In Praise of the Least Oppressive Oligarchy

Peter C. Blum

Of all the forms of oligarchy, democracy is the least oppressive, since it provides the strongest language of justification and therefore of critique which the subjects may use to mitigate its oppressiveness.
– John Howard Yoder[1]

My response to Ted Grimsrud's paper, "Anabaptist Faith and American Democracy,"[2] is thoroughly positive. While I intend to spell out this response in a substantive way, it is important to begin by describing some of the personal background I bring to this discussion. I grew up not knowing anything about Mennonites, in a family that took for granted what Grimsrud calls "the Democracy Story," never worrying about its being intertwined with an "Empire Story." I attended a Mennonite high school, went on to a Mennonite college, married Mennonite, and have now been Mennonite all of my adult life.

My early immersion in Anabaptist thought in the late 1970s and early '80s at Goshen College gave me the general impression that Anabaptist convictions imply an antipathy towards the Democracy Story, now seen as little more than a mask worn by the Empire Story. This was wedded to an impression that, given the political spectrum in the US, Anabaptist convictions regarding peace and justice are generally more compatible with the left than with the right. My pilgrimage away from these impressions has taken me through a series of tempestuous affairs with various kinds of "conservative" political and social thought, and into employment at an academic institution often associated with the right, where I regularly follow Jesus' example by "eating with Republicans and sinners."[3]

Though I remain thoroughly confused and mostly disgusted by politics, broadly speaking, it has become increasingly clear to me that liberal democracy is emphatically not, as some would have it, "a bad idea."[4] It has also become clear that my own understanding of Anabaptist ecclesiology, rather than being in tension with my liking for liberal democracy as I have often assumed, is in some ways fully consistent with it. Grimsrud's reflections help confirm that

growing conviction. In what follows, I first call attention to the continuity between Grimsrud's relatively positive assessment of democracy and a similarly positive, though somewhat neglected, assessment advanced by John Howard Yoder. I then turn to brief critical reflections on the notion of multiple "stories" or "languages." I conclude with some remarks on the urgency of the issues in question in a North American Anabaptist-Mennonite context.

In the essay, "The Christian Case for Democracy,"[5] we find John Howard Yoder's most explicit discussion of whether, and in what sense, democracy should be considered the best form of human government. At one level, Yoder's response to this question, though affirmative, is far from final or unqualified. He wonders aloud if perhaps we need to "keep the question open" in order to maintain a "realistic" perspective. It is no surprise that he emphasizes the Constantinian character of the question, noting that it is raised against a backdrop of "mainstream" assumptions about moral discourse – assumptions that Yoder has questioned throughout his writings. But his answer is still ultimately affirmative. If we can remain vigilant regarding the Constantinian temptation, "we may find the realistic liberty to foster and celebrate relative democratization as one of the prophetic ministries of a servant people in a world we do not control" (166).

At the heart of these reflections lies what Yoder describes as a "provocative paradigm," drawn from Jesus' teaching about the political difference between his disciples and "the rulers of the nations" who "lord it over them" (156). Domination is accepted by Jesus as the way of government among the nations; it is neither affirmed nor condemned, but observed as a fact. More important, the authority figures in this sphere employ a language of legitimation that casts them as benefactors. In Yoder's reading, the latter is still more of an empirical observation than a value judgment. He neither endorses legitimacy claims nor unmasks them as ideology. Rather, he clarifies that the politics of discipleship will follow a different path:

> "*But it shall not be so among you; you shall be servants because I am your servant.*" After having described realistically both the fact of rule and the fact of value claims being made for that rule, Jesus locates himself and his disciples in a different ethical game. They are not to take over that game of "rulers-making-a-case-for-their-benevolence" nor are they to attempt to

> interfere with it. They are called simply to do something else. The meaning of that "something else" is the alternative answer to the question of government which is represented by the servant Messiah. (156)

The difference of discipleship is not opposed to, but *otherwise than*, the facticity of domination and the legitimating language of beneficence. "Since Constantine," Yoder says, "we have fused those three levels. . . . This mixes the descriptive and the prescriptive, interweaving the language which justifies coercion with that which guides voluntary discipleship" (157). As is so often the case in Yoder's analysis, the discussion is dominated by the assumption "that we are talking about government of Christians and by Christians" (157).

