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# Democracy, Liberalism and the Challenge of Social Solidarity

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**Abstract:** This paper examines modern democracy from the perspective of its capacity to generate social solidarity. To do so it considers the idea of *asabiya*, first used by Ibn Khaldûn and more recently applied by Peter Turchin. It postulates that this approach is quite similar to the analysis made by Roman historian Sallust. It considers the issue of the creation and decay of *asabiya* in the context of Benjamin Constant's distinction between ancient and modern liberty. Ancient liberty seeks to generate *asabiya* and this has tended to make democracies a belligerent form of polity. Modern liberty and liberalism are happy to leave individuals to cultivate their own garden. This means that while modern democracy, which can be understood as the form of democracy founded on modern liberty, has some belligerent features it tends towards favoring peace. This raises a problem for modern liberal forms of democracy as they face difficulty in creating social solidarity and opponents who can create *asabiya* and the aggression that goes with it.

**Keywords:** Democracy; *asabiya*; liberalism; social solidarity

## 1. Introduction

In his *War and Peace and War*, Peter Turchin (2006) argues that any understanding of the rise and decline of empires and nations requires an appreciation of the significance of the capacity of a people to cooperate and work together. This cooperation forges those bonds that allow a conquering people to overcome established, and seemingly very powerful, empires. When that capacity declines, established empires become vulnerable to aggressive newcomers. Turchin's analysis makes considerable use of the idea of *asabiya*, of group solidarity, which he takes from the *Muqaddimah* of Ibn Khaldûn.

Turchin emphasises the importance of cooperation, of group solidarity, as the key to understanding why empires and states grow and flourish, and why they decay and die. It is worth asking: what is the significance of this understanding of human history for an appreciation of democracy as a mode of human political organisation. Do democratic polities stand outside of this model of dynamism and decay? Or is it perhaps the case that different types of democracies represent different stages in the life cycle through which all human forms of political organisation must pass? At the heart of this issue is the problem of whether a democratic polity can still the hand of time or whether democracies can only be understood as political entities which are always changing. Students of politics often analyse their subject as if it was 'being' which governed the world whereas 'becoming' is the only means through which politics can be understood (Melleuish 2016).

Hence, the approach of this paper differs from that used in much contemporary social science research. There has been much written about the decline of social solidarity in modern Western, including American, societies ranging from Putnam (2000) to Murray (2012) to Kotkin (2014). However, much of this analysis focuses on a relatively short time frame and often misses long-term change. Turchin's model of analysis, as with Ibn Khaldûn, is concerned with long cycles of change, a method that can also be found in the work of an historian such as Fischer (1996). The advantages of

exploring such an approach to key topics such as social solidarity and democracy is that it opens up new perspectives because of its focus on change over long periods of time.

In a similar way, by using the useful distinction between ‘modern liberty’ and ‘ancient liberty’ developed by Benjamin Constant, it is possible to consider the nature of the democracy of the ancient world and see what an understanding of that form of democracy can say about the democracy of the modern world.

This paper brings together the ideas of Ibn Khaldûn and Constant in the framework of what might be termed the *longue durée* of political and social development to cast light on democracy, in particular in terms of its capacity to create social solidarity and its tendencies towards belligerence.

## 2. Discussion

For Ibn Khaldûn, *asabiya* means a form of group solidarity that is at its strongest when a group shares little more than their hard life and poverty. It is a quality found at its strongest amongst the Bedouin of the desert and finds its expression in a willingness to follow a leader into battle. *Asabiya* decays under the influence of comfort and soft living. This is summed up by Ibn Khaldûn (1967, p. 115) as follows: ‘All this has its origin in group feeling, which differs in different groups. Luxury wears out royal authority and overthrows it.’

This analysis is not all that far removed from the argument found in Sallust regarding the transformations that occurred in the Roman Republic. Initially, according to Sallust (1931, p. 21), Romans had a powerful sense of virtue:

good morals were cultivated at home and in the field; there was the greatest harmony and little or no avarice; justice and probity prevailed among them, thanks not so much to laws as to nature. Quarrels, discord, and strife were reserved for their enemies; citizen vied with citizen only for the prize of merit. They were lavish in their offerings to the gods, frugal in the home, loyal to their friends. By practising these two qualities, boldness in warfare and justice when peace came, they watched over themselves and their country.

