

THE DARK SIDE OF DEMOCRACY: EXPLAINING ETHNIC CLEANSING

Michael Mann,
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Introduction

In his classic novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), George Orwell warns us about the terrible implications of a totalitarian society, wherein the *proles* (85% of this society) are kept from political decision-making.¹ We can now breathe a sigh of relief. 1984 has long passed, and at no time since this literary masterpiece did Orwell's doomsday prophecy become a reality. Instead, most of the world now basks in the glory of democracy. By many, democracy is considered as the final stage in the evolution of political systems. To question its absolute superiority over all other political systems is blasphemous.

Michael Mann is a professor of sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). In 1984, Mann published the article 'The Autonomous Power of the State: its Origins, Mechanisms, and Results' in the *European Journal of Sociology*. This work is the foundation for his study of the despotic and infrastructural power of the modern state. Mann's most famous works include his books *The Sources of Social Power* and *The Dark Side of Democracy*, spanning the entire 20th century from the Armenian genocide in Turkey to the Nazi Holocaust and Rwanda's anti-Hutu extermination campaigns. He also published *Incoherent Empire*, in which he attacks the United States' 'War on Terror' as a clumsy experiment of neo-imperialism. Mann is currently working on *The Sources of Social Power: Globalizations*.

In *The Dark Side of Democracy* Mann sheds light on democracy's more nefarious aspects by exemplifying the horrific consequences of an ethnic majority tyrannising ethnic minorities by (illiberal) democratic means.² It is certainly not the first book to do so. In his book *Freedom's Law*, the influential contemporary legal philosopher Ronald Dworkin warns us about this implication of the 'majoritarian premise' of democracy, and suggests a 'constitutional conception of democracy' through a method he calls the 'moral reading'.³ Both Mann and Dworkin, though hesitant to reject

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¹ G. Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Secker and Warburg, London, 1949.

² M. Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy, Explaining Ethnic Cleansing*, Cambridge, Cambridge, 2005. The book exemplifies largely the worst cases, but explains that there are less violent means of ethnic cleansing. In fact, most examples are non-violent.

³ R. Dworkin, *Freedom's Law*, Harvard University Press, 1996, Cambridge, 1996.

democracy as a political system altogether, raise questions about its superiority.

Both Orwell and Mann portray horrific implications of political systems. Though Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a compelling story from which we can still take lessons, ultimately it is fictional. But Mann's work is not. The examples used to demonstrate democracy's dark side have all taken place in the recent past, or are taking place now. Therefore, this side of democracy as exhibited by Mann needs our immediate attention. Mann's theory comprises eight interrelated theses pertaining democracy's very darkest side: murderous ethnic cleansing. In this book review I will deliberate on thesis 1 and thesis 8.

I. Thesis 1: Murderous Cleansing is Modern, because it is the Dark Side of Democracy

One might identify a contradiction in this first thesis. Democracy is not a modern invention. The Greek word *Demokratia* means 'government by the people'. In Classical Greece and Rome, democracy was practised since approximately 500 BCE, and it is likely that some forms of democracy existed even before that. However, after Classical Greece and Rome, democracy lay mostly dormant until its widespread comeback in its modern form in early eighteenth century Europe.⁴ However, it becomes clear from the first two pages of Mann's book that when he speaks of democracy, he means democracy in its modern form. The contradiction in the thesis holds no consequence for Mann's theory.

"[D]emocracy has always carried with it the possibility that the majority might tyrannize minorities, and this possibility carries more ominous consequences in certain types of multiethnic environments." (p.2). This is true for democracy as a pure decision-making model. However, most democracies in the Western world have created safeguards in their constitutions to prevent such tyrannisations from happening. This is what Dworkin means when he advocates a 'constitutional conception of democracy'. Certain rights of individuals or ethnicities are constitutionally protected from being overruled by the majority. In considering the existence of constitutional safeguards, a more correct formulation of Mann's thesis 1 might therefore be: Murderous cleansing is modern, because it is the dark side of *modern, unconstitutional democracies*.⁵

Is this dark side exclusive to democracy? A distinction can be drawn between liberal and illiberal democracies, as illustrated by Fareed Zakaria.⁶ He also

⁴ R. Dahl, *On Democracy*, New Haven/London University Press, 2000, chapter 2.

⁵ It seems that to Mann, democracy means liberal democracy: "Regimes that are actually perpetrating murderous cleansing are never democratic, since that would be a contradiction in terms." (p. 4).

