

530. Democracy and authoritarianism

Democracy can be direct, in referenda, or indirect, in electing representatives. Direct democracy, without the intermediation of representation, may have been viable in the classic Athenian city state, with the exclusion of women and slaves however, or the later city states in Italy, but not in the massive nation states of modernity. There, the voice of the people is indirect, in representative democracy. There is talk of adding a corrective referendum, to give the opportunity of blocking a government proposal. There is a variety of systems of voting, all with limits and vulnerabilities, about which there is a large literature that I will not discuss here (see e.g. Berry 2017).

An authoritarian regime seems more streamlined, decisive, fast, efficient and heroic than democracy. Support is bought of the powerful, such as business leaders, with preferential contracts, laxity of rules, or outright corruption. While autocracy yields limited negative freedom, limited room for choice, it can offer positive power, in creating new options for choice. There can be benevolent autocracies, but the temptation is to restrict negative freedom, for ensuring continuity.

An authoritarian regime builds on the craving of people for unity and collective identity, with the restriction of diversity, seen as deviance. It is characteristically based on myths of a heroic past of superior strength and spirit. With German fascism these were the Teutonic Knights. In the US it is the rugged individual conquering the West. It is tempting for autocrats to dress up their authoritarianism with a semblance of democracy, in elections, which they frustrate by blocking opposing candidates, their access to campaigning, freedom of expression and demonstration, or allowing fake candidates with no chance of winning, and repressing minorities. Authoritarianism limits freedom of expression, practises lies and secrecy, imposes fake unity, creates or claims fake foreign threats, muffles parliaments, and appoints rather than elects officials. Autocrats often make promises to the people that they cannot keep, and then hide the failure or blame it on a scapegoat, for which a political opponent is picked, which yields a pretext for its repression or persecution

In addition to these drawbacks, autocrats often have a thirst for manifestation, sometimes with the fascist thirst for violence, and for the certainty and clarity in puzzling and uncertain times offered by conspiracy theories. 'Fascism' derives from the word *Fasces* which are bundles of sticks with a hatchet tied into it, used in ancient Rome to clear the path for a magistrate. It was used as a symbol by the regime of Franco in Spain, and still is the symbol of the state police, the *Guardia Civil*.

Authoritarian regimes control criticism and voices of truth by censure, until they discovered that by spreading and encouraging fake news, and themselves faking news, truth disappears, and they can simply label criticism as fake news. How can a democracy fight that? Can you block false news without limiting freedom of expression?. That question has gained urgency with the blocking of Trump's access to social media.

Some formerly communist countries have ostensibly transformed themselves into democracies, but that transformation is problematic if economic liberalisation precedes political liberalisation (Kari and Schmitter 2002). That happened in Russia and Ukraine, where former elites of the *ancien regime* appropriated the liberalised economy as oligarchs, blocking economic liberalisation.

In theory, democracy allows for diversity of ideology, morality, activity, opinion and its expression. It requires deliberation and compromise, which is complicated, messy, clumsy and confusing. Masses of civil servants labour to build and execute policy, which they then

dismantle under the next government. How inefficient and frustrating that is! It seems pedestrian and unheroic.

I recall Hegel's principle that one gets to know things in their failure. Therefore, to have a chance of correcting one's errors, preconceptions and prejudices, one must welcome opposition. That underlies the resonance that Hartmut Rosa speaks of. This opposition is lacking in an authoritarian regime.

However, currently, in democracies, people feel a loss of the old confidence in progress, in the next generation getting an improved economic position, and feel that the system is rigged in favour of the already well-established. They see through the false promise that deregulation and privatisation will raise welfare, while in fact public service declines. They deplore the lack, in market ideology, of morality, virtues of fairness, justice, and social bonds. They feel cheated that the culprits of the financial crisis, leaders of banks, get away scot-free.

Democracy requires trust of people in each other and in government, and for both it has declined with rising inequality. Losing trust in government, people withdraw into private relations, in family or clan, which breaks down trust of citizens in each other. Democracy is still preferable to autocracy, but requires a more moral economics.