One can see from the above description, that Sallust’s idealised picture of the original Romans can also be summed up by the word *asabiya*. The Romans enjoyed a powerful sense of social cohesion, a belief in themselves, and the consequence was a capacity to wage warfare successfully. They became, however, a victim of their success, finding ‘leisure and wealth . . . a burden and a curse.’ Their vices multiplied (Sallust 1931, p. 21):

Hence the lust for money first, then for power, grew upon them; these were, I may say, the root of all evils. For avarice destroyed honour, integrity, and all other noble qualities; taught in their place insolence, cruelty, to neglect the gods, to set a price on everything.

At first these vices grew slowly, from time to time they were punished; finally when the disease had spread like a deadly plague, the state was changed and a government second to none in equity and excellence became cruel and intolerable.

For Sallust, Rome had risen because of its virtues, and this success became the source of its vices. If one takes Sallust seriously, then Rome was already in serious trouble at the time that he was writing, that is to say the years between the fall of the republic and the establishment of the Principate. The ‘golden age’ of the Antonines which was so beloved of Gibbon was already a time when Rome was well on the way to decay and ripe for destruction.

According to this view, empires rise because of their morale, their sense of belonging, which encourages certain virtues that are conducive to their capacity to be militarily successful. Success is the ruin of empires because it destroys the virtues that helped to create them and leaves in their place a whole series of vices that make an empire vulnerable to the next group that is developing its *asabiya*. The empirical evidence for such an interpretation of world history would appear to be overwhelming. Every empire from that of Sargon in Mesopotamia through to the 21st century has only survived for a limited time. The only exception would appear to be that of China, and there is a clear pattern in

Chinese history whereby the Chinese empire has died and been reborn on several occasions. In other words, no political system in history has been immune from change, some of it very harmful.

Nevertheless, it needs be appreciated that what both Ibn Khaldūn and Sallust propose is essentially an interpretation of history resting on the practice of morality. The age of the Antonines was a golden age in economic terms; a period marked by good weather and prosperity. Decline from those prosperous times may have had as much to do with climate change accompanied by epidemics as to a loss of virtue (Harper 2017) although it is clear that material decline and moral decline could be self-reinforcing.

The *asabiya* argument has been developed most forcibly by Turchin in his *War and Peace and War*. Turchin (2006, p. 6) argues that groups that enjoy high levels of *asabiya* originate on what he terms meta-ethnic frontiers, 'places where between-group competition is very intense.' These are places generally where a settled empire rubs shoulders with a culture that is antagonistic towards the empire, but which cannot avoid living with it. One of the best examples of such a frontier was Greece in the 5th century, and there is little doubt that the presence of Persia on its doorstep helped to stimulate the *asabiya* of the Greeks, leading to both extraordinary military and cultural achievements. The Greeks were a hyper-competitive people and Ober (2015) has argued that the efflorescence of Athens in the 5th century was related to its material prosperity which was in turn the consequence of its military successes.

Turchin (2006, p. 6) continues by arguing that 'a frontier group with high *asabiya* . . . needs to expand by incorporating other groups.' This aggressive tendency can be illustrated by the way in which barbarian groups on the border of the late Roman Empire grew by assimilating other groups into larger conglomerations, or the way in which Muhammad integrated the various tribes in Arabia in the early 7th century before they conquered the Persian Empire and much of the Roman Empire. In both cases, the outside 'barbarian' group was able to take advantage of the weaknesses of the empire that they sought, at least initially, to pillage.

Following Ibn Khaldūn, Turchin (2006, p. 7) argues that empires become the victim of their success. 'The seeds of future chaos' are already planted within the peace and stability that empires offer to their populations. In the wake of peace comes prosperity, followed by population increase and as a consequence the impoverishment of the lower classes, alongside a growing enrichment of the upper classes. Turchin (2006, pp. 261–82) calls this increasing differentiation of wealth in peaceful and stable societies the Matthew principle. It is a natural process that can be explained without recourse to any sort of conspiracy theory; wealth begets wealth, just as once one is on a downward spiral it is very difficult to climb back up again. This growing disparity in wealth threatens the social consensus of society, especially as originally the *asabiya* of the group was maintained by its relatively egalitarian nature. Hence in Republican Rome, even the original patricians were not particularly wealthy; only after Rome has become a major expansionist power is the Republic threatened by the enormous disparity in wealth between the *nobiles* and the ordinary citizenry. Equally there was egalitarianism amongst the original followers of Muhammad that did not survive the success of Islam. Turchin (2006, 8) argues that the creation of *asabiya* within a dynamic evolving group followed by the working of the Matthew principle constitutes a secular cycle.

