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The Waning of Democracy?

About fake-democracies and democratic exhaustion

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We have entered an age of fear. Insecurity is once again an active ingredient of political life in Western democracies. Insecurity born of terrorism, but also, and more insidiously, fear of the uncontrollable speed of change, fear of the loss of employment, fear of losing ground to others in an increasingly unequal distribution of resources, fear of losing control of the circumstances and routines of our daily life. And, perhaps above all, fear that it is not just we who can no longer shape our lives but that those in authority have also lost control, to forces beyond their reach

Tony Judt

A democracy paradox is haunting the world: the more democracy all across the globe has been embraced as the undisputed, universal *end-of-history* political model, the more a hollowing out of the democratic culture and spirit can be witnessed.

Within ''mature'', long-time established democracies in Western- and Northern Europe, we encounter a serious ''democracy fatigue''. Across the western world, voting turnout has been falling for decades; political party membership has also been in decline. We

encounter an over-all erosion of the post-war party democracies: record-low levels of political trust; a deep representation crisis, symbolised by a pan-European populist revolt against the political establishment; non-participation of both lower educated and the young Millennial network generation in the political mainstream. The political system has also developed a strong bias towards business interests and EU-lobbies and ''follow the money''-led campaign dynamics, with increasing tendencies towards plutocracy (especially in the US) and political corruption (incidents all over the place).

At the other hand, many new democracies have developed as sheer fake-democracies. They became democracies on the surface only, in which authoritarian leaders or conglomerates of politics, business and organised crime are ''legitimised'' by democratic elections only.

In political science, the talk of the town these days therefore is a new process, the process of de-democratisation. Everywhere, we see a retreat from post-war liberal democracy, and the rise of authoritarian modes or styles of politics. Around Europe, but also within the EU. Think about Putin in Russia. Political leadership in 'one-party democracies' in Africa. Or Victor Orban in Hungary. The macho-political leaders in The Balkans. The phenomenon of 'Berlusconisation'.

We witness the rise of the authoritarian style of politics, disguised by democratic elections, bringing into power corrupt oligarchies, a mix of politics, business and organised crime. The late Ralf Dahrendorf, the German-British political thinker, warned that the 21th century could become the Authoritarian Century, and he may be right. Everywhere an erosion of traditional party democracy and representative democracy can be noticed. We encounter book titles like *'Democracy in Retreat, the Worldwide Decline of Representative Government'* and indeed: more and more, the EU is at the one hand surrounded by fake-democracies and authoritarian regimes, and at the other hand, national democracies themselves lack both output legitimacy (due to austerity politics and welfare state retreat) and input legitimacy (due to the representation crisis of established politics).

Philip Coggan, columnist at the *Economist*, recently published his book *The Last Vote – The Threats to Western Democracy* – which tells an alarming story. 'We have become complacent about our democracies and deeply cynical about the politicians that run our governments. (…) The implicit bargain of democracy – that politicians will deliver prosperity in return for our votes – has been broken'.

In *The Last Vote*, Philip Coggan shows how democracy today faces threats that we ignore at our own risk. Amid the turmoil of the financial crisis, high debt levels, and an ever-

growing gap between the richest and the rest, it is easy to forget that the ultimate victim could be our democracy itself. Coggan's book is a wake-up call: ''From the 18th century onwards, democracy was based on the representative model – voters have the right to choose, and dismiss, their rulers. But we have steadily moved towards a third model in which our representatives delegate decisions to experts – independent central banks, international courts, technocratic agencies (such as the Food and Drug Administration in the US) and so on. (…) This "double delegation" may be understandable – governing a modern society is very complex. (…) But it strikes at the heart of the democratic idea – that voters (or at least their elected representatives) are competent to represent themselves. Instead it echoes Plato's concept of the guardians – an all-knowing elite who take decisions on behalf of their inferiors.' (Philip Coggan, *The threats to western democracy*, Policy Network, 5 September 2013.)