The crucial point from Yoder's discussion that makes contact with Grimsrud's essay is that the alterity of the politics of Jesus does not imply anything like silence or mere indifference with regard to the politics of the nations. As cautious and appropriately provisional as Yoder's endorsement of liberal democracy is, it is an endorsement. *Pace* standard characterizations of Yoder's thought as "sectarian" (read "apolitical," or worse, "quietistic"), a clear thesis of his essay is that democracy appears as *preferable* from the viewpoint of a disciple of Jesus. This preference, I take it, is based on the same general rationale that underlies Grimsrud's essay. Liberal democracy is committed to a legitimating story with which we may express carefully qualified agreement, and on which we may freely draw in prophetic calls for the mitigation of oppression.[6]

Neither Yoder nor Grimsrud is advocating a simple acceptance of the substance of democratic legitimacy claims as *true*. Yoder especially takes pains to underline this:

> When I have the good fortune to find myself in a situation where part of the rulers' language of justification is the claim to have the consent of the governed, then I can use the machinery of democracy and am glad to do so. But I do not therefore believe that I am governing myself or that "we" as "the people" are governing ourselves. We are still governed by an elite, most of whose decisions are not submitted to the people for approval. . . . The consent of the governed, the built-in controls of constitutionality,

> checks and balances, and the bill of rights do not constitute the fact of government; they only mitigate it. . . . It remains the nature of the civil order itself that its coercive control is prior to any justifications or qualifications thereof. (158-59)

Nevertheless, Yoder's insistent "realism" regarding the facticity of domination does not detract from his inclination to see democracy as most compatible with "the dignity of dissent; the ability of the outsider, the other, the critic to speak and be heard. This is not majority rule; it is minority leverage" (167). Though Yoder does not emphasize the point through his choice of terms, it is not just democracy in the abstract that is under consideration here, but *liberal* democracy in particular, democracy that is consistently fearful of what Tocqueville called "the tyranny of the majority." In terms I have employed elsewhere, a trope shared by the languages of liberal democracy and Christian discipleship is that of "openness to the Other."[7]

For Grimsrud, the discussion of democracy and Anabaptist faith is explicitly cast in terms of distinguishable, competing "stories." The issue is the compatibility or incompatibility of the Anabaptist Story, the Democracy Story, and the Empire Story. This way of framing the discussion raises a problem (or perhaps a nest of problems) that is also implicit in Yoder's discussion. At the most general level (and at the risk of a certain academic clumsiness), I believe the problem(s) may be characterized by reference to the specter of "systemic incommensurability." The idea of alternative and potentially conflicting stories or languages recalls thorny discussions across academic disciplines about "rationality" and "relativism." Simply stated, it seems that our talk of stories or languages implies two options for how stories or languages are related to each other. We might think, on the one hand, there is a metanarrative or metalanguage that provides a final or "absolute" frame of reference for adjudicating questions of truth, rationality, validity, etc. Or we might think, on the other hand, that claims regarding access to, or even the existence of, such an absolute framework are not credible. One way lies an "absolutism," the other way lies "relativism" (and its even more frightening sibling, "nihilism"). Many of us are increasingly unable to accept either apparent option. The real question, in the end, is not which option is correct but whether this way of setting up the problem is fundamentally misleading.

This nest of problems has been addressed from various directions in recent philosophy, in both its European and Anglo-American streams. Though a number of perspectives have arguably contributed to rethinking these issues, careful discussion of such contributions in theological contexts is relatively recent. In Anabaptist-Mennonite contexts, where academic or "theoretical" modes of inquiry have often met higher-than-average levels of suspicion, these contributions are only beginning to receive serious consideration. I raise this especially in relation to Grimsrud's way of framing his essay, but not to suggest that it undermines his arguments. My concern, rather, is that these problems must receive more explicit attention if further discussion among Anabaptist-Mennonite scholars is to bear substantial fruit. (Elsewhere I have made a start towards exploring this point, in connection with Yoder's work in particular[8] as well as more generally.[9])