The typical period of a complete cycle, which consists of a benign integrative phase and the troubled disintegrative phase, is around two or three centuries. A life cycle of a typical imperial nation extends over the course of two, three, or even four secular cycles.

According to this view of history and social development, there really can be no middle ground between the aggressive and dynamic growth of a polity, and a state of decay induced by love of money, luxury and a sapping of the will to achieve and dominate. In particular, such a view of history stands in opposition to the idea that there is a form of polity, in the West associated with the ideal of 'mixed government', that will allow human beings to maintain some sort of 'steady state' and avoid political decay. Writing in the 2nd century BCE, Polybius (1979, pp. 303–52) argued that Rome had achieved such a system of government, but of course Rome was unable to maintain its republican constitution

once its empire had expanded. On the other hand, in the modern world both Venice and Great Britain may have been able to maintain their systems of mixed government but that did not prevent either of them from slipping into imperial decline. Mixed government places a great deal of emphasis on institutional structure as a means of preventing the impact of historical change on a polity. However, it ignores the fact that institutions do change and evolve according to the circumstances in which they find themselves.

### 3. The Case of Democracy

How does democracy fit into this model of social and political development as a constant cycle of growth and decay? Is it possible that, once instituted, democracy can create a stable regime?

A good starting point is to consider Benjamin's Constant's distinction between ancient and modern liberty.

Constant (1988, pp. 310–11) described modern liberty as follows:

For each of them it is the right to be subjected only to the laws, and to be neither arrested, detained, put to death or maltreated in any way by the arbitrary will of one or more individuals. It is the right of everyone to express their opinion, choose a profession and practise it, to dispose of property, and even to abuse it; to come and go without permission, and without having to account for their motives or undertakings. It is everyone's right to associate with other individuals, either to discuss their interests, or to profess the religion which they and their associates prefer, or even simply to occupy their days or hours in a way which is most compatible with their inclinations or whims. Finally it is everyone's right to exercise some influence on the administration of the government, either by electing all or particular officials, or through representations, petitions, demands to which the authorities are more or less compelled to pay heed.

Modern liberty means the freedom to do as one pleases within the framework of the rule of law, to hold beliefs as one sees fit, to be free of government interference so as to follow one's inclination and interest. Ancient liberty, however, meant something entirely different. It involved (Constant 1988):

exercising collectively, but directly, several parts of the complete sovereignty; in deliberating, in the public square, over war and peace; in forming alliances with foreign governments; in voting laws, in pronouncing judgments; in examining the accounts, the acts, the stewardship of the magistrates; in calling them to appear in front of the assembled people, in accusing, condemning or absolving them. But if this was what the Ancients called liberty, they admitted as compatible with this collective freedom the complete subjection of the individual to the authority of the community . . . All private actions were submitted to a severe surveillance. No importance was given to individual independence, neither in relation to opinions, nor to labour, nor, above all, to religion . . . In the domains which seem to us the most useful, the authority of the social body interposed itself and obstructed the will of individuals . . . In the most domestic of relations the public authority again intervened . . . The laws regulated customs, and as customs touch on everything, there was hardly anything that the laws did not regulate.

It is not difficult to argue that Constant's fundamental division between ancient and modern liberty can be viewed in terms of the form of liberty that assists *asabiya* (ancient liberty) and that which helps to destroy it (modern liberty). In fact, Constant had fears that the exercise of modern liberty would result in individuals simply pursuing their own interests, thereby allowing the good of the whole to languish. Perhaps this is why the early development of modern economic thought relied so heavily on the notion that there was a hidden harmony, in the shape of the 'invisible hand', between the pursuit of individual interests and that of the whole.

It can be argued that liberalism, as a doctrine which allows individuals to do as they please so long as no-one is hurt, is destructive of social solidarity as it cannot provide a means of uniting individuals to seek the common good. It only makes a great deal of sense if it is adopted by a community which already has a strong sense of its destiny. This was certainly the case with the British who were driven as much by Protestantism as by their liberal ideals (Colley 1992). British liberty was embedded in a

powerful religious/national ideal which constituted a form of *asabiya*. Britain understood herself to have always been free because she had preserved her ancient constitution.

A consideration of the ancient/modern liberty distinction would seem to suggest that there is no necessary connection between democracy as a generic form of political organisation and its capacity to generate *asabiya*. A democratic form of polity that has strong elements of ancient liberty will tend to enjoy a high level of *asabiya*, while a democracy that is constituted on the basis of modern liberty will equally tend to have a much lower level of *asabiya*.

