Debugging Democracy

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Abstract

Democracy was the most successful political idea of the 20ᵗʰ century. However since the beginning of the new century democracy has been clearly suffering from serious structural problems, rather than a few isolated ailments. Why has it run into trouble, can it be revived? In the consumption driven world people have started to be driven by the belief in economic prosperity as the guarantee of human freedom. As a result, human development and personal status have become hostages of economic performance, deforming basic civilisation's ethical matrix. However in 10-15 years, the world may be completely different. We are looking at communications and technology revolutions occurring in very abbreviated time frames. Soon, billions of people will interact via a fast data-transferring Metaweb, and it will change social standards as well as human behaviour patterns. Integrated global economies functioning as holistic entities will spur a deep reframing of global governance, shaping a new configuration of political, economic and military power. One can hardly expect that these changes will leave democratic mechanisms intact. It's a pivotal moment for all of us because we are facing paradigm changes in our way of life. We clearly need a new political vision that is deliverable quickly. Democracy can be reset if it can provide a platform for collective judgement and individual development—in a value-driven process, when values manifest themselves in concrete and socially meaningful issues, and are not reduced to the economic optimization and politics of the wallet. In other words, the only remedy to resolve the crisis of democracy is more democracy.

Democracy was the most successful political idea of the 20ᵗʰ century. Just a few years ago it looked as though democracy would dominate the world. Upbeat articles and euphoria flourished. By 2000 *Freedom House* classified 120 countries, or 63% of the world total, as democracies.

Between 1980 and 2000 democracy experienced a few setbacks, but since 2000 there have been too many to be listed as exceptions. Even in its heartland, democracy is clearly suffering from serious structural problems, rather than a few isolated ailments. Political systems have been undergoing dramatic changes in the past decades driven by globalization and neoliberalism. Vital democratic institutions have been tarnished and manipulated.

Why has democracy run into trouble, can it be revived?

According to the usual explanations of the Western writers, democracy as a model has been attractive, because democracies are on average richer than non-democracies, are less

likely to go to war and have a better record of fighting corruption. More fundamentally, democracy lets people speak their minds and shape their own future and their children's.

Why then the crisis? All is still there—democratic countries are richer, more stable, less corrupt and more liveable. Why the crisis?

The answer is that democracy is not only about how people live. It's also about what they live for—it's about human dignity, self-esteem, meaningfulness, sense of fulfilment. It's about values!

> *"In the absence of basic human rights, economic life as we know it today is inconceivable."*

The first time I thought about this was in August 1968 after the Prague Spring was crushed by the Soviet Union and its allies, feeling the shame, total helplessness and hopelessness.

Today I feel the same just looking around.

Terror in Paris. Crimea annexation, Russian plane shot down by Turkey, refugee tragedy, wave of nationalism sweeping over Europe... One thing is clear.

World governance has gone impotent. G7, G20, UN, World Bank, EEC, BRICS, UNESCO, World Economic Forum and the likes are ineffective.

Dozens of important organizations, dozens of important presidents, thousands of important ministers, millions of spies, analysts, the CIA, the Russian Federal Security Service, MI-6 and so on. An incredible financial, industrial, intellectual capacity is getting wasted.

They run the world. But they run it really badly.

What went wrong?

There are existential, political and operational reasons.

First is the degeneration of liberal values.

The modern market economy was a natural outgrowth of the rise of liberalism and political democracy in the West. The extension of freedom and democratic rights to every citizen has gradually led to the emergence of economic democracy as well, in which each individual casts monetary votes according to his individual needs and capacity. In the absence of basic human rights, economic life as we know it today is inconceivable.

But the further evolution of this value has played a trick on civilization. In this consumption driven world, people have started to be driven by the belief in economic prosperity as the guarantee of human freedom. Material prosperity has become implicitly related to the extent of individual freedom. Personal wellbeing gradually has turned from a tool of liberal values into a competing goal, gradually devaluing and marginalizing these values. That is why the

threat to prosperity standards (leading to unbridled economic growth) is being seen as the erosion of freedom.

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As a result, human development and personal status have become hostages of economic performance, deforming basic civilisation's ethical matrix. Democracy, with economic issues dominating parliamentary agendas, has gradually been reduced to an instrument of economic optimisation. In the political sphere, the end of the Cold War has paradoxically accelerated this process. After World War 2 many people of the world were attracted by the Western model, by its "soft power". Its high economic efficiency, rule of law, human rights turned the democratic system into a shining city on a hill for many especially when compared to the repressive and economically less efficient models.

The socialist system implosion has devalued and erased the stark comparative advantages of the Western political system. Not being able to use anymore the repressive models of the East block as a reference point, the West was challenged to start "sweeping in front of its door", to confirm and prove the democratic model's moral advantages in its own daily reality. But instead it has ceded the temptation to "establish" its gains in the Cold War victory, thereby quickly converting moral principles into geopolitical instruments.

