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SCIENCE VERSUS DEMOCRACY

Michael Ignatieff

The Yaron Ezrahi Annual Lecture

**In partnership with the Hebrew University of
Jerusalem, Department of Political Science**

Response by Dana Blander



**Imagining the Future of Democracy
The Yaron Ezrahi Conference on Democracy**

October 28–29, 2020



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Science Versus Democracy

Michael Ignatieff

I am honored to be asked to speak in Yaron Ezrahi's memory.

I want to talk about democracy as it actually exists, in the way that Yaron Ezrahi taught us to see it, and to focus (as he did) on the relation between knowledge and participation as ultimately competing principles of democratic legitimacy.

Ezrahi's great book *Imagined Democracies: Necessary Political Fictions*, published in 2012, was brilliant at forcing us, first of all, to stop romanticizing democracy, to stop confusing the aspirational language of normative theory with the permanently unrealized reality of democracy as it actually is:

Contemporary democracy is not the deliberative self-governing polity of informed free citizens envisioned by modern Enlightenment thinkers. It is a system of government in which public policy consists of an eclectic patchwork of half-baked programs, where politicians tend to posture rather than act, where the public sphere is more a site of shifting amorphous moods than a clash of ideas.

Ezrahi focused his attention on the epistemology of democratic knowledge, and his conclusions were pessimistic. While our democratic ideals assume an epistemology in which citizens reason, deliberate together, and decide on the basis of a shared account of reality, Ezrahi relentlessly reminded us that this is not the case in practice. Citizens largely do not reason on the basis of facts and evidence, and neither do politicians. Both rulers and ruled are deeply shaped by affective and emotional moods, and by moral and intellectual fashions that sweep through entire populations with the speed of a summer storm. These can change the picture of reality that is broadly accepted by political actors, citizens, and politicians alike as the basis upon which they argue and negotiate. If politics is the art of the possible, then the limits of the possible are not the limits of reality itself, but rather the discursive structures that define what arguments about reality can gain traction with an electorate.

I have my own personal experience of this. I ran for the Canadian Parliament in three national election campaigns in Canada between 2005 and 2010, and I was told by political

professionals, with all the solemnity of a priesthood reciting the Lord's Prayer, that "in politics, perception is reality." I did not want to believe it then, but I'm afraid I believe it now. Ezrahi was right: we fail to understand democratic politics unless we grasp the fictive discourses that define what passes for reality. Equally, it could be added, we should not waste time being disappointed that neither rulers nor ruled are the rational actors we sometimes wish they could be. The least pleasant (but also most humbling and truthful) meaning of "government of the people, by the people, for the people" is "government by people who are no better and no worse at reasoning than we are."

The 2016 US election reminded us how decisive are imaginative frames of reality in defining who wins and who loses in politics. Trump managed to describe America in a manner that captured the resentments and fears of an overlooked portion of the electorate, and this gave him a narrow victory. Overnight, Trump's victory then changed the frame in which we all understood what was real and what was possible in American politics. COVID-19 has had the same effect, for different reasons. Overnight, the unthinkable—total lockdowns of populations—became the inevitable. What is disturbing here is that these changes in the very frame in which reality is understood seem to occur with blinding speed, and without the deliberation and discussion and consideration of consequences that we would like to think should anchor public choice.

Like the animals that we are, we think in packs; we hunt—politically speaking—in packs. These discursive frames of reality are coercive: they define what can and cannot be imagined. It is a rare person who is able to think against the grain, against the immense tidal pressure of public sentiment and pack vengeance, particularly in the age of social media.

The tidal force of emotion and pack-thinking in politics calls into question the authority and prestige of knowledge and expertise. In modern democracies, Ezrahi writes, "expertise is a diminishing source of authority" and "politics is shaped... by suasive emotional and cognitive powers of pictures and images" and marketing strategies rather than by "well-constructed arguments."

