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Can democracy survive cynicism?
James Campbell

THE great German philosopher Martin Heidegger argued that one of the key traits that characterise us as human beings is the recognition we have of the vulnerability that threatens our existence.

Our sense of threat, our cynicism in regards to others and a permanent feeling of doubt that manifests through modern society lead us to distrust each other, our institutions and even our belief in the capacity of things truly to change for the good.

Distrust, born out of the womb of doubt and fear, seems to be a defining characteristic of modern life. Some even blame our educational institutions for the phenomenon pointing out the critical cynicism taught in our universities.

Critics of our societies argue that we espouse and argue for ideas of the common good and moral uplift, yet once the rhetorical moment passes we slip back into habits derived from a more pessimistic world view.

Consider the frequent calls for educational innovation and reform. Many of us seek to change our learning institutions for the better; we applaud those who seek to do so. Yet we need to take a close look at a deeper malaise; a growing cynicism and mistrust of each other that appears to represent our daily interactions and how we see ourselves, our society and the possibility of truly realising and advancing reform.

Jefferey C. Goldfarb’s insightful book The Cynical Society: The Culture of Politics and the Politics of Culturein American Life argues that cynicism and distrust are rooted in manipulations of the people through the media and the ideologies of the elites. Henry Giroux captures the problem in American society in an article for College Literature Giroux declares “freedom is defined increasingly through the logic of consumerism, the dynamics of self-interest, an e-commerce investment culture, and all things private, there seems to be a growing disinterest on the part of the general population in such non-commercial values as empathy, compassion, loyalty, caring, trust and solidarity that bridge the private and the public and give substance to the meaning of citizenship, democracy, and public life.” Finally, Michael Walzer in The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism in Political Theory points out that the nature of a purely individualistic society is that its focus on personal advancement leads to a society characterised by withdrawal, solitude, privacy and apathy.

The increasing individualisation of society, our growing identities as consumers rather than a citizens and our increasing sense of rootlessness in all things are now dissipating our capacities to believe in differences between good and bad that are not simply reducible to individual predilection or choice.

Cynicism and suspicion of everything is the defining characteristic of what many philosophers refer to as the post-modern condition.

Of course we can ask to what extent this cynicism and distrust is a Western or perhaps Americanised phenomenon as indicated by the references above?
What about Malaysia? Are things really that bad? Is cynicism and distrust a characteristic of the Malaysian social environment? Or is the lament over cynicism and distrust overwrought and excessive? On the pessimistic side of the ledger, the signs of cynicism and distrust in public institutions and the capacity for change are reasonably clear. Opinion pieces in the Malaysian Press refer to it, and blog sites are notorious for their vitriol and intemperance.

Educational reform is one of my key interests. But before any revamp can take root, there must be confidence in public institutions and public servants that they can truly make it happen. Without this confidence we face an uphill battle.

Newspaper reports, opinions and blogs are one thing; however sceptics among my readers may justly ask has anyone researched Malaysian attitudes in a more substantive fashion. The answer is yes.

The Merdeka Centre For Opinion Research provides a deeper appreciation of some of the issues at hand. According to one of the latest polls conducted by the Merdeka Centre titled Malaysian Political Values Survey January –April 2010, a sense of disconnect between the people and policy makers comes through in the latest polling data.

A need for greater public participation and a desire for a sense of consultation also suggest itself from the Merdeka data. The centre’s data may indeed be on to something. If cynicism and distrust stem from a sense of disconnect between policy makers and citizens then clearly it is up to the former to take heed and seek to listen to the voice of the people and also make sure that they are aware of this process when it occurs.

In an increasingly globalised Malaysia where Internet access is common place and where travel is far more widely available the need for policy makers to reach out to their constituents and explain their agendas rather than merely expecting people to follow them out of habit or history is increasingly important.

Trust between policy makers and citizens cannot any longer be assumed. These days trust must be constantly renewed and worked on if governments are to avoid the problems of widespread cynicism in regards to their policies. Cynicism is therefore bred from distrust and interestingly enough distrust is in part fuelled by problems in two critical areas.

The Merdeka Centre polling in its Malaysian Political Values Survey January –April 2010 indicates that the two biggest concerns in Malaysia are “making the country more democratic” which 27 per cent of respondents cited and “making our education system world class” (20 per cent).

The sense of powerlessness among many Malaysians which the Merdeka data indicates points to the need for the government to consult and explain their policies in a more coherent and rigorous fashion.
A desire on the part of Malaysians to participate and feel that their views, opinions and interests are taken into account is a good sign of a maturing and growing democracy.

The second concern, which is of interest, is the recognition by Malaysians of the importance of education. This concern is not unrelated to the first, the concern for more transparent and inclusive democratic participation. The reason is for greater democratic participation and consultation to be effective it must be based on an educated public that is able to exercise their democratic rights in an informed and proper manner.

Education is the effective precondition to a balanced and well-informed democratic public sphere operating effectively and efficiently. In this sense both the demand for enhanced democratic processes and improved education go hand in hand. This insight leads me to an essential conclusion.

Trust and overcoming cynicism is based in part on improving and deepening our democratic institutions and clarifying our democratic processes.

However, for this process of reform to be effective it must rely on improving and deepening our educational outcomes in society.

Only with better education based on the principles of inclusiveness, sustainability and growth can our demands for a more democratic society be realised.

It was not for nothing that the great American philosopher John Dewy combined democracy with education in his classic work Democracy and Education.

It is also appropriate to remind ourselves that the great Malaysian educational reformers such as Aminuddin Baki, Ungku Abdul Aziz Ungku Abdul Hamid, and social philosophers such as Syed Hussein Alatas and Chandra Muzzafar also recognised and worked towards the improvement of education, in the broadest sense of the term, as a basis for national development, inclusivity and the creation of a vibrant Malaysian democracy.

Trust is the glue that holds together a society. Without trust we simply cannot work together to achieve our goals. After all who truly will collaborate with people they don't trust?

Social solidarity, working together and feeling a sense of common purpose build trust and dissipate cynicism.

Our public institutions should always be founded upon a mission of advancing the common good and articulating the needs of a generally held sense of public purpose. Deepening our sense of participation and building bridges between diverse communities create a sense of social solidarity, and empathy is critical to national advancement and development.
At root, however, lies the problem of education. For without education the promise of
democratic growth breaks upon the rocks of individualism, cynicism and self-
advancement.

An education, which challenges mental captivity, encourages empathy and fosters
innovation and mutual respect, is the foundation for a truly democratic society.
Cynicism and distrust lie at one end of the range of possibilities for our social
development.

Empathy, social solidarity and creative development lie at the other end. The true
nature of democracy as it is actually practised depends on which of these values and
dispositions characterise our social interactions. As always education holds the key.

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