The degree of euphoria that swept the ruling elite in the West after the collapse of the USSR was explicit in Condoleezza Rice's article "Rethinking the National Interest" in *Foreign Affairs*: "it is America's job to change the world... Democratic state-building is now an urgent component of our national interest". Well, as they say, "we wanted the best, you know the rest...", in many places the world (including where we are now) is still facing the consequences of the "democratic state building" program. And indeed, after Abu Ghraib, WikiLeaks and Snowden revelations it was difficult to expect that people would continue to see a "torch" of the future in the Western model. However, instead of lamenting about the crisis of democracy, we need to debug and upgrade the democratic mechanisms reflective of the new drivers, uncertainties and systemic challenges, rescue democracy from being a hostage of traditional geopolitical considerations and banal economic growth concerns.

Already in 10-15 years, the world may be completely different. We are looking at communications and technology revolutions occurring in very abbreviated time frames. Soon, billions of people will interact via a fast data-transferring Metaweb, and it will change social standards as well as human behaviour patterns. Integrated global economies functioning as holistic entities will spur a deep reframing of global governance, shaping a new configuration

of political, economic and military power. One can hardly expect that these changes will leave democratic mechanisms intact.

1. *What are the implications of an integrated global economy for democracy? How can we sync democracy with globalization? How can we enable the democratic decision-making mechanisms at the global level?*

Since the dawn of the modern democratic era in the late 19th century, democracy has expressed itself through nation-states and national parliaments. But globalisation has changed national politics profoundly. People today engage in social issues mainly through civil society and the use of social media as their primary tool. This holds fascinating prospects for de facto global citizenship and action, but it does something to the old type of representative democracy.

2. *What are the probable outcomes of the evolving new balance of political, economic, and military power, shifting the "centres of gravity" from West to East, from North to South, and from nation-states to private actors? Will it recreate a new "multi/uni/bi- polarity" of the world or give birth to a lateral self-adaptable and heterogeneous international network instead of a traditional states-based system?*

The present-day social reality reveals new growing and influential actors. Alongside the notorious process of globalization, there is another process that receives much less attention. This is the process of "lateralisation"—the establishment of vigorous, polyphonic groups that benefit from the broad access to the IT and communications, financial, organisational, and technological means of the post-industrial world.

These "asteroids" of the social universe include various "ambitious" corporations (Apple, Uber), global diasporas, influential NGOs, various think tanks (such as Library of Alexandria), criminal consortia, etc.; all of them make up a new flexible Hybrid Universe, without any 'formalized' sociological "cartography" as yet but leaving ever-growing footprint on the political mechanisms.

3. *How can the IT and communications revolution change social standards and human behaviour patterns, and thus the world order? What will happen to the traditional democracy content elements (political parties, elections, representative mechanisms)?*

We never anticipated a technological revolution so extreme in its productivity that it could actually reduce marginal cost to near zero for a whole array of goods and services, making them essentially priceless, abundant and beyond the market.

In the last 20 years, we've seen the zero marginal cost phenomenon invade entire sectors of the world media, knowledge and information industry.

It's a pivotal moment, not only for the global economy, but now for all of us because we are facing paradigm changes in our way of life. We clearly need a new political vision that is deliverable quickly.

From internet of information, to internet of energy, internet of things and what's next?

Sensors are being connected to everything—every device and every human being—in one neural network. We have 14 billion sensors now. By 2020, there'll be about 50 billion sensors and by 2030, 100 trillion sensors. The first reaction is wow, we're going to connect the human race. The second reaction is, this is scary! Because all these sensors will change not only our life, but us as well!

> *"Democracy isn't dying, it's evolving."*

Internet of politics? The internet makes it easier to organise and agitate; in a world where people can participate in reality TV votes every week, or support a petition with the click of a mouse, the machinery and institutions of parliamentary democracy, where elections happen only every few years, where one supports a political party, look increasingly anachronistic (already today no political party has youth organisations). Internet of Politics will inevitably archive party politics. Douglas Carswell, a British member of parliament, likens traditional politics to HMV, a chain of British record shops that went bankrupt, in a world where people are used to choosing whatever music they want whenever they want via Spotify, a popular digital music-streaming service.

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There are big questions about who's going to control the networks, information flows, data security, privacy, information transparency. But there is even a bigger and more fundamental question: what are the long-term goals? what is the meaning of world development in the twenty-first century, the answer to which will define the future of democracy?

To conclude, democracy isn't dying, it's evolving.

As Alexis de Tocqueville pointed out in the 19th century, democracies always look weaker than they really are: they look confusing on the surface but have lots of hidden strengths. Being able to install alternative leaders offering alternative policies makes democracies better than autocracies at finding creative solutions to problems and rising to existential challenges, though they often take a while to zigzag to the right policies. But to succeed, both fledgling and established democracies must ensure they are built on firm foundations.

Complacency in these matters could easily lead us towards whatever we associate with the opposite of democracy in the years to come.

My point is that the people are not estranged from democracy. They are concerned about the eroding environment, poverty, corruption, unhealthy food, ineffective crime

policies, unfair educational system, the erosion of care for the sick and elderly. They feel that "traditional democracy" does not do well in addressing these concerns, let alone solving them. People haven't abandoned politics, but politics, they feel, has abandoned them. So, democracy can be reset if it can provide a platform for collective judgement and individual development—in a value-driven process, when values manifest themselves in concrete and socially meaningful issues, and are not reduced to economic optimization and politics of the wallet.

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