This analysis very much complicates the idea of the EU embracing a new role as democracy watchdog to correct and punish so-called ''democratic backsliders'', an idea supported by the British thinktank *Demos (*see beneath*)*. Europe historically may be the cradle of liberal democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights, but the EU as an institution itself is the ecosystem *par excellence* for new technocratic expert-politics, a new post-democratic space for experts only. For that reason, the EU by many is perceived as an anti-democratic force, an Eurocratic elite project which undermines and overrules national democracies.

In other words, the EU may not be the exception or antidote to the trend of authoritarian de-democratisation, but instead, being a *sui generis* hybrid Superstate and Supermarket at the same time -, the EU is a symbol itself of technocratic authoritarianism at the expense of national democracy.

If this is true, and the alarming support for anti-EU (far) right-wing populist parties does suggest that the EU by large parts of the electorate is not recognised as a convincing democratic space, the EU itself cannot credibly be the democratic guardian angel or democracy watchdog.

Democratic Backsliding

This is, as said, problematic for a strategy, proposed by the British thinktank *Demos*. It calls on the EU to control and correct the so-called ''Backsliders'': EU-countries in which democracy is sliding back, both new members and old members of the Union.

As Demos is arguing: ''The European Union (EU) was founded on the principles of liberty, democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. The accession process for new EU member states ensures that new countries adhere to these basic principles of democracy. But there are few mechanisms at the EU's disposal for ensuring that member states do not slide backwards and become less democratic once they are part of the Union. Reports on democratic backsliding tend to focus on Central and Eastern European countries, most notably Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania. However, countries in Western Europe have also come under fire for undemocratic legislation, controversial policies on religious freedom and problems over corruption and media ownership.

'Backsliders' assesses in detail the status of democracy in seven European countries – France, Italy, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Latvia – and considers how the EU should confront the challenge of upholding strong democratic values in all its member states. It also builds on existing measures from around the world to create a unique index that provides a detailed picture of democracy across Europe. The report concludes arguing that the EU, and the European Commission in particular, needs to fully embrace its role as a democratic protector.''

Demos in its report is identifying ''**five core problems of democratic backsliding**:

1. **Democratic malaise and public distrust**:
   Across Europe voters are increasingly dissatisfied with traditional political parties. Parties of protest have been gaining ground with startling success.

2. **Corruption and organised crime**:
   Corruption exists in the most advanced democracies, but the extent to which it flourishes and goes unpunished within a country is a reflection of poor democratic institutions and procedures. The European Commission has estimated that €120 billion, or 1 per cent of the EU's GDP, is lost to corruption each year.

3. **The justice system**:
   A healthy and functioning democracy requires an independent judiciary that is free of corruption and political influence. Judicial reform and the independence of the judiciary remain issues of concern, particularly among central and Eastern European former Soviet bloc countries. There have been persistent concerns about the functioning of the judicial systems in Bulgaria and Romania, and more recently in Hungary in response to proposed constitutional changes.

4. **Media freedom**:

The US watchdog Freedom House produces an annual report on the freedom of the press, which classifies the world's countries into three categories: 'free', 'partly free' and 'not free'. In 2012, four of the EU's then 27 member states failed to make the grade as 'free'. In order of concern these were Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary and Greece.

5. **Human rights and the treatment of minorities**:

   The pressures of immigration are being felt across Europe, where a high standard of living and the opportunity of employment have attracted migrants from every corner of the world. The treatment of asylum seekers, and two minority groups in particular – Muslims and Roma – have been issues of concern in some EU member states.''

On average and by way of its own developed **EU Democracy Index** (see later), Demos found that since 2000, Europe has become more politically unstable, corrupt and intolerant towards minorities, and that not only notorious Greece and Hungary are Europe's biggest 'democratic backsliders', but that no country is immune for phenomena of democratic decline.