Some final words are in order regarding the urgency of the general discussion encouraged by Grimsrud's essay. It is a dual urgency, arising from both current national politics and current denominational politics in the United States. At the level of national politics, the ongoing possibility of publicly advancing claims that arise specifically from Christian discipleship is radically and unavoidably problematic. If we wish to proclaim, or even simply to *live*, our understanding of what it means to follow Jesus, we cannot escape the fact that the very notion of "following Jesus" is essentially contested. Grimsrud's call to active, critical, but friendly engagement in democratic political discourse is arguably a necessary prerequisite to the intelligible communication of what Anabaptists take to be the good news in contemporary North America. Liberal democracy is committed to holding open a space where we may noncoercively but passionately contend with others whose magisterial definitions of Christianity become de facto definitions *of us*, hence often drawing us toward the frigid extreme of one or another pole where discourse is potentially drowned out by the chattering of teeth.

Of even greater concern is the level of denominational politics. I take it as a central emphasis of Anabaptist ecclesiology that discernment – including discernment of the meaning and application of scripture – should take place at the level of the local, gathered community. Here I will be most audacious in the interest of stimulating further conversation, even though I am least able in this context to provide substantial support for my claims. Reflecting on the meaning and importance of this emphasis has been a central element of my own intellectual

and spiritual struggles in recent years. As the results of congregational discernment become more diverse, I am disturbed by the ease with which some Mennonites seem to abandon this emphasis in the interest of a "Truth" to which they ostensibly have access apart from such a discernment process. Since "the Bible is clear" on certain issues (a current favorite in the US is homosexuality), it seems obvious to some that positions on those issues should be defined at a higher level, as the "teaching positions" of the denomination.

As I have explored the emphasis on local community discernment in the Anabaptist tradition, I have come to see a tension between the submission or yieldedness (*Gelassenheit*) of the individual to the community, and the individualism so often associated with liberal democracy. But when discussions of individual and community remain vague and superficial, they too readily assume a binary opposition, an all-or-nothing choice between the two. "Old Order" Amish and Mennonite communities are widely viewed as illiberal and authoritarian, as anti-democratic. Yet even in these cases, however imperfect the practice may be at times, the underlying principles (both implicitly presupposed and explicitly appealed to) are those of a discernment process in which all the members have a voice; those in leadership are, in principle, servant facilitators of the shared discernment process.[10]

As far as I have been able to tell, the Anabaptist ideal of the discerning local community is basically indistinguishable from the idea of direct participatory democracy. I suspect that it is only in such a local community, small enough for all its members to know each other well, that the full participation of individuals in their own governance is a real possibility. This is emphatically not to make any "utopian" claims as to the inherent goodness of the small community; the shadow cast by the facticity of dominion is never *absent* even at the local level.[11] My suggestion, rather, is that there may be a significant difference in the *ability to manage* our implication in that facticity at any level of social reality above the local community. In sociological jargon, the Anabaptist ideal of local discernment may entail a relational context dominated by primary relationships (oriented toward persons as ends) rather than secondary relationships (oriented toward persons as means).

Ted Grimsrud has done us a great service by encouraging and contributing to the discussion of Anabaptist faith and democracy. My comments here are intended primarily as supportive of his general position, but also as further contributions to this urgent conversation.

Notes

[1] John Howard Yoder, "The Christian Case for Democracy" in *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 151-71, at 158-59.

[2] Ted Grimsrud, "Anabaptist Faith and American Democracy," *MQR* 78.3 (2004): 341-62.

[3] Though it may have other origins ultimately, I owe this phrasing most directly to Ned Wyse.

[4] In addition to Anabaptist-Mennonite colleagues and friends with whom I have discussed these issues, I am deeply indebted to several students who participated with me in a recent seminar on the concept of community at Hillsdale College. I am especially grateful to Elizabeth Crepeau Ehlen for her stubborn suspicions regarding the perspectives of John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas, and for passionately but lovingly challenging a number of my more illiberal tendencies.

[5] Yoder, "The Christian Case for Democracy." Parenthetical page references in the following discussion are to this essay.

