

MICHAEL WALZER: A USER'S GUIDE TO DEMOCRACY

Interview by Amy Otchet, *UNESCO Courier* journalist



[Michael Walzer](#)

A leading American political philosopher's 30-year quest for a more just society

You've written a great deal in support of multiculturalism. In short, you describe systems in which individuals wear different "hats"—that of the citizen, a religious affiliation, a union, etc.—and forge alliances with others in different groups. While many critics claim that multiculturalism dilutes the common glue (national identity) which binds society, you maintain that the real culprit is rampant individualism.

Actually, multiculturalism can work in both directions. Some cultures are coercive and need an individualist corrective. But when individualism is all powerful, the society needs the corrective of community and cultural cohesion.

I was recently in Jerusalem—where an Israeli leftist intellectual turned to a visiting American communitarian political theorist and said: "For you, community is a dream. For us it is a trauma." In Israel, the structure of religious communities is so powerful that it divides the polity in frightening ways. Very strong ethnic national and religious communities are often oppressive to many of their members, most importantly to women. To be committed to a democratic society of which these women are supposedly equal citizens, you have to find some way to break into these communities and reshape their internal life. The only agent for doing that is the state and that means you need a strong sense of citizenship and common values in order to foster resistance or intervention in the groups.

And what about more individualist societies?

In the U.S., for example, individuals are radically focused on themselves, on their careers, their partners or a rapidly shifting series of partnerships. The individual has little, if any, sense of being obligated or connected. In such a society, there is a real necessity to foster and strengthen the bonds of community. For these bonds to be authentic, they have to be local or parochial in some sense. They aren't going to connect every American to every other American. They connect much smaller groups of people to one another—neighbours, faith communities or people with common ethnic history. These connections are essential for a society to be capable of caring for its most vulnerable members. Radical individualism does not make for the kinds of ties that are necessary for basic decency—not for justice, either, which is another two stages away.



["The conquered Native Americans and the enslaved black Americans... have not achieved anything close to equal status in American society."](#)



[A record number of immigrants to the U.S. were naturalized in 1996. Above some of the 10,000 "new Americans" who attended a mass naturalization ceremony at Texas Stadium, Irving \(Texas\).](#)

When gay men and women can live openly in a society that has previously forced them into invisibility, they are not just enjoying more freedom. The society is more egalitarian

A fish out of water

One of the United States' most renowned political philosophers, 64-year-old Michael Walzer is like a fish out of water. "Living in the U.S., where there is no leftist movement or social democratic party, I have a rarefied political existence," he says, explaining that his main activity is to write: books and a constant stream of articles for left-wing reviews, most notably as editor of *Dissent*, a pillar of America's intellectual landscape. Unlike so many of his entourage of 1960s activists who fashioned themselves as professors, Walzer was not a "red diaper baby" raised by communist parents.

There is often tension between the left and minority ethnic groups. These groups are criticized for alienating the majority in a labour union, for example, by raising issues of racism or prejudice. They are told to leave their "identity politics" at the door and join the wider cause of the poor. How do you draw the line between identity politics and multiculturalism?

There are a couple of different issues here, one of which is the relation between class and racial or ethnic identity. Class identity used to be something not all that different from what ethnic identity is today. The working class used to have a language, a mode of dress, and a set of values just like any ethnic group in American society today. It is the decline of the cultural cohesiveness and differentiation of the working class that has so greatly weakened the union movement in the U.S. The union movement was never simply a movement of people pursuing interests, it was also a movement of people who shared a way of life—a sense of identity.

Even so, the distinction is commonly made between economic interests (which are supposedly rational and bring people together) versus birth and blood, culture and history (which separate people). It is a common complaint on the left, to tell people defending identity politics, "You're just getting in the way of the class struggle and a rational defence of the interests of the poor." This isn't entirely wrong because identity politics is often very divisive. But at the same time, identity politics is a form of egalitarian politics which must be held in some kind of useful tension with class. When gay men and women can live openly in a society that has previously forced them into invisibility, they are not just enjoying more freedom. The society is more egalitarian.

How can we bring new groups into society?

It is important that the naturalization process isn't too long or discriminatory. The old price for admission—especially in countries like France—was that you had to leave the old culture behind. You not only became a French citizen, you were supposed to become French. In the United States, anyone who has grown up in an immigrant neighbourhood has felt that there was something shameful about the old culture. We knew that our parents or grandparents would stay awkwardly representative of something that we were going to and had to leave behind. It was an imposed surrender of identity. Now we've raised the question: can we redefine the terms of assimilation, of democratic citizenship?