What this means is that what we describe as a 'democracy' can be either aggressive or passive, depending on its capacity to generate *asabiya*. As with any form of polity there can be no middle ground. A democracy is either on the way up or somewhere along the road to dissolution. The idea of an unchanging structure, of a 'steady state', such as envisaged by the idea of a mixed constitution, is an illusion. Ironically, any given democracy can be designated, and consequently criticized, as being either aggressive or decadent depending on where it is placed in the cycle. Democracy can strengthen the *asabiya* of a people. It does so by unleashing a powerful feeling of collective destiny, thereby encouraging co-operation and the capacity for a people to emphasize what they have in common, suppressing differences and points of disagreement. In this way a democratic spirit can assist a people to increased cooperation while unleashing their aggressive tendencies.

It can also weaken the *asabiya* of a people by providing a cocoon within which individuals experience equality but feel no collective responsibility for the other members of the polity. This is most likely to happen when democracy takes a statist form, under which the democratic state takes responsibility for the members of the polity. Such a situation encourages individuals to cultivate their gardens rather than taking responsibility for their actions and being accountable for their neighbors. It is interesting that Alexis de Tocqueville (2003, p. 305) identified a polity that combined democracy with administrative centralization as the form of democracy most likely to turn itself into a tyranny.

One measure of the amount of *asabiya* in a polity is the amount of charity giving and volunteering that takes place in that polity. In his study *Who Really Cares? America's Charity Divide Who Gives, Who Doesn't and Why It Matters Matters*, Arthur C Brooks (2006) argues that the rates of giving to charity and volunteering are much higher in America than in Europe. Europeans, who are much more secular than Americans, also tend to believe that it is the role of the state to provide for those in need rather than themselves as citizens responsible for each other. Brooks (2006, p.132) contends that 'the demographic implosion of Europe lies in some part behind its low charitable giving and volunteering rate.' It can be argued that such evidence indicates that European countries have a declining *asabiya*.

In ancient Athens, which has been described (Berent 2000) as a 'stateless society' because it lacked any real form of state apparatus, there was a similar emphasis on participation by the citizens. In his famous funeral oration (Thucydides 1972, pp. 143–51), Pericles argued that to be a real citizen one had to become involved in political life. Rich citizens were expected to supply liturgies for the good of Athens. This could include funding a trireme for the navy or a chorus for the annual Festival of Dionysius.

A democratic society possesses a very powerful potential for the creation of *asabiya* because it relies for its power on the willingness of its members to contribute to the commonweal. However, as Turchin points out, this capacity to create *asabiya* also increases the capacity for aggression on the part of the democratic polity. People who cooperate well also generally fight well together.

Moreover, having experienced the power of democracy, they will become eager to share that experience with others. This tendency to impose democracy on other peoples as the ideal form of government can be seen in both the ancient and the modern world. Thucydides (1972, pp. 236–45) describes how the Peloponnesian War became an ideological war between democratic Athens and oligarchic Sparta. Athens expected that all its allies would be democracies and thus loyal to Athens. In a similar vein, modern democracies, in particular the United States, have an expectation that all states will eventually become democracies like themselves.

### 3.1. Ancient Democracy and Belligerence

Democracy in its pure form will tend to encourage belligerence rather than peace. If Athens can be considered the purest form of democracy in that it encouraged the participation of all adult male citizens, it can also be considered to have been an extremely aggressive political entity. From the time of the coming of the democracy in the fifth century until its eventual castration by the Macedonians, Athens was at war for the majority of its existence. Much of that war was directed at obtaining, keeping and then recovering the empire that its citizens could exploit. This empire not only helped to pay their wages for running the democracy but also allowed them to build such beautiful buildings as the Parthenon.

Loren Samons (2004) has argued that Athenian democracy can hardly be held up as a paragon of virtue. There is little doubt that the Athenians ran a militaristic outfit that ruthlessly exploited its allies and dependencies. It engaged in amoral actions, as is illustrated by the infamous Melian Dialogue (Thucydides 1972, pp. 400–08), and was stupid enough not to make peace with Sparta when it became apparent that the prospects of winning the war were extremely poor after the failure of the Sicilian campaign.

