

BOOK REVIEW

Anne APPLEBAUM, *Twilight of Democracy:
The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*
(Doubleday Publishers, 2020)

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Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism

Anne APPLEBAUM

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In her book, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*, Anne Applebaum explores a political shift that many democracies face today. In her analysis of global democracies, Applebaum explains why authoritarianism is on the rise and how it is being welcomed by many. She argues that the world is becoming more authoritarian, and democracy is starting to slip, especially with the recent election of US President Donald Trump. Through her writing, Applebaum hopes to bring awareness to this phenomenon with the hope of recognizing it and resisting it.

Anne Applebaum is a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, who has worked for several magazines and newspapers. These include *The Spectator*, *The Evening Standard*, *Slate*, *The Daily and Sunday Telegraph*, *The Economist*, *The Independent*, *The Washington Post*, and currently *The Atlantic*. Her career provides her with great access to the top decision-making circles both in Europe and the United States during critical times, including the fall of the Berlin Wall, or the Brexit referendum and its aftermath.

The book contains six distinct chapters that could exist as individual pieces. The first chapter serves as an introduction, by explaining how democracy rose up and is now starting to fall in Poland. She also introduces an essential theme of the book, individuals that she labels the new generation of “*clerics*,” or “*clerks*” who assist in the disruption of democracy and support authoritarian policies. Both on the left and right, these pseudo- intellectuals undermine the core principles of democracy, “manipulate discontent” and serve as ideologies of the new, anti-democratic world. In her next chapter, Applebaum explains how anti-democratic sentiment can exist on both the far left and the far right. She gives the examples of Lenin’s Soviet Union on the far left and Hitler’s Nazi government on the far right. In this chapter, Applebaum mentions how *clerics* can use the media to spread narratives that assist the rise of authoritarianism. She earmarks Jacek Kurski, the director of state television in Poland, and how he used his media outlet to circulate conspiracy theories about communism. She compares him to his brother and tries to make the case that Jacek deliberately chose this darker path of conspiracy paddling, despite having the same upbringing as his brother who endorsed more democratic values. Applebaum argues that c onspiracy theories have an emotional appeal and are a simple explanation

of events, so people easily believe them. However, they end up corroding the public trust in political institutions, which then becomes detrimental to a democratic regime.

The book's third chapter uses two different types of nostalgia to explain why authoritarianism is so appealing. Applebaum defines the first type of nostalgia as *reflective nostalgia*, in which people reflect on the past but do not wish to recreate it. The second type of nostalgia is *restorative nostalgia*, where people want to restore the past. This second type of nostalgia is where the problems begin. It plays on radically simple beliefs in things such as unity and patriotism to erode currently diverse and democratic governments. In the following chapter, Applebaum shows that the internet and technology have changed media to the point where false news is ubiquitous. Every radical idea can find an outlet for a narrative. She explains that those who run these hyper-partisan news outlets are the new generation of anti-democratic *clerics* who seek to sow distrust in the government. She uses the Vox Party of Spain and the Trump administration as examples of governments that have used conspiracy theories and false narratives to gain supporters and win elections.

Applebaum's fifth chapter shifts the focus away from European politics and focuses solely on the United States. She argues that America's democracy was not perfect at the time of its founding but has been improved upon drastically over time through expanding voting rights and civil rights. Applebaum claims that Trump and far-right Republicans are *clerics* who have adopted both far-left and far-right views of despair towards America. Trump's statements are pessimistic and anti-American and thus sow distrust in the government and democracy. She argues that Trump resembles a dictator and spreads a dangerous narrative for democracy. In her final chapter, Applebaum concludes her arguments by stating that we are currently going through a political shift but that political shifts are not uncommon. She gives the historical examples of the Dreyfus Affair in France, the recent 2019 protests in France, the Brexit referendum and the election of President Trump to explain her argument that history is circular. In this chapter, Applebaum also acknowledges the significance of Covid-19. She states that historically pandemics lead to the expansion of state power because people are willing to give up their freedoms for their safety. She predicts that more *clerics* will arise in the near future and hopes that the world stands against them to protect democracy.

This book's strengths lie in the sheer number of examples that Applebaum gives. Throughout the book, Applebaum focuses on a select few countries to explain her points and offers her personal experiences with government leaders and her colleagues. For example, Applebaum provides many details on Boris Johnson's reasoning behind Brexit, due to her personal connection to him. She also mentions other former colleagues whose opinions have shifted far to the right and uses this experience to showcase the lure of authoritarianism.

Although this book has its strength in knowledge, it is weak in clarity and falls short of its intentions. Upon acquiring this book, one would expect it to be a journalistic approach to a global political crisis. However, the book is a mix of journalism and memoir. Each chapter has the same structure. The first half is information about democracy and authoritarianism. However, the second half goes off at a tangent in which Applebaum flaunts her personal experiences or negatively describes her former colleagues so as to appear superior to them. There is also quite a plethora of bashing of former President Trump within the book, making her work seem less passionate and less professional. Applebaum makes no effort to hide her distaste for Trump and goes out of her way to attack his personal life, family, and even his hair.

Overall, this book is quite intriguing but challenging to follow, given Applebaum's fusion of memoir and journalistic style of writing. This book appeals mostly to a general audience. The academic reader may find it partly valuable, as it provides some behind the scenes information on decision making during critical historical moments. Despite these drawbacks, the book may appeal to anyone interested in the current global political divide and those that enjoy exploring the themes of communism, democracy, and authoritarianism.