Jonathan Birdwell, Head of the Citizens Programme at Demos and one of the authors of the Demos report, argues that, with democracy in Europe increasingly under strain, ''the EU must keep a keen eye on democracy's progression and step confidently and vocally into its new role as democracy watchdog''. The legal basis for this enforcement role of the EU, especially by the European Commission, should be found in the Lisbon Treaty, which now requires the EU to uphold the Charter of Fundamental Rights among member states. Birdwell: 'As for enforcement, the Commission needs to sharpen existing tools and build new ones. Infringement proceedings need to be reformed to distinguish core democratic transgressions from issues of lesser import. For severe transgressions, the EU can suspend a country's voting rights in the Council. This is a dramatic step with a high bar to meet, and thus something that has never been used in the history of the EU. The EU should consider making it slightly easier for it take this action and thereby make its threat more real.'' (in: Jonathan Birdwell, *Backsliders: safeguarding democracy in the EU*, 16 October 2013, Policy Network)

What is democracy? And why democratic decay?

Despite a long history of theoretical thinking, academic reflection and lived political practice, it is still hard to define democracy. Maybe, the notorious definition of pornography applies to the definition of democracy as well: ''you can only define it, when you see it''.

No kidding. Democracy in (post)modern societies need a much broader definition than just a political and legal one. It must include the mass media, the channels of mass communication. Free press may even be a more important precondition for genuine democracies, then the existence of a multiparty system. It is very worrying that in many countries the boundaries between media and politics are shattered, and that media ownership increasingly is interwoven with political power: the process of Berlusconisation, also to be found in Central and Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans. But in Northern democracies as well, media tycoons (Rupert Murdoch's deal with New Labour) and tabloids (German *Bildt Zeitung* and Austrian *Kronenzeitung*) play a problematic electoral/economic role in the political process.

Formal criteria of democracy such as the rule of law, Montesquieu's division of powers (think about the clash between the political and juridical system in Hungary) are, indeed, fundamentally important. But indispensable for a genuine democratic political culture is, for instance, also respect for the political opponents. The old historic concept of '*'Her Majesty's Opposition*'' derived from the oldest modern parliamentary democracy, the UK, is key to how powerful parties in government should deal with the political 'enemy', also under conditions of a winner-takes-all electoral system. Turkish political culture for instance is notorious for having a complete distrustful, and therefore fundamentally undemocratic, relationship between political opponents. The same applies to Putin's Russia and several Balkan countries. Democracy needs procedural fair play and respect, to begin with.

Important for the democratic hygiene of a society, is also that between different parts of the 'elite' a sound tension and competition exists. We can differentiate between the cultural elite (intellectuals, journalists, academia, media, artists), the economic elites (business leaders) and the political elites. These different elites should not overlap too much, but keep critical distance, operating with different dynamics and logics, so that checks and balances in society are maintained.

In many authoritarian fake-democracies, we encounter a strong overlap between political and business elites, sometimes even mixed with organised crime. This is a smoke signal for a corrupted political system.

Also plutocratic tendencies do threaten democracy. Where ''money talks'', business interests undermine the idea of democratic civil equality. In many countries, the money-intensive political campaigns enable only billionaires to run for office or parliamentary seats. This is fundamentally eroding representative democracy, which should guarantee participation of non-elites and non-wealthy in the political process.

Pluralism in general, also in terms of respecting minorities, is an important feature of rife democracies. It stimulates the democratic quality and integrity of political parties and politicians, and guarantees self-correction in case of failure and corruption**.**

The Demos Democracy Index

No misunderstanding. There are 'thin' definitions of democracy, originating in the works of Schumpeter or Robert Dahl. The idea of alternating ruling elites ('polyarchy') classifies a country as a democracy if political elites are nominated through multiparty electoral systems. Democracy as procedural machinery and method.

In contrast, there are also 'thick' definitions of modern democracies, including socio-cultural circumstances, as ''everyday democracies''. In this perspective, democracies must be rooted in a culture in which democratic values and practices shape not just the formal sphere of politics, but the informal spheres of everyday life.

In terms of the Demos report: ''Everyday democracy is therefore not only the reflection of the healthiness of political institutions, but also the observed vibrancy of public engagement in the informal realms of civil society, the degree of social and political capital and attitudes, values and opinions that inform popular engagement in both the public and private domains.''