To be an American citizen, I have to learn the English language, study American history and learn about the political mores of Americans. But what more is required? How much of my old identities, commitments and loyalties can I retain and even

Experience piqued the political awareness of this philosopher. Born in the melting pot of New York City, Walzer was steeped in multiculturalism with his family of Jewish shopkeepers of Eastern European origin. Life veered left at the age of nine with the family move to a small Pennsylvanian steel and mining town, where the strength of the local labour unions offered a vision of activism. Walzer's formal political education began at Brandeis University—the first Jewish-sponsored university in the U.S. and a refuge for leftist intellectuals subjected to the McCarthyite red-hunts of the 1950s. Next stop for Walzer: the civil rights movement. Within a week of the first sit-in at a segregated lunch counter, Walzer headed south to write about the movement for Dissent. Within months, he was involved in organizing northern support for the movement while pursuing his graduate studies in political theory at Harvard University. In the mid-1960s when “white agitators” were “pushed out of the civil rights movement,” Walzer explains that he shifted camps to take an active role in the anti-war movement against U.S. intervention in Viet

cultivate and still be within the body of citizens? The terms are now being renegotiated to the advantage of the incomers. There are sure to be a lot of difficulties in that negotiation but I think the product will be a more egalitarian society.

At the same time, there are real demands that have to be made on people entering a democratic society. You can see that in any religious fundamentalist example anywhere in the world. Religious fundamentalists want their children to attend schools teaching doctrines profoundly hostile to democratic politics. And they often want the state to pay for that education. The body of citizens has the right to say, “But your children are going to vote in our elections. They are going to determine the fate of this country and of our children. So we will insist that you teach your children about the values of democratic politics, the right of opposition, the plurality of parties, the freedom of argument and the history of democracy in this country.”

You maintain that multiculturalism can encourage social equality. Through political activism, groups will forge alliances while pressing ahead with their own interests. Yet you never examine the ways in which institutionalized racism can block the path to equality. Why do you barely even mention the word racism?

Racism may be too broad a term. The U.S. is an immigrant society within which immigrants have been very successful. The conquered Native Americans and the enslaved black Americans are the two groups that have been forcibly prevented but also disabled from the inside in a variety of ways. So they have not achieved anything close to equal status in the society. But the Asian Americans are doing fabulously well and yet they initially encountered a racist response. And I would guess that Hispanic Americans will overtake both black Americans and Native Americans in terms of economic well-being in the near future. So the problems of American society are the problems of the two non-voluntary immigrant groups—those did not choose, that were not able to choose, to be part of this society. You can tell long stories about the difficulties various immigrant groups have encountered. But I don't think the story about institutionalized racism helps to explain the difference between, say, the Irish and the Japanese.

You reject affirmative action programmes assuring minority representation in universities, for example. What then are the alternatives for redistributing resources?

There is a reason for the success of affirmative action. It is inexpensive and doesn't make any demand on social resources. It benefits a small, mostly younger, subsection of black Americans and creates a small, rather vulnerable, black middle class. At the same time, it avoids the kind of investment that would be

Nam.
“The only way to survive as an American political scientist,” says Walzer, “is to have one door outside the academy through political action.” So throughout his teaching career at Princeton University and Harvard, he has used his pen as a lance, most importantly through Dissent, “now a movement magazine without the movement,” he says. “But we keep going in the hope that we will encounter our necessary alter ego somewhere down the line.”

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‘Give each community the right to worship as it wants to, in its own buildings, without interference. With this one thing, you will end the wars.’

necessary for improving the level of inner city schools, or for changing the racial hierarchy in the U.S.

The rectification of inequalities requires a political movement far bigger than the black community. But given the political context in the U.S., there isn’t going to be in the near future a significant redistribution of resources to individuals. However it might be possible to organize a redistribution to groups. For example, a significant part of the American welfare state is run by religious communities through hospitals, nursing homes, and day-care centres. When the Republican majority in Congress began cutting the welfare budget in 1995, the loudest screams of protest came from the charitable organizations of the Lutherans, Catholics and Jews—the three most successful groups in getting money for welfare services from the state—which provided in fact something like 60 per cent of their charitable budgets.

Why shouldn’t black Baptists control the same share of tax money as white Lutherans or Catholics or Jews? These other groups have greater organizational power, and a long history of collecting this money—so it’s going to take a deliberate political decision to make it available to black Baptists. I am not religious myself but I recognize that these religious institutions are socially useful. We saw this in the 1960s when the whole civil rights movement was run out of the Baptist churches in the southern towns. Now they might serve as agents of redistribution.

Tolerance is becoming a buzz-word, sometimes sounding like a polite way of accepting the unacceptable. Shouldn’t we strive towards something more?

The crucial thing is not tolerance but toleration. Tolerance is a mental attitude but toleration is a set of arrangements. I think that the attitudes matter less and will come in time if you get the politics right—if you find the right regime of toleration. This reminds me of a Puritan sermon (from the 1630s or 40s) against divorce. It said simply: if you hold the estranged couple together long enough, something will happen that makes the marriage possible. I don’t believe that about marriage, but it may be true for the less intimate coexistence of groups. If you force Greeks and Turks to live together for 200 years, there is going to be commerce and friendship and even intermarriage across the borders—if the political regime is successful and imposes peace. My stress is not on mutual respect but on peaceful coexistence. Start there. In today’s world, it would be a huge gain. Then you can work towards higher levels of mutuality.