This was written in 2012, almost a decade before we discovered, during the coronavirus pandemic, the extent to which expertise can be contested; how the wearing of a mask can become politicized as a marker of identity and libertarian conviction; and how "following the science" can be a contentious issue, rather than a shared bedrock of knowledge bringing us together through a mortal crisis—indeed, science's very authority has been in the dock throughout.

Yaron Ezrahi called on us to understand what was truly new about the epistemological conditions for democracy in the modern world. But he also insisted that the epistemology of democracy has always been contested ground, back to the ancient Greeks. He traced the problem back to Plato, who insisted that knowledge has to be the ultimate source of the legitimacy of decision-making, and Aristotle, who argued to the contrary, that the basis of decision-making legitimacy must be the participation of citizens and the inclusivity of the process by which decisions are made .

Knowledge and participation have contested the ground for legitimacy ever since. One condition for a stable democracy is a stable relation between knowledge and participation as bases for legitimate decision-making. When the democratic system is working as it should, experts are empaneled to deliver reports on the ethical and technical aspects of a new technology or to advise on a new threat, such as a virus, but it is democratically elected politicians, responsible to the electorate, who make the ultimate decisions. When the system works as it should, knowledge reinforces rather than undermines democratic legitimacy.

Today, in a multi-media world where each of us has the equivalent of the Library of Alexandria in the cell phone in our pocket, where everyone suddenly feels entitled to their own favorite facts, and where technology enables instantaneous mobilization of the like-minded, the tidal waves of popular sentiment referred to by Ezrahi very frequently overwhelm, and even silence, the voice of expert-validated knowledge. Science still enjoys prestige for what it delivers to ordinary citizens: longer lives, cures for illness, and wondrous new technology; but when scientists speak in the public arena, majorities frequently resent—and sometimes with justification—the claim that experts have a right to prevail, to close the argument, for example, about stem cell research, abortion, genetic manipulation, vaccines, and in the case we are living through, epidemic disease.

As we have seen—in the United States, Spain, Brazil, and the United Kingdom, and perhaps also in Israel—politicians openly challenge epidemiological advice, and scientists themselves do not speak with one voice. They have struggled to manage, predict, and even understand a virus that is no worse than a bad cold for some, and a death sentence for others. While it is likely that the eventual arrival of a successful vaccine, or vaccines, will abate the clamor and will reinforce, once again, the authority of science, the strength of the anti-vaccine movement suggests that there will always be a vocal minority in opposition, whose agitation may well cost lives. The strength of these anti-scientific social movements tells us, as Ezrahi so clearly saw, that the authority of science will always be contestable terrain at the margins, and sometimes at the center, of any democracy.

When the authority of science and the authority of democracy conflict and the result is a stand-off, a legitimacy vacuum can ensue, with ordinary citizens distrusting government and scientific advisers in equal measure. It is tempting to think that this standoff will pass if the current crop of demagogues are handed electoral defeat for their failures to keep their people safe. It is tempting to think, in other words, that knowledge will prevail. But Ezrahi's work forces us to confront a more troubling possibility.

As Ezrahi says, "there is an unsettling empty dark space at the foundation of political order." This is an intrinsic problem, at the root of democracy itself, in the inherent conflict between knowledge and participation as competing principles of legitimacy. COVID-19 has laid bare this void—this dark space—for all to see, as science and majority rule contest each other's legitimacy.

As a result, Ezrahi argues, there is "a pressing human urge for safe-seeming, involuntary and transpolitical anchorage(s) of power." When neither majority rule nor science seem to confer legitimacy on collective decisions, people deal with the legitimacy vacuum—and the absence of closure—in a variety of ways. Some simply find the "facts" on the Internet that reinforce their convictions, inventing authoritative knowledge to bolster their identities and sustain their partisanship. So their epistemological frame becomes: "I know what I know and I follow leaders who tell me what I know." Social media then accentuates what Daniel Kahneman called "confirmation bias." In the void formed when political and scientific authority contradict rather than reinforce each other, we create our own certainties by actively seeking "facts" that confirm our biases.

