

Democratic governance vs autocracy and unfairness

Peter Tait

5.5 minute read.

Among my holiday reading were three books looking at different aspects of 'democracy', that slippery idea which I define as a system of governance where the people who have to live with the consequences of decisions, collectively make the decisions. Ideally this occurs through some form of direct democracy. Liberal, ill-liberal (yes, I've learnt that is a thing), representative (electoral) and other forms are all attempts to do this in a less perfect manner.

The books are:

- Anne Applebaum's *Autocracy Inc.* – the dictators who want to run the world (Allen Lane, 2024);
- Heather Marsh's *Binding Chaos* – mass collaboration on a global scale (Must Read Inc, 2020); and
- Erica Benner's *Adventures in Democracy* – the turbulent world of people power (Allen Lane, 2024).

This piece is not so much book reviews but reflections on what they said as it relates to CAPaD's work.

Applebaum *Autocracy Inc* I have already reviewed here (<https://canberra-alliance.org.au/review-anne-applebaum-autocracy-inc-the-dictators-who-want-to-run-the-world/>). In brief, the klepocracy is organising opportunistically to run human affairs to transfer power and wealth to themselves and for any hope of human survival, pro-democracy activists must cooperate internationally to curb the power of the autocrats; people must push their governments to do this. She concludes "Nobody's democracy is safe" (p174) and we must prepare to defend democracy.

Marsh has been involved in Wikileaks, the Occupy movements and other grassroots campaigns. Her central thesis is that all direct, anarchic and representative forms of 'democracy' (ie governance) are corruptible and lead to oligarchies. Her solution is for a network of decentralised, non-organised, self-defining and self-governing groups collaborating around an activity. Self-defining in that individuals freely join and freely remain to participate in activities to achieve the commonly agreed end (and freely leave when they want).

Loose principles supporting this are that only those affected by the outcome of the actions get to participate; expertise is welcome with expert opinion translated so everyone can understand. Experts only advise and are governed by the group; agreement is not reached by discussion and decision making but by stigmergy (a term borrowed from biology where group self-organisation occurs through participants acting together to achieve an outcome by followers joining in with a non-dominating leader).

Binding Chaos isn't actually a single book. There is one opening book with this name and then a website comprising 12 other 'books' that explore "different facets of the world we live in". The section on governance is titled *Autonomy Diversity Society*. (available at <https://georgiebc.wordpress.com/2017/01/30/autonomy-diversity-society-book/>, accessed 6/1/25)

In *Autonomy Diversity Society*, Marsh does unpack her processes somewhat by introducing tools for collaboration such as deliberative forums and consent decision making where decisions need to be collectively made. Her main point is a skepticism of all forms of governance except through collaborative action. I am not really sure how realistic that is; I cannot discard the notion that plans and decisions need to be made.

Benner's personally reflective journey discusses modern 'democratic' governance through the de-romanticised lenses of ancient Greek and Roman, and more modern Renaissance, models of democratic governments compared to our modern situation. Shared with the previous two authors, her key message is the need for constant vigilance and pro-democratic action by citizens to prevent tyrants and oligarchs taking power and dominating.

Her take on democratic government is that it is a system for sharing power and curtailing domination. Additionally to sharing control, democratic governance also gives people the sense of having control, which contributes to their wellbeing.

Another point she makes is that political control is only one part of the recipe; democratic governance needs economic equity and justice. This reflects the public health related literature such as Wilkinson and Pickett's *The Spirit Level* and other work on social determinants of health. This work, and Benner concurs, is that wealth disparity corrodes social harmony, undermines trust within society and in governments, alienates people and opens the way to autocracy. We can observe this spectacularly in the USA with the MAGA movement.

Her next to final point is that pro-democracy activists need to discard 20th century notions of 'democracy' being a natural endpoint of Progress as the Superior Form of Governance and return to these social and economic reasons for democratic government being the better way to make sure everyone has the opportunity (whether they take up that opportunity or not) to partake in decisions about how each society is run and who shares in the benefits and risks. The outcomes, based in lived and historical experience, is that these democratically governed societies are "safer, fairer and freer" (p143).

So democratic government both relies on wealth equity to exist and is a foundation of the equitable sharing of the economic benefits within society.

Benner's final take-home is to warn how easily a 'democratic' society can slip into tyranny. In her examples of ancient and modern tyranny (and this is reflected in Applebaum's book), the demagogue works with and is facilitated by a willing citizenry who facilitates and permits the transition.

The reasons for many people's willingness are many but fundamentally it reflects their dissatisfaction and perspective that they are missing out on a fair share of the socio-economic pie and, as commentary on the MAGA phenomenon suggests, giving the middle finger to the current political system.

The common threads in all readings are that the powerful rich are actively, if only loosely coordinated, undermining democratic government to their own ends. Some citizens willingly comply with this happening while others resist it. Democratic government delivers the better socioeconomic outcomes for everyone. We can never assume democratic governance is safe. We, the pro-democracy people, need to be vigilant and continue to struggle to nurture and protect democratic government and institutions in all possible ways including making governments actually live by their democratic rhetoric.