⁶ F. Zakaria, 'The Rise of Illiberal Democracy' *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 76, No. 6 (Nov. - Dec., 1997), pp. 22-43. Fareed Zakaria is Managing Editor of *Foreign Affairs* and a contributing Editor for *Newsweek*.

points out that autocracies can be liberal as well. According to Zakaria, the liberal (as opposed to illiberal) aspect of a political system is more benevolent to it than its democratic (as opposed to autocratic) aspect is. People living in a liberal autocratic state will have more constitutional rights (freedom of expression, right to privacy) than people living in an illiberal democracy have. An ethnic minority can be subject to tyrannisation in both of these political systems if the system is illiberal. Only in the case of an illiberal democracy can the minority be tyrannised by the majority. But in an autocracy the minority can be tyrannised by the autocrat. It makes no difference to the tyrannised minority which political system denies it its liberal/constitutional rights, because the consequences for the minority are the same. The problem lies not in democracy, but in illiberal political systems.

II. Thesis 8: Ordinary People are brought by Normal Social Structures into committing Murderous Ethnic Cleansing

“As the psychologist Charny (1986:144) observes, “the mass killers of humankind are largely everyday human beings – what we have called normal people according to currently accepted definitions by the mental health profession.” ... Placed in comparable situations and similar social constituencies, you or I might also commit murderous ethnic cleansing.” (p.9).

Mann supports this thesis with the famous ‘Milgram Experiment’⁷: an experiment that would prove the relationship between obedience and authority to explain the actions of the Nazis during the Holocaust. In this experiment ‘ordinary Americans’ were given orders by people in lab coats to directly or indirectly inflict (often excruciating) pain upon experimental subjects.⁸ People were more likely to pull the lever that administers an electric shock to the experimental subject in the other room, than to administer the shock by pushing the victim’s hand down on a plate bearing an electric current. The conclusion of the experiment is roughly that people generally obey orders from authority figures, and the more indirect the action is that inflicts the pain, the more likely they are to perform it. So bureaucratic ‘desk killing’ would be easier than committing murder oneself (p.26-27).

Mann presents another well-known experiment to back up his thesis: The ‘Stanford Prison Experiment’.⁹ In this experiment students were assigned the role of prisoner or warden in a prison setting. The researchers provided the wardens with weapons (wooden batons) and prison guard clothing. The wardens were not allowed to use the batons to punish the prisoners, the

⁷ Stanley Milgram is a Jewish award-winning social psychologist.

⁸ The experimental subjects were actors. No real pain was inflicted.

⁹ The experiment was conducted in 1971 by a team of researchers led by psychology professor Philip Zimbardo at Stanford University.

batons were meant only to establish the wardens' status. The wardens also wore sunglasses to prevent eye contact. Prisoners wore ill-fitting smocks and stocking caps, rendering them constantly uncomfortable. Guards called prisoners by their assigned numbers, sewn on their uniforms, instead of by name. A chain around their ankles reminded them of their roles as prisoners. The experiment quickly grew out of hand, and was discontinued after only six days. Experimenters said that approximately one-third of the guards exhibited genuine sadistic tendencies. Prisoners became depressed and showed signs of extreme stress. Most of the guards were upset when the experiment was concluded early. The result of the experiment has been argued to demonstrate the impressionability and obedience of people when provided with a legitimising ideology and social and institutional support (p.27).

I will not try to refute Mann's eighth' thesis, nor the conclusions of the experiments presented, as I am a law student, not a social psychologist. I chose this thesis for deliberation because it raises a legal question: If you accept that perpetrators of murderous ethnic cleansing are 'victims of normal social structures', should they receive alleviation of punishment?

The Dutch criminologist Wouter Buikhuisen raised a similar question in the 1970's, but for him, people were victims of their own biology (biochemistry/genetics). Upon proposing this, Buikhuisen met with great resistance from his critical contemporaries. But today, the concept of free will is becoming less self-evident. Both biology and social structures may play a role as deterrents of our behaviour. We might not be as in-control of our actions as some of us would like to be. With this in mind, can biological and social circumstances justify a 'victim of circumstance' defence? There are at least two consequences of alleviation of punishment as a result of a victim of circumstance-defence that argue against it.

1. It is dissatisfactory for the victim, his relatives, friends, and sometimes even for society as a whole, and can result in strong feelings of injustice.
2. Once courts accept a victim of circumstance defence to allow alleviation of punishment, the floodgates are open. Ultimately, every action of every person is determined at least partly by circumstance.

The two striking experiments mentioned at the beginning of this chapter demonstrate the impressionability of people. However, one must be wary of accepting a victim of circumstance defence, as accepting the defence may lead to the undesirable consequences described above. Finally, we must not forget that during the Holocaust some, due to circumstance, were brought to committing atrocities, whilst others in similar circumstances were brought to courageously committing heroic deeds.

Conclusion

Mann's *The Dark Side of Democracy* is filled with historical occurrences, sometimes pages long, of ethnic cleansing in the world. Thereby Mann's theory is often snowed under, and one might lose track of the point he tries to make. His wordings sometimes lack sharpness (e.g. in thesis 1). However, the book's subject is imminently important, considering the violent and deadly consequences of democracy's dark side. It is good to know that a prominent scholar such as Mann does not abstain from criticising aspects of that superior political system called democracy.