Most philosophers on the left seem panicked by the rise of tribalism since 1989. Why aren’t you so alarmed?

All forms of parochialism or particularism are dangerous. A parent’s love for a child can produce

Select

bibliography

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For more information on Dissent:

www.igc.apc.org/dissent/



gross injustice and spawn forms of favouritism and nepotism. Yet you wouldn't want to give up on parental love. The tribal, ethnic or national forms of particularism have greater dangers than favouritism or nepotism because of the command of resources and weaponry. There is something to worry about. But many leftists have made the great mistake of opposing every form of particularism. This is like setting yourself against humanity itself.

Consider the hypothetical argument of many philosophers on the left: I suddenly find myself in the situation where my child and another child whom I don't know are in danger. If I can only rescue one, the right thing to do, according to these philosophers, would be to toss a coin to decide which child to save. But it's not possible to turn that from a philosophical position to a real-life demand. It doesn't recognize forms of attachment that are natural to human beings. We have to find a way of living with tribal loyalties that develop historically among groups of people. This is the 17th-century English philosopher John Locke's original argument for toleration. Living in an age of religious civil wars, he said: establish a regime of toleration. Give each community the right to worship as it wants to, in its own buildings, without interference. With this one thing, he said, you will end the wars.

We have to experiment with forms of autonomy and federation—and we must do so quickly. Somebody has to be able to move into places like Kosovo to find forms of political association to give vulnerable communities some room of their own. It shouldn't always be sovereignty or political independence—there can be many forms of autonomy and federal government. We had better start experimenting because we are not going to eliminate tribal feelings. Politics is the art of finding arrangements that accommodate those feelings.

You once wrote, “We become social critics naturally, by elaborating on existing moralities and telling stories about a society more just than our own.” You have been telling stories for more than 30 years. How have they changed?

It has gotten harder to tell stories about societies more just than your own. Not because my own society has gotten more just but because there has been such a massive loss of faith in the alternative visions that we used to refer ourselves to. The democratic left longed for the collapse of communism. We always believed that the fall of those regimes would immediately open opportunities for a “third way”—a socialism that didn't rely on the state but encompassed a decentralized and highly participative form of democratic politics, with workers' control of factories and new social movements like feminism and environmentalism. But instead of opening this new path, 1989 unexpectedly brought a crisis of faith in any sort of

radical alternative. The stories of more just societies now sound like utopian fantasies. So before we can start telling those stories again, we've got to argue that there are forms of life different from what we see around us which are still sociologically or economically feasible.

I don't mean to sound grim. Political opportunities often take shape in unexpected ways. We always misjudge the time intervals. 1989 came sooner than we thought and the opportunities may come later.

Maybe you're also a bit nostalgic for the excitement and activism of the 1960s and 70s. What about the new forms of opposition developing at the international level around a wide range of single issues—from genetically modified crops to human rights abuse?

(With a broad smile and a chuckle.) You may be always nostalgic for those moments of exhilaration. But there certainly are new forms of organization with groups functioning in a space that is beginning to be called international civil society. They recruit members from different countries and act across boundaries even though they are most often trying to bring pressure on specific national governments. But it is not clear that these organizations can be fully participative and democratic. Instead of active members, they have a dues-paying membership which supports the work of a highly mobile, professional staff. Political activism often amounts to little more than signing a cheque. I am not sure that this is the kind of activism that makes for democratic decision-making.

How do you account for this decline in activism?

In the U.S., for example, political parties used to operate at many different levels—the state, city and even the precinct (neighbourhood). When you have a party articulated with activists at every level, you can be pretty sure of that group of people's ability to hold leadership responsible. The broader the activism, the wider the responsibility of the leadership.

Today, the precinct party offices are gone. You have a candidate and an entourage of publicity and make-up people who function like a commando unit. They descend on a place in time to make the evening TV news and then depart. There is no local structure to hold them responsible.

An alternative might be a civil society articulation of democratic politics. Instead of relying on party structures which are so far removed from local communities, citizens might form associations through churches, unions or philanthropic groups to press for their demands and hold political leaders responsible.

When describing the "good life", most philosophers offer sweeping reflections on universal principles and ideals. Yet you focus

strictly on the nuts and bolts of political arrangements. Why?

It's a feature of Western philosophical, religious and more recently political tradition to focus on the good society and the good life where that definite article is very definite and singular in character. Monotheistic religion with its notion of the messianic kingdom contributes to that singular conception which the left inherited. Most people who talk nowadays about the good society are on the left.

I have never believed that there could be either a definite or a singular picture of the good life. You could tell stories of good lives. You could point to people who had lived well. You could describe a variety of good societies in movements, communities and even states. But given the immense variety of human beings and the extraordinary creativity of humanity, it never seemed plausible to think there can be one way of living, or one correct form of social organization.