Thus, our "transpolitical" anchor comes to rest, precariously, on the ocean floor of our solitary selves. The public choices we make, the political allegiances we assume, become existential. We think our very identities—as honorable, truth-loving individuals—depend on who we ally with in politics. Political disagreements become mortal because so much seems at stake. Ultimate questions—what is true, what is false, who is to be trusted, who is friend, who is enemy—are at stake in every political argument. Political discourse becomes an exchange of insults between identities too embattled, too existentially charged, to admit doubt, to reach out, to seek the compromises of interest and understanding that are essential to a functioning democracy.

Facing the legitimacy vacuum in politics, others may seek their transpolitical anchorage by seeking recourse to religion, even going to the length (and certain segments of the Orthodox Jewish community may be an example of this) of denying both the authority of democracy and the authority of knowledge, in favor of the authority of God.

Since the end of the religious wars in the 17th century, the Western democratic tradition has always been alert to the danger when anyone posits a source of authority higher than that of the democratic community itself. Democracy's traditional solution to the problem of such a "transpolitical authority" was toleration: to disestablish the churches, to separate religion and state, to allow full freedom of confessional allegiance, while carving out a civic space for democratic debate in which the religious had full rights of participation but no right to argue, any more than anyone else, that their claims cleared the table. Instead, what was supposed to settle democratic debate were the facts—hard evidence about the real world, as gleaned from rigorous observation and the scientific method. In addition to the facts were the distribution of political forces, that is, which sectors and segments of public opinion could claim political ascendancy; and of course, the principle of majority rule, tempered by minority rights and judicial review.

Almost every element of this liberal democratic settlement is now in question. The "facts" and the authority of the institutions that determine what the facts are—from university departments, to government statistical offices, to Science with a capital S—are all contested in the name of a kind of secularized "priesthood of all the believers," a Protestant revolution of disbelief in expertise and its authority, spurred on by the digital revolution, in which ordinary people are empowered to believe in what they feel most strongly. This relates, Ezrahi argues, to the "post-modern turn," to deep and enduring changes in the very boundaries between self and other, between internal and external. These cultural shifts have radically undermined democracy's traditional epistemology:

The erosion of the sharp division between the internal and the external, the interiority of the human subject and the external world as an object, or, to put it more generally, the end of the external as a safe boundary of the internal, signifies the decline of the Enlightenment's democratic moral epistemology, which, inspired by the scientific revolution, has rested on a sharp distinctions between categories such as objective and subjective, natural and artificial, necessity and freedom.

I wouldn't go as far as this. Ezrahi's work is enormously interesting, but here would be a point—his full-on embrace of the post-modern critique of science and objectivity—where I found myself thinking of the famous story of Dr. Samuel Johnson kicking a cobble-stone and saying, "Here I refute Berkeley." The stone I would kick to refute post-modernist relativism would be the COVID-19 deaths—more than a million around the world. Real people really died and continue to die daily. Reality does have a way of definitively refuting the fantastical

claims and conspiracy theories that abound in politics and ordinary life. Reality, I would argue, may be very dark these days, but dark realities at least have the virtue of forcing most of us to awake from the virtual illusions in which we spend so much of our lives.

The question about democracy which is illuminated by Ezrahi's work is how much of the fact-based, evidence-based, science-based epistemology remains intact in a digital social media world that has weaponized—and anonymized—the tides of sentiment and emotion that are now sweeping through the democratic world everywhere. Demagoguery, sophistry, lying, and deception are not new problems in politics. They have been a challenge to the stability of all political systems. What is new is the technological acceleration of public opinion: rather like global warming's effect on the weather, the tides that sweep across our politics are more intense and more violent, thanks to the geometric multipliers at work in every household with access to the Internet.