The Demos EU Democracy Index has been developed along these lines. This Index was compiled through indicators from the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators, the Cingranelli-Richards (CIRI) Human Rights Database, and data from the European Values Study (EVS). The Demos Index is based upon Five Dimensions and several indicators. These are reproduced out of the report underneath:

''Dimension 1: electoral and procedural democracy

Our first dimension aims to capture the 'essentials' of
democracy: the independence of institutions, respect for the rule
of law and the absence of violence and corruption.

Dimension 2: fundamental rights and freedoms
Our second dimension aims to capture the rights and freedoms
outlined in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, including
political rights, rights of association, freedom of expression,
freedom of the press, freedom of religion and gender equality.

Dimension 3: tolerance of minorities
The third dimension focuses on attitudes towards minority
groups, the rise of grassroots xenophobic populism, and the
intolerance towards six minority groups that were
likely to face discrimination: intolerance of Muslims, Jews, Roma, immigrants and of
homosexuals.

Dimension 4: active citizenship
This dimension measures the health of EU member states' civic
culture and the extent to which citizens are political and civically
active. The data are based on belonging or active civic engagement, including
involvement in: political parties, trade unions, women's rights, local community action,
human rights, youth work, volunteering, protest or political activism.

Dimension 5: political and social capital
This dimension measures how attitudes towards democracy and society are changing in the
EU, and whether we can observe increasing or decreasing satisfaction. The indicators explore
citizens' attitudes towards democratic governance and evolving attitudes towards
authoritarianism. We also use two measures of 'social capital', which capture the extent to
which citizens have general trust in people and each other and the extent to which respondents
feel they have control over one's life and freedom of choice. ''

So far, so good, the EU Democracy Index of Demos about what democracy is all
about and to what extent democracy is under substantial strain. An what should be done about
it by the European Commission as enforcer of European values and rights.

The report is to a lesser extent an explanatory account of why democratic decline,
democratic exhaustion and democratic corruption take place. Which socio-economic, cultural
trends and changes do play out here? Which causes can be diagnosed for the picture of
democratic gloom? Who is there to blame, if any?

For this we should better turn to the abundant literature and analysis about the pan-
European revolt of modern right-wing populism, which is taking place for nearly two decades,
since the rise of the FPO-party of Haider in Austria. This new kind of populism - anti-

establishment, anti-elite, anti-representative democracy, anti-migration, anti-EU – is a strong alarm signal and symbol of what is happening in and to our democracies.

The pan-European Populist Revolt:
A representation crisis and shortcut between elites and non-elites

Western Europe is in the grip of a political identity crisis. The disrupting effects of globalisation and lifestyle individualisation, the permanent retrenchment of the welfare states and the development of a ''media audience democracy'' are accompanied by fundamental changes in the political party system: the triumph of the floating voter, i.e. the unprecedented rise of electoral volatility, and the spectacular jump in the political arena of neo-populist entrepreneurial movements.

The traditional mass parties that have ruled the region at least since the end of the Second World War have lost members, voters, élan, and a monopoly on ideas. Because they are the pillars of both the party-oriented parliamentary system and the welfare state, their slow but steady decline affects European societies as a whole. Due to changes in labour, family and cultural life styles, the Christian Democratic (conservative) and Social Democratic pillars of civil society are eroding away, leaving behind "people's parties" with shrinking numbers of people. This erosion of political representation eats away at the foundations of the European welfare states and European party democracies.

The second ingredient of the European crisis is what might be called the paradox of Europe's Holocaust trauma. Europeans still seem unable to cope with the question of ethnic diversity. Intellectual discourse has for too long been characterised by a species of political correctness that praises multiculturalism and 'The Foreigner' as enriching for society while turning a blind eye to the de facto segregation and marginalisation of many new immigrants and the stress they place on the welfare system in many nations. Also the potential cultural conflict between Europe's liberal-permissive societies and orthodox Islam was denied. The established democratic parties reacted to the rise of extreme right, racist parties with a *cordon sanitaire*, but made the mistake of also putting a 'cordon sanitaire' around the issues these parties campaign on, i.e. the shadow sides of mass migration: problems of integration and segregation; high unemployment and crime rates; 'multicultural discontent'', especially within the constituencies of the people's parties: ''feeling a stranger in one's own country''.

