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## DEMOCRACY AND DISSATISFACTION\*

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*The global spread of elections (frequently free and sometimes fair) and the universal acceptance of the language of human rights have become the distinctive feature of politics in the beginning of the new century. By 2005 for the first time in history, more than half of the world's population was living in democracies. However, the paradoxical outcome of the triumph of democracy is that two decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall there is a growing dissatisfaction with the really existing democratic regimes and there is a growing sense of trouble in the house of freedom. This dissatisfaction is amplified by the challenge of the economically successful non-democratic regimes. Chinese post-communist authoritarianism is in many ways more inventive and experiment friendly than post-communist democracies. The article analyzes strengths and weaknesses of the democracy, as well as some illusions associated with it. Democratic triumphalism of the last two decades is a real and present danger for our understanding of the challenges democracy faces today. The author concludes that democracies are not and cannot be 'satisfaction machines'. Democracy's advantage over authoritarianism lies not in some inherent democratic ability to offer citizens instant gratification of their needs and desires, but rather in democracy's superior institutional and intellectual readiness to cope with the dissatisfaction produced by its citizens' choices. What democracies do offer dissatisfied citizens is the satisfaction of having the right to do something about their dissatisfaction. So, democracy is the political regime that fits best for the current age of dissatisfaction.*

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‘As a rule history is “protestant” not “catholic” – its primary feature being institutional, cultural and ideological diversity. But episodically history has its “catholic moments” when universal ideological word becomes an institutional flesh’ and when there is a powerful feeling that history is heading to a certain destination (Jowitt 1992). The post-Cold war period was such a ‘catholic moment’. At least for while Western liberal democracies looked as the final stop in human history. Contrary to the experience of the past at the end of the last century neither God (tradition), nor revolution (ideology) could grant governments ‘the moral title to rule’. The will of the people as expressed in free and fair elections has become the only source of legitimate government that modern societies are ready to accept. The global spread of elections (frequently free and sometimes fair) and the universal acceptance of the language of human rights have become the distinctive feature of politics in the beginning of the new century. While the earlier generation of democratic theorists was preoccupied with the question ‘what makes democracy work and last’ the new post-1989 democratic theory has become overwhelmed by de-

mocracy's universal appeal, the emergence and survival of democratic regimes in unlikely places and in diverse cultural and economic environments.

The revolutionary crowds on the streets of Prague and East Berlin – peaceful, triumphant, and insisting on their right to live in a ‘normal society’ – provided the ultimate validation for the superiority of liberal democracy as a form of government. The fears and contradictions that had been afflicting Europe's democratic experience over the last two centuries seemed finally to have reached a resolution. Democracy did not need any more justifications. Europe has entered the age of democratic triumphalism.

Democracy – meant to be self-government of equals – is now universally valued, it is institutionalized in more than three-fifth of the world's states and it is demanded and struggled for by large movements in the remaining two-fifths. By 2005 for the first time in history, more than half of the world's population was living in democracies. Centuries-old arguments critical of the desirability or feasibility of democratic regimes virtually disappeared. Democracy may not have run out of enemies, but it ran out of critics. Anti-democratic arguments and sentiments went into hiding. And here comes the problem...

The paradoxical outcome of the triumph of democracy is that two decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall there is a growing dissatisfaction with the really existing democratic regimes and there is a growing sense of trouble in the house of freedom. The triumph of democracy turned to be also its crisis. There is a feeling that we have reached what Gershenkron called a ‘nodal point’, a point where in a relatively short period of time we will witness, experience and perhaps even participate in aesthetic, ideological, strategic and finally institutional redefinition of the meaning of democracy.

There is the feeling that inspired by the spread of democratic regimes following the demise of communism, political theorists failed to grasp the profound transformation within the democratic regimes and the historic consequences related to this transformation. In the years immediately following 1989, little attention was paid to the impact of that year's epochal events on the way that democracy began to be perceived by its own citizens and the arguments with which it was promoted. The discourse of democratic triumphalism has eroded the intellectual foundations of modern democratic regimes. No longer was democracy only the least undesirable form of government – the best of a bad bunch, if you will. Instead, it was coming to seem like the best form of government, period. People were starting to look to democratic regimes not merely to save them from something worse but to deliver peace, prosperity, and honest and effective governance all in one big and luxury package. The historical break point of 1989 made many to believe that democracy is synonymous to peace and economic growth. The defining feature of the age of democratic triumphalism was the attempt to present democracy as a single cure for all societal problems and to justify democracy not comparing its advantages and disadvantages with the ones of its competitors but in terms of its capacity to satisfy the material needs of the modern consumer. Democracy was presented as the only right answer to a number of unrelated questions. What is the best way to bring economic growth – the answer is to become a democracy. What is the best way to protect one's country – the answer is to become a democracy and to be surrounded by democracies (‘freedom anywhere will make the world safer everywhere’). What is the best way to fight corruption – the answer is to be a democracy. What is the best way to respond to demographic or migration challenges – the answer is to be more democratic and inclusive. Rhetoric has won a victory over reality. What the missionaries of democracy failed

to recognize is that it is one thing to argue that problems like corruption or integration of the minorities can be better solved in a democratic environment and it is totally different thing to insist that the very introduction of free and fair elections and the adoption of a liberal constitution can solve all these problems.

