositions about the depravity of human nature and the need for violence to guarantee the social contract. While Grimsrud acknowledges in a footnote that "we should also offer critiques of the Democracy Story itself insofar as it sometimes allows for the use of violence,"³ what if the Democracy Story no less than the Empire Story is founded upon the violence of self-assertion at the expense of others?

This is not to deny that "Mennonites have experienced (and even helped to foster) the American ideals of tolerance, freedom of religion, economic opportunity, protection of rights, free speech – the stuff of the Democracy Story."⁴ However, two questions must be asked before we assume too close a connection between the two stories: Is the rationale for supporting these ideals the same? Do these ideals really constitute the "stuff" of the Democracy Story? Our response to these questions will depend largely upon our

understanding of the Democracy Story and our definition of its core values. Grimsrud draws, for example, from Walter Karp, Noam Chomsky, Jonathan Schell, and Jeffrey Stout to differentiate the Democracy Story from the Empire Story by separating a peaceful, participatory, republican civic America from an imperial, militaristic, nation-state America.⁵ While this distinction is eminently helpful for Anabaptists seeking to distinguish their support for civic America from complicity in the violence of imperial America as they become more involved in political advocacy, I am not so sure it allows Mennonites to embrace all of civic America without reservation. Can America as Empire exist without at least the complicit support of civic America?

Furthermore, are Karp, Chomsky, et al. the best representatives of the Democracy Story as understood and practiced on Capitol Hill, on Main Street, or even in the academy? How helpful is this portrayal of the Democracy Story for understanding the political climate in the US today? Does the Democracy Story really offer a powerful alternative to the Empire Story, or does it only offer an opportunity to hold it accountable to its own professed values? I propose that viewing the development of the Democracy Story through the work of Thomas Hobbes, Immanuel Kant, and John Rawls offers another insight into the values of that story, or at least points toward the need for greater critical engagement before it can be embraced so wholeheartedly.

At the root of political philosophy as espoused by Hobbes, Kant, and Rawls lies an analysis of the nature of human social interaction as essentially one of perpetual conflict. Infamously described by Hobbes as being “nasty, brutish, and short,”⁶ human social reality understood this way is also foundational for both Kant and Rawls. Other persons are assumed to be enemies, or at least potential competitors, for the satisfaction of personal ends that ultimately are mutually exclusive. For Hobbes, the only rational solution to this unhappy state of affairs resides in an appeal to the external force of law.⁷ So too Kant, in *Perpetual Peace*, asserts that

A state of peace among men who live side by side is not the natural state (*status naturalis*), which is rather to be described as a state of war: that is to say, although there is not perhaps actual hostility, yet there is a constant threatening that an outbreak may occur. Thus the state of peace must be *established*. [original emphasis] For the mere cessation of hostilities is no guarantee of peaceful relations, and unless this guarantee is given by every

individual to his neighbor – which can only be done in a state of society regulated by law – one man is at liberty to challenge another and treat him as an enemy.⁸

An egoistic pursuit of individual ends inevitably resulting in conflict is also apparent in Rawls's attempt to return to an "original position" in order "to derive satisfactory principles from the weakest possible assumptions" in which "a deep opposition of interests is presumed to obtain."⁹ Although significant advances in reducing the potential abuse of this power are made in the transitions from Hobbes's monarchy to Kant's republic to Rawls's modern liberal democracy, the necessary exercise of violent coercive power remains, and so does the temptation for elected leaders or even a democratic majority to wield that power unjustly in order to advance their own interests.

Indeed, as Alasdair MacIntyre has described the contemporary moral experience, the external application of force as the security of morality results in using force or manipulation to achieve one's own ends.

Seeking to protect the autonomy that we have learned to prize, we aspire ourselves *not* to be manipulated by others; seeking to incarnate our own principles and stand-point in the world of practice, we find no way open to us to do so except by directing toward others those very manipulative models of relationship which each of us aspires to resist in our own case.¹⁰

This dependence upon coercive power and manipulation in order to protect the egoistic pursuit of one's own life and liberty transforms moral debate into a struggle for power. It also works against the development of internal sources of motivation for benevolent action on behalf of others, something that I believe is an essential core value of the Anabaptist Story.

Might the recent US presidential election, for example, demonstrate how many Christians (and possibly Mennonites, too) voted for George W. Bush's "family values" platform out of a desire to manipulate others into moral agreement rather than out of a compassionate concern for those suffering as a result of immoral and unjust laws and policies? A democracy is always in danger of being transformed into a theocracy whenever control of the government becomes a substitute for Spirit-empowered witness that always holds out hope for the conversion of one's neighbors. If fellow citizens cannot be trusted to discern the truth together, then they must be manipulated into moral action, by force if necessary. While the tradition of radical protest against injustice within the larger

Democracy Story appears to reflect a greater openness to dialogue, part of its legacy is not mutual cooperation or commitment to dialogue but co-option of power and the ability to manipulate others in a new, albeit more just, direction.

The appropriate parallel to the core Anabaptist conviction that Grimsrud identifies as the refusal to fight in wars¹¹ and the belief that violence is not necessary to resolve conflicts of interests is the conviction from the Democracy Story that violent coercion *is* necessary to limit the violence that occurs as a result of a natural state of war between human individuals. I therefore disagree that only the Democracy Story “raised *for the first time* the possibility that violence and human government need not be inextricably linked” (my emphasis).¹² Does this statement not marginalize (even if unintentionally) Jesus’ teachings on nonviolent human social interaction, and the subsequent organization of the church as a *polis* that could exist as a political body without resort to violent coercion?¹³ It was not the Democracy Story that *first raised* the possibility that violence and human government need not be inextricably linked, but Jesus and the New Testament church – a vision that was caught and given new life in the Anabaptist Story.