[6] Consider the thoroughly "liberal" texture of Yoder's own phrasings, at times. An example that many of us – recalling the essay originally dates back to 1977 – will find remarkably prescient: "We are more likely to fall into international anarchy (i.e., war) or into domestic war when people do take over the government with too strong a sense of divine calling to set things right, with the national order as instrument" (159).

[7] See Peter C. Blum, "Community, Totality, and Hospitality: On the Openness of Anabaptist Community," *Brethren Life and Thought.* 48.3 & 4 (Summer and Fall 2003): 159-75.

[8] See Peter C. Blum, "Foucault, Genealogy, Anabaptism: Confessions of an Errant Postmodernist" in Susan Biesecker-Mast and Gerald Biesecker-Mast, eds., *Anabaptists and Postmodernity* (Pandora Press US and Herald Press, 2000), 60-74; Blum, "Yoder's Patience and/with Derrida's Differance" in Ben C. Ollenburger and Gayle Gerber Koontz, eds., *A Mind Patient and Untamed: Assessing John Howard Yoder's Contribution to Theology, Ethics, and Peacemaking* (Cascadia Publishing House, 2004), 75-88.

[9] The specifically Anabaptist discussion in Peter C. Blum, "Heidegger's Shoes and Beautiful Feet: Ritual and Cultural Portability," *MQR* 79 (January 2005): 89-107, draws theoretical substance from "Overcoming Relativism? Levinas' Return to Platonism," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 28.1 (Spring 2000): 91-117.

[10] See the nuanced discussions of Old Order Amish decision making in Donald B. Kraybill, *The Riddle of Amish Culture*, rev. ed.(Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

[11] Here I am inclined to be critical of Yoder's discussion, insofar as its phrasings often seem to imply that the phrase "facticity of dominion" describes a reality found outside of the community of disciples and not within it. Yoder's primary reference here is to an imperative regarding a church's self-understanding, as opposed to the empirical distance of churches from that understanding. Yoder surely would have claimed (justifiably) to be fully aware of this empirical distance, and there is evidence throughout his writings of this awareness. But I do not intend to dismiss claims that Yoder may underemphasize problems of power and oppression within the community of faith, and in ways that may be deeply problematic.

Columbus's America and Emerson's America

Peter Dula

The idea of two Americas, put forth in Ted Grimsrud's essay, is one that I have thought about a great deal in the last several months in Iraq. Most of my friends here are French, Spanish, and Italian. They go to great lengths to stay as far away from Americans as possible. In fact, one of them has strict regulations about avoiding contact with Americans, and many more refuse any kind of formal partnerships with US organizations. But all of them make exceptions for the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). I have been to dozens of NGO parties where an MCC colleague and I were the only Americans. Often the conversation would turn to complaints about Americans (the way they look, dress, or talk, how much they eat, the way they vote) followed by apologies – 'Oops, sorry, I keep forgetting you are one of them.' At that point I would often note the irony that such conversations were taking place against the backdrop of a very loud stereo playing REM, Beck, Lou Reed, or even Sinatra, all quintessentially American artists.

When I talk about two Americas here I mean Empire America, an empire possible in part because there is no civic nation, and the Artists' America, the wild riot of our novels, films, and music. I will call them by the names of their founders, Columbus's America and Emerson's America. I will get to something more like Grimsrud's distinctions later.

Withdrawal has a long and noble lineage in the mythology of Emerson's America. I don't mean the American mythology of the high school history books, of the politicians' America, or of John Rawls, but the very different American mythology as presented on film and in literature. Thoreau headed for the pond to escape the 'quiet desperation' of his neighbors in Concord. Huck Finn lights out for the territories once he realizes that Missouri is unlivable. Shane rides off into the darkness after his attempt to rejoin civilization is foiled. He is pushed out, reminded that there is nothing for him but withdrawal. Bogart's Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe, one expects, have merely stayed out.[1] But we do not blame them. Their America, which is called 'California,' unlike Shane's, is uninhabitable. Philip Roth's Zuckerman lives alone like a hermit, because, he says, it is the only way 'to keep the shit at bay.'[2]