These multipliers are themselves heavily subject to manipulation by the bot farms and disinformation strategies employed by foreign powers and private commercial interests. We once assumed that we had sovereignty over our own political systems. Now this sovereignty is open to question. To ensure the reliability of our democratic epistemology, to ensure that democracy itself survives, we will have to find a way to keep our digital media platforms open while preventing them from being taken over by foreign influences.

Again, foreign propaganda is a threat to democratic epistemology as old as democracy itself. What is new is the capacity of propaganda to be anonymous, with plausible deniability protecting the states and agencies that seek to deform democratic debate. This propaganda becomes effective precisely because we cannot identify it as having any source. In this way, a democracy can lose control of the shared vision of reality on which it is supposed to base its collective choices.

Public opinion in the digital age not only circulates more rapidly; it is also more malicious and more damaging. Why? Because it is largely anonymous. On the Internet, as the memorable *New Yorker* cartoon reminds us, nobody knows you're a dog. Anonymity removes from discourse any obligation to be civil, to gauge the reaction of another speaker, to listen, to change one's mind.

The very possibility of civility in politics depends upon the conventions of civility that occur when people interact with each other in the same physical space. When citizens are no longer bound by these ordinary civic conventions, malice, vindictiveness, even mob rule can be unleashed. The civic space in which politics largely occurs is now almost entirely virtual—and

it is both dangerously uninhibited and also radically unpoliced, except by those oligopolies—the Googles, Facebooks, Twitters—that control access to the space in return for the rents they charge for advertising.

So this is where we are: with democracy going virtual, conducted, not in a real public sphere, but on unregulated platforms that empower malice and disinformation and threaten the very epistemology of truth and deliberation upon which depend a democratic society's stability and capacity to generate reality-based public policy.

The coming apart of the (once enabling) relation between knowledge and democracy has other causes besides the social media revolution and its coarsening impact on democratic discourse. We also need to factor in the deep changes in the social structure of advanced societies—in particular, the spectacular growth in income and institutional privilege of precisely those experts who provide modern society with the knowledge on which democratic choice should be based.

Experts—lawyers, doctors, professors, judges, regulators, and the university credentialed professionals who ensure that knowledge forms the basis of private and public decision-making in our society—have all done very well in the last 80 years. “Knowledge professionals” are among those who have benefited most from globalization and from the rents that access to knowledge and expertise can accrue to those who are certified and licensed to purvey them.

Knowledge professionals are resented, therefore, by all those social classes harmed by globalization or left behind as knowledge empowers capitalism's insatiable appetite for creative destruction. Widening inequality across developed societies has made it inevitable that knowledge professionals would come under political attack. Their income, their privileges, their supposed disrespect for ordinary people, their liberal social values and cosmopolitan tastes, have all become the target of choice for populists, mostly of the right, but also of the left.

Long before the pandemic, populists had been assailing the authority of these knowledge professionals. They were attacked for being elitist, out of touch, condescending, and indifferent to the claims of all those who felt they were losing out in the brave new world being founded by the knowledge professionals: the cosmopolitan, liberal, open-bordered, and hyper-credentialed world of privilege and income.

Populists also attacked the institutions in which knowledge professionals make their lives: the courts, the media, the universities, the regulatory agencies. As Ivan Krastev has pointed out, these institutions happen to be the counter-majoritarian machinery of the liberal state.

Resentment of the knowledge professionals, their privileges, income, and expertise, is now inseparable from resentment of the counter-majoritarian power that they exercise in the courts, the media, the liberal professions of law and medicine, and the regulatory agencies of the democratic state. The core element of the populist counter-revolution is that “the people” should prevail over elites, that arguments based on majority interests should win out over arguments based on knowledge and expertise.

The legitimacy of the liberal professions once depended on their credentialed expertise, often converted into cartelized rents, in the form of fees for their services. While these fees were resented, lawyers and doctors provided services so essential that their authority was accepted—and mostly still is.