Athenian democracy brought the ordinary citizen into the political process and involved him in the military adventures of the polis. It also, by a law of Pericles, made the rules for citizenship quite stringent by insisting that citizens have both an Athenian mother as well as an Athenian father. It has been argued that a democracy in Greece had to be a naval power because rowing in a trireme enabled a propertyless male to make a contribution to the military effort. In a more traditional polis, in many ways exemplified by Sparta, it was the hoplites, the heavy infantry who formed the core of the military, who held political power. Sparta appeared to be belligerent but the purpose of that appearance was to discourage other *poleis* going to war with it.

In Athens it was no accident that the rise and development of democracy coincided with the creation of the Athenian fleet, followed by the successful prosecution of the war against Persia and the mutation of the Delian league into a full-blown Athenian Empire. It can be argued that democratic politics unleashed the full martial potential of the Athenian people; it provided the energy and vitality that underpinned Athenian imperialism.

On the one hand, the empire provided the essential material resources that allowed ordinary Athenians to be paid to participate in the political work of empire and democracy. On the other hand, democracy and empire provided the stimulus for the development of the *thumos* or self-esteem and spiritedness of the Athenians that goaded them ever forward on their quest to be recognized in the Greek world. Harvey Mansfield (2007, p. 42) has argued that *thumos*, what Plato and Aristotle called ‘the part of the soul that makes us want to insist on our own importance,’ is the missing ingredient from the study of modern politics. *Thumos*, can be considered to be the emotional state that allows a powerful *asabiya* to develop.

As mentioned earlier, it was imperial tribute that enabled Pericles to turn Athens into a city dominated by great works of architecture such as the Parthenon. It was also Pericles who delivered the rhetorical equivalent of the Parthenon in his famous funeral oration, a statement of the greatness of Athens and an affirmation of its self-esteem, of its *thumos*. But then *thumos* can all too easily turn into hubris. It is no accident that Pericles’ oration in Thucydides is followed almost immediately by the account of the plague. However, the most obvious example of how Athenian self-esteem turned into hubris and then disaster is the Sicilian campaign. Supported in the assembly by Alcibiades and opposed by Nicias, the Athenians voted even greater resources to the military expedition when Nicias pointed out that what they proposed to send is insufficient (Thucydides 1972, pp. 414–25). This is despite the fact that the majority of Athenians, according to Thucydides (1972, p. 409), had only the vaguest ideas regarding Sicily, or how large it was and how many people inhabited it.

Thucydides (1972, p. 429) paints a vivid picture of all the ships and men waiting to leave Athens

What made this expedition so famous was not only its astonishing daring and the brilliant display that it made, but also its great preponderance of strength over those against whom it set

out, and the fact that this voyage, the longest ever made by an expedition from Athens, was being undertaken with hopes for the future which, when compared with the present position, were of the most far-reaching kind.

He then proceeds to describe the consequences of this extraordinary display of hubris as the Athenian expedition proceeds to its ultimate destruction, with the final pathos of its enslaved survivors working in the stone quarries of Syracuse.

If Athenian democracy can be characterized, it is certainly not in terms of a desire by the Athenians to be 'quietly governed'. With the advent of democracy, and in the wake of the successes of the Persian wars, the Athenians became a restless and adventurous people who were driven to achieve. Achieve they did. Without democracy there would not have been the extraordinary achievements of Athenian tragedy, architecture or philosophy. Nor would there have been the seemingly endless wars that ultimately drained Athens of both her manpower and her resources.

### 3.2. Modern Democracy

Modern democracy may be considered to be the form of democracy that incorporates modern liberty as its foundation. Hence modern democracy is liberal in nature which means that its citizens cannot be compelled to involve themselves in it. Nevertheless, it can be argued that modern democracy can exhibit belligerent tendencies. Democracy does stimulate the *thumos* of ordinary citizens; it stimulates their sense of self-worth. Consider the case of America. At the beginning of the 19th century America was only a fraction of the size that it subsequently would become. Through a mixture of purchase and military conquest it eventually came to occupy a large part of the North American continent. As well, the more aggressive northern democratic portion insisted on preventing the secession of the Confederacy, which it forced to return to the union through brute force, and then imposed a brutal occupation on it (Kagan 2006).

In a similar fashion, Constant criticized the Jacobin regime of revolutionary France as an example of an attempt to impose ancient liberty on the modern world. For him, it was an inappropriate attempt to recreate the classical world. Another way of considering Constant's criticism is to consider revolutionary France as an aggressive democracy that sought to democratize the rest of Europe as an expression of the *asabiya* that the revolutionary experience had unleashed in France. Even in the modern world, democracy, as the cases of 19th century America and revolutionary France indicate, can mobilize the group feeling of a society, and stimulate the *thumos* of its members, so that it becomes aggressive and seeks to dominate others.