Many people in developed Western societies take democracy for granted, as self-evident, but it is not. Schmitter (1994: 57-58) wrote that: 'There is no proof that democracy is inevitable, irreversible or a historical necessity. It neither fills some indispensable functional requisite of capitalism, nor corresponds to some ineluctable ethical imperative in social evolution. Its consolidation demands an extraordinary and continuous effort—one that many countries are unlikely to be able to make... Democracies may stumble on without satisfying the aspirations of their citizens', and it is subject to a 'lingering demise'.

Democracy requires pluralism as opposed to monism, tolerance of difference, and the willingness to communicate across differences. This is becoming more difficult as diversity increases. There also is an effect of scale, Dahl (1984) claimed that as democratic societies become bigger and more complex, there inevitably is a clustering of interests, in a 'corporate democracy', with institutions like labour unions, employers' associations, associations of farmers, shopkeepers, cafes and restaurants, ophthalmologists, lawyers, pharmaceutical companies, car manufacturers, environmentalists, etc. Those associations are not or limitedly democratic themselves, dodging public scrutiny and accountability. For example, they may impose restrictions of autonomy on members of an association, under the banner of providing a joint image and identity by way of accreditation. In bundling membership they can build a corporate identity and collect and develop expertise. This development has been favoured by increasing privatisation, where government hived off some of its responsibilities. This makes it more difficult for democratic government to come to decisions on vital matters such as environmental policy, because for every policy, some partial interest is affected, and the corresponding lobby blocks progress, yielding immobility. At some point, the comparative advantage may shift to authoritarian regimes.

Democracy is not just following the majority, but also protection of minorities, with freedoms of expression, association, voting and being elected, and equality under the law. Judgement of legality lies with judges, and for this they must be independent from government and parliament. However, in their judgement they are inevitably affected by culture, and need to be, to maintain recognition and acceptance by the population, which yields a bias, such as that against black people, for example, or allowing the possession of arms. One may try to correct this with jury trial, but that introduces another bias of emotional appeal rather than arguments of justice.

Democracy prides itself on benevolence and limited control, but over time regulations have accumulated, with control to prevent misuse of the regulation, such as with social benefits. Occasional scandals of misuse have triggered excessive control, to the point that the

rule is difficult to implement in practice. Parliament stacks conditions without being aware of the predicaments they cause for hapless civil servants that have to unravel the spaghetti. In the Netherlands, this has produced a scandal of the control of a scheme for child care subsidies. People benefitting from it were treated with extreme suspicion of fraud, leading to severe punishment of repayment while what went wrong was often due to just a mistake in filling forms or misunderstanding complex rules. Many civil servants did feel the injustice and hardship, and complained to their bosses, but were rebutted with the dogma of 'the law is the law'. There was a parliamentary enquiry, revealing the excessive injustice and hardship that was reported but ignored, which resulted in the government stepping down. There are two root causes. One is that inoperable legislation is crafted by a parliament that has no task in the complexities of execution. The second, more fundamental cause, is the urge to excessive control. In tandem with more parsimony in control, part of the solution is to allow more case by case individual judgement by those executing the regulation. Instead, attention seems to go only to the question who should be punished, in having to step down. As noted before, in the dilemmas of science, such leeway for case-by-case judgment may yield inequality and even corruption, but this may be controlled to some extent by peer review.

In a democracy there is a dilemma of transparency versus secrecy. In the scandal concerning benefits for child care, as discussed, one of the criticisms was of the 'Rutte doctrine', Rutte being the prime minister, which entailed that some information is not divulged, even to parliament, which is a sin against democracy. There were reports of the inequities in the administration of the child care benefit, but they did not reach parliament or even ministers. The prime minister argued that some confidentiality was needed among civil servants and their ministers, and there is some validity in this. In negotiation between conflicting interests, when moves and proposals are divulged prior to agreement, they may be torpedoed by oppositional clamour before they can be balanced by compensating concessions. There needs to be time for a to-and-fro of proposals before they settle down in a balance of interests. This arises also in diplomacy that needs to be conducted in secret. However, one can see how it went too far, and after an agreement is reached, one can document the considerations and arguments, for the sake of accountability.

