

What's the Debt-Ceiling Debate Really About?

We are a nation of hypocrites, at least those of us franchised into the political economy are.

We say we want democracy but what we actually want is something more like "Lord of the Flies."

Take the current debt-ceiling battle. We shouldn't be fooled into thinking it's simply a fiscal debate. So what is the real issue in the debt-ceiling debate? It's about the debt of thoroughly democratic governance.

The conservative revolution that shuffled a new Congress onto Capitol Hill when mostly angry white people showed up to vote last fall is a new expression of an old tension. It is a Jekyll-and-Hyde attitude toward institutional authority.

An expansive government that participates in the redistribution of society's resources embodies the egalitarian spirit of democracy. It indicates, on one level, a high level of enfranchisement of the citizenry. It functions to represent many interests.

Yet many believe that an expansive government threatens individual freedoms and undermines democracy.

Many interests call for many programs, and revenue is needed to fund them. Where does the money come from? Taxing the rich, an unconstitutional constraint on individuality, they say.

Furthermore, an expansive government lowers civic responsibility, the story goes. It engenders, to use conservative language, a "welfare state."

What we are witnessing in Congress is not a fear of too much debt, but too much democracy.

Democracy enfranchises its citizens through complex avenues of resource redistribution. A society diversifying ethnically and culturally requires a diversifying government.

Otherwise (as I understand the early liberal theorists of democracy to believe), social, cultural and natural inequalities will lead to political and social inequities that limit human freedom.

We have a government that is responsive to an America that has changed. Its social programs have developed because without most of them, many of its citizens would remain at the bottom of the heap where they were placed, not where they sought to go.

Yes, this kind of government requires revenues. When tax cuts, shipping jobs overseas, overseas financing, wars and recession cut into those revenues, something has to be done.

One answer is to reinstitute higher individual and corporate income tax levels for upper-quintile income levels to sustain programs. Another is to cut programs.

Another - one we're seeing now - is to force the downsizing of government by attrition: greatly limiting its ability to redistribute resources by eliminating things like credit.

What conservatives really fear is what the current debt-ceiling debate in part represents: a changing America, one that requires government to be heavily involved in the enfranchisement of such a diverse citizenry.

That is, what they fear is a broadening democracy.

The role of a government is not a social one, according to this new conservative ideology. Each individual is responsible for herself and must be free from forced responsibility for others.

Society is, at best, the aggregate of individuals. Without rejecting the liberal value

of the individual, I want to suggest that this view of society is in many ways anti-democratic.

Many of us remember the 1970s think tank charged with analyzing the state of democracy. It was called the Trilateral Commission.

Three geopolitical regions primarily contributed to the conversation: North American, European and Japan. Right-leaning scholars and theorists wary of the loss of American hegemony and concerned with socialism wanted to think through global planning for the future.

Ethicist Graham Ward, author of "The Politics of Discipleship," expertly recounts how the rhetoric of the literature produced by the commission blamed democracy's crisis on several things like democratic trends towards equality, the decline of governmental authority based on hierarchy, expertise and wealth, the loss of party politics, and budget deficits caused by welfare state spending.

One of the commission's key contributors, the brilliant scholar Samuel P. Huntington, stated then, "Some of the problems of governance in the United States today stem from an excess of democracy."

This is the fundamental issue at stake for the new conservatives in the debt crisis, in my opinion.

Their deep worry is that the prosperity they have enjoyed - in large part due to historical, social and religious advantage - is being diluted by a government responsive to the prosperity of a changing American citizenry.

They are threatened by the policies that have them "sharing" in the welfare of their fellow citizens.

Furthermore, the old adage that an insecure citizenry looks to a more authoritarian government has been realized.

In this case, a section of the citizenry is insecure, and it has opted for strong

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“decider” leaders who permit no opposition to their views and decisions.

Looking at the debt-ceiling debate from this perspective, the stance of the Republicans makes sense to me.

To keep the inevitable cultural and ethnic shift from occurring too quickly, democracy must be denied its resources, including the ability of its governments to borrow money to sustain democracy’s goals.

And I don’t think it’s a strategy based on prejudice as much as fear.

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