But what are the consequences of modern liberty becoming the basis of the modern democratic polity? Does it mean the beginning of an inevitable decay? Modern liberty, for Constant, signified the victory of commercial principles over military ones as the foundation of the ethos that dominated the political order. If modern liberty is the foundation of the political order, then the basis of citizenship cannot be the willingness to fight. In the ancient world the democratic principle was invariably tied to war and participation in war. Citizens gained the right to vote because many of the major decisions had to do with going to war and with risking one's life in a war. In the modern world, citizenship is not linked to anything much beyond the right of the citizen to vote and to receive welfare; there is no real imperative for a citizen to participate.

Put another way, in an ancient democracy the desire for honor and self-esteem was paramount. The Greeks and the Romans had a strong sense of *asabiya* because they also had a powerfully developed *thumos*. Modern democracies can under certain circumstances appeal to the *thumos* of their citizens but generally they prefer their citizens to be calculating and utilitarian in their motivations. In a modern democracy, utilitarianism and personal comfort trump *thumos*.

The real question relates to the consequences of having a democracy based on such a foundation. Consider for a moment the logic of Constant's argument. Constant's modern liberty, with its emphasis on individuals, their personal freedom, and their capacity simply to 'cultivate their gardens' implies, as has already been argued, a loss of *asabiya* which ancient liberty strongly cultivated. It can be argued

that modern democracies tend to peace not so much because they are democratic but rather because their form of democracy is shot through with liberalism and the desire to be left alone. Hence Pierre Manent (1997, p. 181) has argued that modern Western human beings are free to pursue liberty because they have been 'domesticated'; they no longer are driven by such passions as the quest for virtue. Manent argues that the virtues which had previously driven human beings, in particular magnanimity and humility, were an irritant from which they sought to escape (Manent 1997, p. 25). They now simply want to be left alone. Utilitarianism flourishes because, unlike Christianity and classical virtue, it makes no demands on individuals and causes them no pain.

Such an adoption of the values of peace by modern democracies makes them vulnerable to social units that foster a high degree of *asabiya* and which can mobilize their populations for aggressive activities. That is why modern democracy was almost annihilated in Europe during the Second World War. Both fascism and communism, at least in the short term, were capable of generating much higher levels of *asabiya* than the European democracies which lacked a capacity for social cohesion. This was because fascism and communism looked beyond a model of human nature based on utilitarianism and calculation to one that encouraged the *thumos* of their citizens. Democracy in Europe was only saved by the intervention of the one relatively aggressive modern democracy, the United States. It possessed the *asabiya* that they lacked, the will to fight for what it believed. Even then American troops were only marginally more efficient on the battlefield than the British and much less efficient than the Germans (Turchin 2006, p. 323). The Germans were efficient because they possessed a high level of *asabiya*, and they possessed it because the National Socialist regime was able to create a sense of social solidarity and *thumos* in significant sections of the German population.

The history of American involvement in war since 1960, including the Vietnam war, indicates that a high level of technology is no substitute for a high level of *asabiya*. In recent times the United States has had difficulty in recruiting people for the military (Murphy 2007, p.84), a sign of declining *asabiya*.

There is a paradox involved here. Ancient democracy was capable of generating *asabiya* and fostered aggressive tendencies amongst its citizens. Modern democracy, especially in its Jacobin form, generated enormous amounts of *asabiya*. This can be seen in the success of the French revolutionary armies and the expansion of 19th-century America across the North American continent.

However, as Constant argued, this *asabiya* was generated by the desire of the Jacobins to emulate the Ancients and to re-create ancient liberty under modern conditions. Once modern democracies embraced the ideals of liberalism, of the right to cultivate one's garden, the consequence was a decline in *asabiya*. This decline has been greatest in those modern democracies that combine democracy with administrative centralism, which includes most of Europe. In terms of the historical model developed by Ibn Khaldûn and elaborated by Turchin, modern democracies are decadent and ripe for plunder. They are incapable of creating a strong sense of social solidarity simply because they encourage their citizens to follow their own interests as opposed to the common interest. Their only real advantage rests with their superior technology.

There is an alternative argument that when the chips are down, democracies, particularly those of Anglo-Saxon derivation, will rally and protect freedom and democracy. This is the argument that Andrew Roberts (2006) puts in his *History of the English Speaking People since 1900*. It was an argument that was particularly strong at the time when there was a Bush–Blair–Howard axis supporting the war in Iraq. But is it, in fact, true?