But their legitimacy also rested on the idea that liberal professions were service professions, where expertise is placed at the service of citizens. In turn, this meant that the liberal institutions over which the liberal professions presided—courts, media, universities—were service institutions for the benefit of citizens at large.

This ethos of service is now in danger, partly for economic reasons. A university education, even in state-financed institutions, is increasingly expensive, and the legitimizing mantra of the 1960s—that education opens the doors of opportunity for all—is less convincing for low-income families without the resources to invest in their children’s advance.

The sheer cost of going to law has a similar delegitimizing effect for poorer families. Thus, claims that the legal profession and the courts exist to protect all citizens and serve them equally ring hollow, and make electorates susceptible to demagogic and populist attacks on judicial over-reach and lawyers’ privilege.

The media likewise legitimize themselves as bulwarks of democracy and protectors of citizens against the arrogance and corruption of those in office. However, journalists everywhere are struggling to find a viable financial model in the midst of the digital revolution, and as their search for audience has led them to become increasingly adjuncts of the entertainment industry, they have paid a price in public confidence in them as neutral arbiters of public debate.

Where doctors provide services within a publicly funded health system, the knowledge professionals in medicine retain their legitimacy as servants of their fellow citizens. But where

they operate as private entrepreneurs, their fees and the cash payments some systems allow them to take incur resentment, as well as anger that “the system”—the democracy they are part of—allows a profession to ration health care by what happens to be in a citizen’s wallet.

These challenges to the legitimacy of the knowledge professions are inseparable from the wider crisis of liberal democracy and the populist attacks on the institutions—courts, media, regulatory agencies—that impose counter-majoritarian restraints on the will of the majority.

As I reach my conclusion, my point is not to make you more depressed about the future of democracy than you already are. It is to observe, as Ezrahi told us, that the conflict between knowledge and participation as the core principle of legitimacy in democratic decision-making is as old as democracy itself. Majorities are often wrong on the facts, and from the beginning, elites have despaired of democracy for this very reason. Yet over the centuries, even knowledge elites have learned that we value democracy not because its decisions are invariably right, but because wide participation in deliberation and decision-making is more likely to produce decisions that benefit the majority than ones made by small, closed cliques. If we all have an equal share in the decisions, we are much less likely to take decisions that harm us all. This was why Kant was so hopeful that republican decision-making would help save the world from the scourge of imperial and dynastic wars, initiated by the small cliques surrounding kings and queens. Finally, we value democracy not because it always follows the path of knowledge, but because democracy’s key premise—everyone counts for one and no one for more than one—honors the equal dignity of all democratic citizens.

These arguments for democracy, made centuries ago, remain as true today as they were then. And the role of scientific and professional knowledge in democratic decision-making, despite everything I have said, continues to provide a guide, however contested, to the choices we are making right now about the coronavirus pandemic. The stubbornly enduring authority of knowledge and its custodians may be one reason why populists and authoritarians have mounted such an unrelenting attack on the liberal professions.

What I hope my analysis has added to Ezrahi’s picture is a focus on the privileges of the liberal professions, and just possibly on the erosion of the ideology of service that once sustained both their own legitimacy and the legitimacy of the liberal democratic institutions they serve. What we professors, lawyers, doctors, judges, and regulators are paid is surely a political question, overdue for review. If we claim monopoly rents, we can hardly be surprised if we are disliked and if the institutions that legitimize these rents are unpopular. How we credential expertise, how we open doors for some, but close it for others, is an urgent question for universities. Our legitimacy—and the knowledge we provide to society—depends on us being seen to

be opening doors for all, and actually delivering on this promise. As liberal professionals, charged with validating and credentialing the knowledge on which a free society depends for its capacity to make good decisions, we are not used to seeing our own professions as playing some role in undermining the legitimacy of the liberal democratic order itself and providing its enemies with all-too-convenient targets. But that is what I am suggesting. We are part of the problem, and it would be good for us to become part of the solution.