These problems did much to provoke a populist-xenophobic backlash. Here, Europe is facing two dilemmas: 1. how to maintain its 'communitarian' welfare states under conditions of permanent immigration?; 2. to what extent will the integration patterns in Europe be determined by multiculturalism or integrationalism?

A third ingredient of the crisis is widespread unease over the process of European integration. What could be a proud achievement of cosmopolitan cooperation between rival nation states has become, instead, a cause of increasing insecurity and national alienation. This discontent with the European Union propelled considerably by the impact of the Big Bang-enlargement - the arrival of a many new East-Central European member states to the EU and the contested negotiations for a Turkish membership – , and by the effects of the neoliberal and technocratic make-up of EU-negative integration: the rise of a Brussels 'market state', run by elite experts.

The fourth component of the European malaise is the fact that much of the discontent was channelled through the rise of right-wing or even extremist-radical right populist movements. And in Europe, unlike the American historical tradition, populism is more or less associated with fascism and Nazism, the pathologies of the ''voice of the masses''. This in itself adds up to a sense of crisis: the opening up of the historical scars of the 20th century.

The representation problem of the traditional political party system; the discontent with ill-managed mass migration; the growing unease with the European integration process (not a shield against globalisation, but instead the transmitter and 'visible face' of globalisation): these all fuel the political and electoral potential of (right wing) populist movements, which exploit feelings of anxiety, fear and discontent while constructing a narrative of social and moral decline.

In the process of adaptation to the New Global World Order, there has been a fundamental breakdown of communication and trust between elites and the general population. The pressures of adaptation to the new globalised world are particularly directed towards those who do not fit in to the new international knowledge based economy, the unskilled and the low-skilled. The over-all discourse of adaptation and competitive adjustment has a strong bias against the lower middle class and non-academic professionals. This bias is one of the root causes for populist resentment and revolt. Policy- and political elites are selling and producing insecurity and uncertainty, instead of showing security and stable leadership in a world of flux.

Populism can be defined as a particular style of politics, referring to 'the people' as a false homogeneous entity against a 'corrupt elite', and in this sense the neo-populist citizen's

revolt in Europe must be understood. This revolt is rooted in the perception that people feel 'betrayed' by the ruling elites. They feel, as transnational public opinion research is revealing, not represented in, but victimised by, the great transformation of our contemporary societies, in particular by the processes of globalisation/Europeanisation, post-industrialisation and multiculturalisation. Populism can be read as a fever warning which signals that problems of transformation are not being dealt with effectively, or points to the malfunctioning of the linkages between citizens and governing elites.

In the report of Policy Network, *Democratic Stress, the Populist Signal and Extremist Threat. Call for a new mainstream statecraft and contact democracy (*Anthony Painter, 2013*)* which was supported by my own Wiardi Beckman Foundation, we analysed:

''The rise of the populist radical right is one of the most significant features of western democracies in the last quarter of a century. As a 'challenger brand' within democracy but against liberal democracy, this suggests that the system may be under some 'stress'.

Populism is a democratic argument that seeks to change the way democracy functions. It is a threat within democracy to the culture and norms of liberal democracy as it functions. In other words, right wing populism does not seek to replace democracy; it seeks to change it. (..) It is not about being 'popular' as the term is commonly (mis)used in the media or politics. Margaret Canovan distinguishes the 'redemptive' and 'pragmatic' sides of democracy. Populism reaches more for the former – a pure and non-bounded 'will of the people'. Populism is expressive and emotive; it rejects the institutional checks and balances of liberal democracy. The political mainstream is ultimately about pragmatism, balance and institutional interplay. The rise of the populist radical right is a 'signal' of the failure of mainstream democracy to meet the needs and desires of citizens perturbed by social, cultural, economic and political change.''

The Mission for Social Democracy?