It is probably true that democracies of Anglo-Saxon derivation have preserved their *asabiya* much more than other modern democratic countries. They are also the countries that have the strongest traditions of restricting the power of the state and encouraging the citizenry to do things for themselves. They are also, probably correctly, regarded as being much more aggressive than other democracies, particularly, as in the case of Iraq, when it comes to defending and/or imposing democracy on other countries. As has already been argued, democracies imbued with *asabiya* will tend to be aggressive.

Modern democracies have been, and will continue to be, challenged by other forms of polity capable of generating high levels of *asabiya*. These included both fascism and communism during

the 20th century. As discussed earlier, the victory over fascism and Nazism owed less to a superior sense of social solidarity than to overwhelming force and superior technology. Democracy did not overcome fascism; rather America and the Soviet Union managed to crush a Germany that was, man for man, a much more powerful entity than they were. The fall of communism derived from the fact that ultimately communism sapped the *asabiya* of the ordinary citizen because it created a privileged class that sat on top of a group that had only their poverty to share.

### 3.3. The Problems of Modern Democracy

It can be argued that the biggest problem facing modern democracies is that they create their own internal enemies who sense that democracies cannot create a high level of social solidarity. This is not unlike the disgust which Sallust felt about late republican Rome. They then become disgusted with democracy and look for alternatives that might satisfy their longings. In previous times it was the 'barbarians' who possessed *asabiya* and who were emboldened by it to attack and conquer settled, 'civilized' communities. Such 'civilized' communities usually took the form of agrarian empires who could only respond by taxing their inhabitants, thereby often alienating them. At times of dearth, such as occurred in the 17th century as result of climate change, the result was regime change such as occurred with the collapse of the Ming dynasty in China and its replacement by the Qing (Parker 2013, pp. 115–151). But in Eurasia the last of the old nomadic barbarians were conquered by the Chinese in the 18th century (Perdue 2005). In the contemporary world their place has been taken by those who achieve their *asabiya* in different ways.

Turchin argues that in the past the core areas for those groups who develop the *asabiya* necessary to become dominant were the border areas between settled 'civilized' communities and outsider 'barbarian' groups. In a way that still holds true for the 21st century as one of the groups with the strongest *asabiya*, radical Muslims, are often to be found on the frontier where Islam meets the West, such as immigrant communities in Europe (Roy 2004, pp. 232–89). More generally, it is the various religious fundamentalist groups who today possess the strongest *asabiya*. This can be seen in the fact that they are far more likely to have large families and consequently win the demographic race against those who seek only to 'cultivate their garden.' As Kaufmann (2010) has argued, the future may well belong to the religious because of their fecundity. Their *asabiya* is strong because they have a powerful sense of their own importance and of their place in the world. They possess the *thumos* that liberals lack (Kaufmann 2010).

Fundamentalists, whether they be Christians, Jews or Muslims, are unlikely to adhere to the values of modern liberty. This is not to say that they do not profess egalitarian values. It is rather that their egalitarianism is less likely to be of the liberal variety, of allowing one just to go off and do as one pleases. For example, there is a powerful tradition within Islam of forbidding wrong (Cook 2003), of making one's neighbor's business one's own. Similar, if less explicit, traditions also exist within Christianity and Judaism. Such practices are clearly at odds with the modern liberal idea that one should be free to do as one pleases so long as it does not harm someone else. There are many problems with this liberal ideal from the point of view of *asabiya* and social cooperation. In particular it implies that if an individual is free to do as he or she chooses, then that person has no real responsibilities beyond not harming others. Liberalism has no place for obligations to others. To leave alone is sufficient; one is not one's brother's keeper. In essence that is the crux of modern liberty and modern democracy, and it does allow for a high degree of personal autonomy and independence. But such autonomy comes at a price, and that price is a diminished sense of social obligation, and consequently *asabiya*.

What is being suggested is that 'modern barbarians' do not need physically to conquer the heartlands of modern democracy; demography may very well accomplish the task for them. This argument is similar to the one that Rodney Stark advances to explain the rise and success of Christianity in the Roman Empire. Stark (1997, pp. 3–28) argues that an explanation for the growth of Christianity does not require the conversion of large numbers of gentiles. The number of Christians increased because Christians had a strong sense of social obligation and a desire to care for each other.