Thank you for listening. Let the comments, disagreements, and questions begin!

Response

Dana Blander

Ignatieff's analysis of the current reality is a wake-up call for those of us who care deeply about liberal democracy and who are also willing to look inwardly at our own actions, who have the courage to admit where we went wrong and who want to examine how we can make amends. (As Freud put it, "Turn your eyes inward, look into your own depths, learn first to know yourself! Then you will understand why you were bound to fall ill, and perhaps, you will avoid falling ill in the future."¹)

In recent years, much scholarly attention has been devoted to the crumbling of liberal democracy and the rise of populist and authoritarian politics, and yet the "why?" questions—why is this happening, and why now?—have been left very much unanswered.

Ezrahi's analysis addressed the epistemological crisis of liberal democracy, encompassing the uneasy relationship between knowledge, science, and the rise of the professional classes on the one hand, and broad democratic participation on the other; the escape to transpolitical anchors (such as religion and conspiracy theories); and the effects of the social media revolution. All these elements offer clues as to why we are currently witnessing the decline of liberal democracy and the flourishing of populist trends.

Following the Neapolitan philosopher Vico, Ezrahi claimed that we are in the midst of an epistemological crisis in which our common sense is failing in the task of navigating us through our political and social realities: We, the citizens, "are no longer able to link political causes and effects, to separate public facts from fictions, or basically make sense of the political world in which we live." It is noteworthy that all these tasks are part of our inheritance from the scientific revolution—identifying cause and effect, distinguishing fact from fiction, and making sense of the world.

This crisis is leading to widespread distrust of science, the professions, and the media, and to the rejection of all elites in the name of authentic equality for lay citizens. As Ignatieff describes, this trend includes strong resentment toward knowledge professionals and

1 Sigmund Freud, *A Difficulty in the Path of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 17, p. 143 (Standard Edition, 1917).

“their” institutions. In turn, as Ezrahi noted, this distrust and resentment has “undermined key habits, conventions, and constructive fictions that allowed a certain approximation of democratic norms.”

These constructive fictions are necessary to hold together the political imagination of democracy, as shaped by the Enlightenment. In his work, Ezrahi presented the Enlightenment as a very powerful imaginative project, which viewed the individual as a free and rational agent. This was derived from the imagining inherent in Hobbes’s ninth law of nature (in *Leviathan*), according to which all men are equal by nature, and in Rousseau’s premise (which opens *The Social Contract*) that “man is born free but everywhere he is in chains.” The core values of democracy—equality and freedom—were first imagined and then aspired to, but were never fully realized.

At this point, Ignatieff suggests a socio-historical view of this process that can be rephrased in this way:

In our days, the gap between these necessary fictions (which constitute the political democratic imagination) and the everyday experience of many individuals has grown so large, due to inequality and exclusion, that these “transparent” individuals no longer share the premises that are the very foundations of these fictions.

But the problem runs even deeper: Ignatieff not only traces the sources of the resentment toward the knowledge professionals and their institutional embodiment to the diminishing value of truth and facts (the basic elements of the scientific revolution), a process that is accelerated by social media; he also points to the responsibility borne by the professionals themselves. He argues that, by making their services inaccessible to so many, they have lost their justification to act as anti-majoritarian checks and balances. This has been one of the blind spots of liberal democracies in our time, and we are now paying the price for the growing inequality in our society.

It is true that liberal democracies have done remarkably well in framing constitutions and building institutions, but along the way, Rawls’s “veil of ignorance” became, instead of a metaphoric means for attaining justice-as-fairness, a real veil that caused many individuals to become unseen, to have their identity and values become unrecognized and ignored. The veil became a mirror in which the only image reflected is that of a minority comprising the professional classes, as well as some successful entrepreneurs.