The European Union (EU) defends democracy but is itself limitedly democratic. The European Commission is the sole initiator of European laws, some of which trump national law. The commission is not elected but proposed by the European council, which consists of national heads of state, and only needs approval from the European parliament. Only three out of all languages of the union are used in deliberation and policy making.

The EU harbours limitedly democratic states, such as Hungary, which restricts opposition and free speech. The EU tries to penalise that country for its authoritarianism, but cannot dismiss it as a member, so that censure is mostly exhortation, rhetoric.

One of the problems of democracy is that it is oriented to the short term, of some four years until the next election. This inhibits attention to long term issues such as climate change and other degradation of the environment. An authoritarian regime that inhibits or lacks open elections can afford a longer term perspective, such as in the Chinese investments all over the world for a new 'silk route'. Prosperity of many has been raised by undemocratic, forced and unequal stimulus of economic growth by forced eviction of people from 'backward' locations and poor working and housing conditions of workers at development sites.

Democracy is vulnerable to demagogues and legally admissible sabotage by false rhetoric, demonstration, dissimulation, creeping coups, claims for negative freedom, false promises, illusory seductions of national unity and a mythical past, hidden discrimination appealing to prejudice, stimulants of the parochial altruism discussed before. I do not wish to imply that every leaning to populist, authoritarian, nationalist leaders, is based on prejudice, lies and false promises or irrational myths. There are legitimate grudges from loss of jobs, due to

globalisation. automation and robotisation. Globalisation has been driven by market forces, with the economic argument of '*comparative advantage*', which says that production should take place where it is the most efficient, relative to other activities, and materials are to be sourced where they are cheapest. In lowering costs, that has greatly contributed to prosperity of citizens in general, but has been destructive of the interests of some workers, who did not only lose their jobs, but suffered because of economies of scale and specialisation, the drive to efficiency, which caused the razing of old, small and 'inefficient' housing, small shops and other amenities, narrow roads, and the building of tall and wide ones, whereby work was moved to a distance, local amenities disappeared, young families moved out, and small communities suffered. People have a deep-seated need for sociality, indeed they develop their identities in interaction with others, which needs some degree of continuity. This is *resonance* again. Next to this economic and social loss, economic development with its demand for efficiency, the centrality of pecuniary values, the hunt for consumption, the commodification of goods, the fetishism of property, destroyed traditional values, such as those of family and faith, that were constitutive of identity. In consequence and in combination with that, many people felt a loss of recognition and respect, being seen as 'deplorables' They are now supporters of Trump.

Formerly, it was thought that ultimately democracy will win, because the central direction of autocracy will ultimately fail, and market dynamics is essential for increasing prosperity. However the Chinese has shown that central direction with controlled and limited market dynamics can win out in economics. China is not on a path of transformation to a standard capitalist market system, but on a path of ongoing central direction by the Communist Party in combination with limited market dynamics, in allowing private enterprise next to the continued existence of large state-owned enterprise, localised collaboration between politicians and private business, with privatisation of some state assets, and access of foreign investment in some sectors, but not in telecommunication for example (Mueller and Tan 1997). In the long run people may demand democratisation, but the evidence shows that many seem to value prosperity more.

Are there opportunities for improving democracy, in reducing its bumbling and erratic shuffling to and fro, its inequalities, obfuscations, short term perspective, excessive control in regulations out of distrust of the population? Some possible solutions have been offered above. Concerning the short term bias of business one can limit the influence of shareholders who press for short term profits. One can impose more tax on pollution, such as the carbon tax on emissions that is now being discussed. For government it is problematic to extend the time perspective of government by lengthening the period between elections, but that delays the pressure of democratic control.