When disaster struck they looked after one another, unlike the ordinary Romans. They were a success not because they physically ‘conquered’ the Roman Empire, but because they were able to thrive and grow owing to their capacity for mutual aid. It is worth noting in this regard that many in the 19th-century West had a similar capacity for mutual aid that manifested itself in a whole range of self-help and voluntary organizations. Some of that spirit still survives in the desire of many ordinary people to volunteer for a whole range of activities. That capacity for mutual aid went hand in hand with a faith in the future that manifested itself in large families.

There came a stage in the Roman Empire when the presence of the Christians appeared to threaten the stability of the empire. This meant that there were two options: persecute them out of existence or adopt their religion as a means of saving the empire. Ultimately the second path was taken, and it was taken because the state of the Empire was so grave that a new source of social solidarity was required. Hence, when Julian attempted to reinstate Hellenism in the early 360s he found little popular support. He found himself entering empty temples (Julianus 1913, p. 487).

Are modern Western democracies facing similar circumstances today? One could look at a number of problems facing modern democracies that follow from their desire to leave people alone to cultivate their gardens and the attempt by the state to retrieve social solidarity through bureaucratic intervention, a situation analogous to the later Roman Empire.

Under these circumstances it is apparent that modern democracies will not be saved from their own vices through state-sponsored schemes to make people more patriotic (let’s teach national history in schools) or by bureaucratic regimentation. As in the case of Rome, such schemes can only exacerbate the situation by forcing reluctant individuals into following courses of action against their will. The only way that *asabiya* can be created is spontaneously through groups, groups that are often narrow-minded and perhaps even repressive in their practices. Despite its enormous affluence, America still possesses some such groups for whom the pursuit of liberty does not equal the accumulation of wealth. As we noted earlier, there are also fundamentalist groups elsewhere who also retain their *asabiya*.

#### 4. Conclusions

To recapitulate the argument, ancient democracy, as manifested in Athens, was liable to be aggressive and imperial in its ambitions. Modern democracy lacks the *asabiya* that ancient democracy generated because it is interested in individual liberty and the peace to pursue that liberty. Only in certain cases, such as Jacobin France and 19th-century America, does modern democracy become aggressive. This places modern democracy at a considerable disadvantage when faced by aggressive foes which possess a high degree of *asabiya* such as Germany in the 1930s and 1940s. In fact, democracy almost expired in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s. Moreover, it is modern democracy that itself creates its own opponents in the ‘frontier’ where new groups come into contact with democracy only to find it unsatisfying because it lacks the capacity to create a strong sense of social solidarity. This was the case in Europe in the early 20th century when many young people found democracy unheroic, and unable to fulfil their longings. They often became fascists or communists. It is the case now for many from the Islamic world who come into contact with it.

Over time, of course, many are seduced by the comfort and soft living of modern democracy. They come to appreciate what its liberty has to offer and find its allures attractive. In the process their *asabiya* is weakened, and this means, in particular, the capacity for social cooperation. This cycle of alienation and co-option is a never ending one. The fate of modern democracies may well rest on their capacity to use their allures of comfort and luxury to seduce those who might otherwise destroy them.

As discussed above, the lack of *asabiya* may not matter while conditions remain relatively good. However, it means that modern Western societies have no protection once things go sour. Comfort and luxury only work while there is comfort to go around. The recent eruption of populism (Moffitt 2016) in the Western world indicates that the ‘age of comfort’ (Melleuish 2014) may well have come to an end. The cycle of Ibn Khaldûn could well be upon us. If this is the case, then societies founded on liberalism are not well prepared to deal with any harsh conditions which lie ahead. Their *asabiya*

has eroded; populism is an indication of the realization that social solidarity in the West has been seriously compromised and that there are elements in Western society who desperately wish to see it restored. Some critics have called for the restoration of mixed government (Milbank and Pabst 2016, pp. 205–44) but the problem with such a view is that it understands politics in terms of ‘being’ rather than ‘becoming’.

In such circumstances, if Turchin and Ibn Khaldûn are correct, the West is in real danger should another major crisis emerge, such as a pandemic. The West lacks the will and *thumos* to deal with such a crisis. Democracy, especially when it is dominated by modern liberty or liberalism, follows a dynamic that undermines its *asabiya*. The same is not true of other civilizations which have maintained their sense of self-worth because the dynamic of their current development has not destroyed their *asabiya*. The ‘barbarians’ are at the gates but only in the sense that the Greeks were the barbarians at the gates of Persia.

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