

## Book Review

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*Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*, Anne Applebaum, 2020, New York, Anchor Books (Penguin Random House), 206 pp., ISBN 9781984899507.

Is the populist turn in the past years a sign of democratic backsliding? Is democracy around the world under threat? Anne Applebaum's latest book, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*, attempts to answer these questions.

The author begins (and ends) by talking about parties in their house with friends who apparently are members of the political and social elite in Europe. It is not surprising that Applebaum, a journalist by profession and married to a Polish politician, establishes this as a background of the book. What surprises me, though, is how she approached the story by openly criticizing the people who attended her parties. She called them former friends. So how did this inform her topic on democracy and authoritarianism?

The people in her party are also key personalities in different government offices, institutions, and authorities. These personalities, it turned out, were part of what she considered to be a gradual shifting of political leaning and alliances. Erstwhile champions of democracy, the conservatives of her kind, have slowly turned against it and supported political causes that promoted a more dictatorial and

authoritarian form of governance. It is at this point that she claims authoritarianism has a “seductive lure.”

In expounding the idea of the “seductive lure of authoritarianism,” Applebaum identified several strategies employed by leaders with heavy authoritarian tendencies. The attempt is not to have a guidebook of sorts but to elicit the glaring patterns among these leaders. I would like to emphasize two, which may be very relevant to the Philippines: the appeal to nostalgia and the use of falsehoods.

Applebaum presented nostalgia as a critical sentiment and a powerful tool if used wisely. Nostalgia appeals to the past. Several years before and during the pandemic, the social and economic conditions have been worsening. To exaggerate her point, the current situation is far from desirable. While the impression is that life is improving through various services and advancing through new inventions and developments, people have seen better days. In fact, as Applebaum argued, the better days are the very source of that nostalgic sentiment. The problem lies with the idea of “better days.” They are not necessarily the *actual* better days. As frustrations lead to resignation, the public reconstructs a different set of reality—one where they think life was better, despite the absence of all the innovations today. In the Philippines, I would say this sounds like Marcos apologists recreating the martial law period as the golden age of the contemporary Philippines. This is notwithstanding the fact that economically, socially, and politically, the country lagged behind its neighbours in the region.

It does not stop at being nostalgic. The objective is to return to the old days. Applebaum introduced the idea of restorative nostalgia, which means people, now with a reconstructed memory of the past, would want to restore such a version of history with the belief that it contained the best

moments of their country. The same restorative nostalgia propels movements and slogans like “Make America Great Again” in the United States (US) and “Arriba España” in Spain.

The second strategy is the use of lies. Applebaum talked about medium-sized lies. These are lies that are not too big to be unbelievable and not too small to be negligible. Another term used in the book is conspiracy theory. In this case, political parties and machines operate like mythmakers and lie-generators. The idea is to feed the public some information that they will take but not question. Conspiracy theories, unsurprisingly, worked. For example, in Hungary, the conspiracy that George Soros is funding the importation of migrants to destroy the country was effective. It sounded ridiculous, but people bought the idea. In Poland, government findings regarding the death of its former president in a plane crash became a conspiracy theory and were taken as fact by the public. In the Philippines, several conspiracy theories or medium-sized lies circulated in support of or against certain politicians. To boost campaigns of certain candidates, we hear claims about gold and hidden wealth, and extraordinary accomplishments.

Applebaum claims that authoritarian tendencies in democracies today are exacerbated by the widespread use of social media. Without directly blaming them, she claims that the spread of falsehoods, medium-sized lies and conspiracy theories become uncontrollable as more people access sites like Twitter and YouTube. The generation of news and content is no longer exclusive to traditional media outlets, and strict vetting and verification of information is a standard not practiced as much in social media. This is probably true in Western settings, where mobile phone use and access to the internet is relatively more straightforward. Elsewhere, there are

still connectivity challenges. Applebaum obviously was only referring to the West in this book.

Democracy is the key theme of the book. In particular, the book examines the fading of democracy in states which were known for being bastions of democracy. In Poland, for example, where people felt the devastating impact of a dictatorial party in the past, it is unimaginable that the people will choose to slide down to a quasi-authoritarian regime of the Law and Justice Party. In Hungary, the overwhelming support for the Viktor Orban government cannot be understated. It is not surprising that the leader has amassed significant influence in various spheres of life. More famous examples are Donald Trump of the US and Boris Johnson of the United Kingdom (UK). Trump has “radicalized” a section of the Republican Party, something Applebaum detested in strong terms, while Johnson was merely playing a clown for the conservatives but then eventually landed at Number 10.

And yet, Applebaum was not very liberal with her conception of democracy. Throughout the book, it was apparent that democracy is upholding neoliberal values, specifically preserving the neoliberal economic system, following Ronald Reagan's position. This somewhat limited view of democracy might work for her, as it is evident in her explanation. However, it betrays her objectives. There seems to be a disconnect between her idea of democracy and how she looked at the specific cases. Democracy is not simply about which states support specific economic models. Instead, there is also a need to highlight the fact that people are selecting (or electing) their leaders, voicing out their criticisms freely and openly, among other things. The established, although debated, definitions of democracies by political science scholars are only mentioned in passing.

I would argue that this limitation is because of Applebaum's apparent opposition to communism and the Soviet Union. Her previous books have significantly dealt with the history of the Soviet Union, the Gulag, and the abuses of communism. Her approach to democracy in this book is placed in contrast with the socialist system imposed by ruling communist parties. To a certain extent, her reading and understanding of authoritarianism are largely influenced by her distaste for communism.

Going back to the title of the book, Applebaum claimed that democracy is at its twilight stage. But is it? The book could have expounded more on this idea. Instead, it is more of punditry than a comprehensive theorizing of democracy and authoritarianism. It is laced with her personal commentaries about specific individuals and events. I do not know if the intent is to expose the inconsistencies in the reasoning of the political actors or to publicly shame them through her rather critical take on their political stances. Scholars of comparative politics may see the value of this book in providing a glimpse to what is happening in Poland, Hungary, the US, and the UK. But if one is looking for a deeper theoretical analysis and treatment of the puzzle the author presented, as the book title seems to promise, maybe this is not that book.

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