Social democratic parties will have to show a far greater capacity for reinvention in order to sustain their political relevance. They have to reconnect with the contemporary *Zeitgeist* and provide convincing answers to the most pressing questions of our times: how to ensure that capitalism works for the many not the few; how to secure recovery and prosperity in a changing world economy beset by global imbalances; how to ensure finance works to spur growth and innovation; how to spread life chances more evenly and counter the

marginalisation and exclusion of certain groups; how to reign in the polarisation in the labour market; and how to cope with demographic change and migration – to name just a few.

While our parties at the end of the nineteenth century aimed to balance industrial and traditional views on labour and happiness, the contemporary social-democratic leadership far too uncritically hailed the new, and forgot about the traditional life and values. It failed to develop and communicate ''just' reform policies and thus alienated itself from the constituencies it traditionally represented. By becoming part of the mainstream discourse about change and reform and not distinguishing itself at least by an amendment to the mainstream course of change, social-democracy has blurred the left/right-divide and opened up space for the (false) populist cleavage between the Establishment and the People.

Europe faces a dangerous populist revolt against the good society of both the neoliberal business community and progressive academic professionals. The revolt of populism is 'produced' by the economic and cultural elites. Their TINA-project is creating fear and resentment under non-elites. Their deterministic image of a future world of globalisation, open borders, free flows of people, lifelong-learning in the knowledge-based society is a night mare world for non-elites. This widening gap between the political and policy elites and large groups of the population of the continental European welfare states has led to a massive unease in many Western countries. Trust in institutions and politics is at a record low, there is a crisis of confidence and a crisis of political representation.

In the elite narrative, sizable parts of the middle and working class are being confronted with economic and psychological degradation. Theirs is no longer the future. They feel alienated, dispossessed and downgraded, because the society in which they felt comfortable, in which they had their respected place and which has been part of their social identity is being pushed aside by new realities. They consider social democracy as part of that 'modernization' that is eroding old comforts and old securities. Social democracy in far too many countries has lost touch with these sentiments and worries. It has become full part of that 'brave new world' of the bright, well-educated, entrepreneurial and highly mobile.

As consequence of these trends, society has lost its '*sense de la politique'* (Rosanvallon). One could say that the essential progressive idea of 'positive freedom' (Isaiah Berlin) is in crisis: the belief in a better society or a better personal life through politics, the state or collective action, has eroded in many segments in society, including parts of the younger generations. The participatory republic of citizens has turned into a 'spectator's democracy'. This *audience democracy* (Bernard Manin / Jos de Beus) consists of consumers with weak party identification and a deep distrust towards politics and their representatives.

The logic of image-driven media and campaigning is marginalizing the politics of deliberation, open discourse and compromise.

Are we trying to re-animate a political movement in denial, or does social-democracy still contain the hidden treasure to reunite fragmenting and polarizing societies? The historical compromise or alliance between the labour movement and the cultural elites, between the working class and the professional middle classes around the project of the welfare state has been put under strain because of changes in lifestyle, value orientations, labour market patterns, social mobility, and due to ill-understood 'treacherous' austerity policies. In programmatic terms, there is a fresh need to rethink the concept of solidarity. Society is also challenged by cultural trends and changes. Individualization ('bowling alone'), cultural diversification and pluralism ('multiculturalism'; the explosion of lifestyles and identities) and growing fragmentation ('broken society'?) ask for a new social-democratic design of bridging and bonding, for contemporary forms of social cohesion and community.

Renew but maintain, against all American and Asian odds, the European welfare societies under conditions of mass migration and globalization. Compete on the basis of human well-being and welfare against the narrow neoliberal concept of economic growth. Let the European social democracy remain the pillar for a modernized European social market model and develop a sensibility for cultural and identity politics. The big discontent and unhappiness in affluent welfare democracies are to a serious extent about community, social cohesion, security: post-materialist problems of a social-psychological nature.

Restore the divide between left and right in politics, in order to fight the dangerous populist cleavage between the establishment and (a false entity of) the people. We must be tough on populism and tough on the causes of populism. That's the only way to protect and improve democracy.

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