Other parallel but nevertheless distinct convictions may include these: (1) the Anabaptist conviction of the church as free from state control, against the liberal democratic conviction of the state as free from church control; (2) the Anabaptist affirmation of upside-down social power (which John Howard Yoder calls “a theologically mandatory vesting of the right of dissent”), against a democratic affirmation of equality (which Yoder describes as the idea “that most people get to talk or that everybody gets counted”);¹⁴ and (3) an Anabaptist commitment to an alternative economics, against the close identification of the Democracy Story with free-market capitalism (at least in the United States).¹⁵

I do affirm with Grimsrud that the emergence of the secular Democracy Story offers new possibilities for nonviolent cooperation and demonstrates a greater openness for critique. The need for engagement is obvious not only because we must proclaim Jesus as Lord over all areas of life but because, as Grimsrud cautions:

If we do not have a clear sense for how our theologically-based convictions *link* with pragmatically- and humanistically-grounded convictions we will be more likely to toss them aside when they are challenged. We all know stories of people who “lose their faith” when they encounter a wider world that their narrow “first language” has not prepared them to deal with.¹⁶

This seems to be one of the parallel dangers presented by Anabaptist opportunities for engagement in the wider culture. If we withdraw, we may become unable to speak to competing claims to “lordship.” But the twin temptation is equally dangerous – to become engaged uncritically. That there is no single source or definition of the Democracy Story may demonstrate the validity of arguments by Ted Koontz and Stanley Hauerwas on needing to be clear about the distinctive beliefs of the Anabaptist Story. We must deconstruct which parts of the Democracy Story we are advocating and which ones we must challenge. Thus, as Yoder writes in “The Christian Case for Democracy,”

[I]f we claim for democracy the status of a social institution *sui generis*, we shall inflate ourselves and destroy our neighbors through the demonic demands of the claims we make for our system and we shall pollute our Christian faith by making of it a civil religion. If on the other hand we protect ourselves from the Constantinianism of that view of democracy, we may find the realistic liberty to foster and to celebrate relative democratization as one of the prophetic ministries of a servant people in a world we do not control.¹⁷

The crucial variable is not democracy, but a supererogatory concern for others that is both central to the Anabaptist Story and shared by some within the Democracy Story.

Finally, I would like to put forward Just Peacemaking Theory as one example of a strategy of engagement that attempts to be both biblically based and practically viable in the public square, i.e., both faithful to the Anabaptist Story and supportive of the positive features of the Democracy Story.

One of the ten practices of Just Peacemaking Theory is to “Advance Democracy, Human Rights, and Religious Liberty” in recognition of the fact that “the more democratic the states are, the more peaceful their relations are likely to be. In their disputes with each other, democracies are more likely to employ democratic means of peaceful conflict resolution.”¹⁸ Moreover, the development of democratic reforms can be linked with a greater respect for human rights and religious liberty, the “stuff” of democracy to which Grimsrud refers. The particular strength of Just Peacemaking Theory as it relates to the Anabaptist Story, however, is that it does not rest upon advocacy of democracy and human rights alone. Encouragement for democratic forms of government is joined by four principles that stress the need for peacemaking initiatives: supporting nonviolent direct action; taking independent initiatives

to reduce threat; using cooperative conflict resolution; and acknowledging responsibility for conflict and injustice, and seeking repentance and forgiveness. These transforming initiatives follow closely from those taught by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, and they affirm what I have referred to as central to the Anabaptist Story – a supererogatory ethic in human social relationships that goes beyond traditional understandings of social contract or covenant theories. Just Peacemaking Theory thus allows us to “celebrate relative democratization” while at the same time challenging the coercive violence of both the Democracy Story and the Empire Story.

Notes

¹ I am grateful to Glen Stassen and Rob Muthiah for their constructive suggestions for improving earlier drafts of this essay.

² Ted Grimsrud, “Anabaptism and Democracy,” *MQR* 78.3 (2004): 342.

³ *Ibid.*, Note 52, 360.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 346.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 346-51.

⁶ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: Parts I and II* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1958), 106-07.

⁷ John Howard Yoder seems to make a similar point in his essay, “The Christian Case for Democracy,” in *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 169: “Some of the contract theories are relatively pessimistic in that they see the purpose of the contract to be reciprocal control over the threats which we represent to each other.”

⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, trans. M. Campbell Smith (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1948), 9.

⁹ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), 456-57.

¹⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, second ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 68.

¹¹ Grimsrud, 344.

¹² *Ibid.*, Note 4, 344.

¹³ Cf. John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, second ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 52-53; Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1964), 17.

¹⁴ Yoder, “The Christian Case for Democracy,” 168.

¹⁵ The Anabaptist core convictions are those given by Grimsrud, 344-45.

¹⁶ Grimsrud, 357.

¹⁷ Yoder, “The Christian Case for Democracy,” 164-65.

¹⁸ Bruce Russett, “Advance Democracy, Human Rights, and Religious Liberty” in Glen Stassen, *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1998), 97.