Another related blind spot which is implied in Ignatieff’s lecture, and which he describes in his book *Ordinary Virtues*, is that we, the liberal democratic believers, have come to speak in

a language that is foreign to the ears and hearts of the majority of citizens. Worse, we have failed to realize the alienating nature of this language gap in time.

As Ignatieff shows in *Ordinary Virtues*, the language of human rights is the language of international treaties and liberal elites; it was never “translated” into the language spoken by the individuals and local communities who inhabit this global world. People and communities everywhere hold their own ordinary virtues (such as tolerance, forgiveness, trust, and resilience) that can accord with the core values of democracy or can become anti-democratic, depending on the circumstances. And if we go back to Ignatieff’s earlier book *The Needs of Strangers*, liberal democracies have also failed to provide us with a sense of community to meet our need for belonging.

In other words, **liberal democracies have neglected the moral psychology of the individual.** To this, I would like to add my own thesis about tolerance of ambivalence as a civic virtue, according to which the desire to escape from ambiguity and uncertainty has thrown the democratic self into the arms of populism and authoritarianism, which offer the comforting hug of redemption and faith (Canovan), of simplicity and surety in a world of uncertainties. These are comforts that liberalism and negative liberty are unable to provide.

This brings us to the two subjects that will be discussed in this conference: media and education. Social media plays a crucial role in shaping the “reality show” which we all now inhabit; or even more seriously, as Ignatieff mentions, it might endanger our very sovereignty, since it constitutes a “wild” agora with no rules and limits, a Facebook without faces. Therefore, we need to find ways to use social media in the service of democracy, so that it can fulfill its role in enabling us to tell fact from fiction, as Ezrahi emphasized again and again.

Education, the second subject that will be discussed here, is the only way to enable every citizen to internalize the language of democracy and acquire it as a mother tongue, regardless of origin, race, religion, or gender.

It is the nature of democratic values that they need to be experienced in “flesh and blood,” but sadly, it is usually their absence that is experienced by the more vulnerable groups in society. In a way, it can be argued that the “Black Lives Matter” campaign addresses precisely this issue—it translates the value of human dignity from the text of the opening clause of the UN Declaration of Human Rights into the everyday lives of those who suffer from its absence.

One last remark regarding populism and COVID-19. The populist leaders’ electoral victories and the coronavirus pandemic took us by surprise. Each of them poses a very different threat to democracy, but what they have in common is, as Ignatieff puts it, that they have changed

our political imagination as to what can and cannot be done in a liberal democratic state. They have contaminated the democratic political imagination by forcing the use of tools whose presence in the democratic toolbox is unimaginable: COVID-19 brought with it national lockdowns and widescale surveillance of citizens by security authorities, while populist leaders have manifested hatred and prejudice against the “other” (xenophobia), bluntly polarized society, and launched direct attacks on democratic safeguards and institutions, such as the courts, the media, and universities.

However, there is a major difference between these two threats to the democratic way of life: The coronavirus is an external threat, and the democratic immune system can deploy various extreme measures in order to combat it. By contrast, populism and authoritarianism are autoimmune diseases afflicting democracy from within. They grow out of the empty, dark space within democracy which Ignatieff calls “the legitimacy vacuum,” and in turn they hollow out democracy from the inside. Even worse, they use democracy against itself. Rather than abolishing democratic norms and institutions, the new populist leaders use them as a weapon against the body of democracy, undermining the rule of law by ruling the law, and attacking democracy with democratic discourse.

“Reimagining Democracy” is an annual conference sponsored by the Israel Democracy Institute, in collaboration with the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, in memory of the late Prof. Yaron Ezrahi and his extraordinary contributions to Israeli public life. The conference stimulates nonpartisan debate about the contemporary challenges faced by democracies worldwide. In keeping with Ezrahi’s legacy as an educator and public intellectual, the conference serves both as a platform for debate among prominent thinkers and as a channel of outreach and education for the general public.

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