It took less than a decade so the justification of democracy's superiority in terms of economic growth, security or good governance has started to backfire. The combination of the global economic crisis and the rise of authoritarian capitalism has challenged long-held assumptions. The claim that democracy is best at delivering economic growth has been shaken by China's success. In the last 30 years non-democratic China is world's fastest growing economy. It is on its way to overtake the United States as the world's largest manufacturing nation and it has already replaced Germany as world's leading exporter. But it is not only China. The research community is well aware of the fact that some of the best and some of the worst performing emerging economies are autocracies. So, while the most developed democracies tend to be rich and prosperous, democracy is not a synonymous to prosperity or economic growth.

The democratic experience in Africa has demonstrated that the spread of elections was also not necessary benign when it comes to the reduction of violence. The Oxford economist Paul Collier in his fascinating book *Wars, Guns and Votes* (Collier 2009) has demonstrated that while in the middle income countries elections systematically reduce the risk of political violence, in low income countries, elections made the society more dangerous. In the same fashion of 'think again' enlightened revisionism Israeli military historian Azar Gat (Gat 2007) went even further in challenging the current orthodoxy about the military superiority of liberal democratic camp. In his analysis democracies' victory in the last two world wars should be explained not by the intrinsic superiority of the democratic political system but by the fact that the United States happened to be in the democratic camp. It is America's superiority and not democracy's superiority that explains the outcome of the power struggles of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While Azar Gat was challenging the notion that democracies are invincible, American political scientists Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder (Mansfield and Snyder 1995) challenged the strategy that puts democracy promotion at the center of West's security policy. Collecting historical evidence from the last 200 years Mansfield and Snyder have challenged the democratic piece theory. While the authors agree that democracies tend not to fight each other, in their analysis societies that are undergoing a period of transition to democracy become more war-prone not less and they do fight democratic states. So, be sure you know what you pray for when you pray that one day China and Russia will start or re-start their democratic transitions.

Robert Kagan's (2009) hypothesis that 'nations' form of government, not its 'civilization' or a 'geographical location' may be the best predictor of its geopolitical alignment also got under fire. It is enough to open today's newspapers in order to notice that when comes to foreign policy democratic Turkey, democratic India or democratic Brazil are not inclined as a matter of principal to side with the fellow democracies from the United States or the European Union. Anti-colonial sentiments and old-fashioned state interests and ambitions not nation's form of government can turn to be better predictor for country's geopolitical alignment. So, what happened to democracy in the last decade is what marketing specialists will easily recognize as the crisis of 'overselling'. The latest two waves of democratization created expectations and institutionalized a discourse on democracy that is at the very heart of the current crisis of the really existing democratic regimes.

## The Great Recession

When the world was hit by the most severe economic crisis since the Great Depression many political theorists expected that the crisis will result either in failure of the new regimes of authoritarian capitalism like Russia or China or that it will end up in the repetition of the 1930s and it will destroy the new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe. The crisis in a perverse way did neither lead to the collapse of the new authoritarians nor to the demise of the new democracies. In a strange way the crisis validated Huntington's observation made 40 years ago that 'the most important political distinction among countries concerns not their form of government but their degree of government' (Huntington 1968).

The blurring border between democracy and authoritarianism in the context of growing mistrust to both political and business elites and deepening crisis of governability of modern societies on the global scale and not the rise of capitalist authoritarianism is the defining feature of our time.

The authoritarian capitalist regimes of today best represented by China and Russia are not rooted in the power structures of the traditional societies and are not primarily dependent on mass repression. While living in non-democratic states both Russians and Chinese are freer and wealthier than in any other moment in their history. It is the Russian and Chinese middle classes that represent the key social constituency supporting the regime. Unlike Soviet or Chinese communism the new regimes of authoritarian capitalism do not present themselves as an alternative to democracy but as a variation of democracy. The new authoritarianism strives on fears or disappointments related to previous attempts for democratization, Russia being the classical example.

The global survey *The Voice of the People* conducted annually by Gallup International in the last four years suggests an intriguing paradox: while democracy is universally accepted as the best form of government the citizens of the democratic societies in many cases and in particular in the case of Central and Eastern Europe are not only more critical to the merits of the democratic system than those living in non-democratic societies but also they tend to believe that their voice matter less in the way their countries are governed. Havel's classics on the late totalitarian society was famously entitled *The Power of the Powerless* its post-communist sequel can easily be published under the title *The Frustration of the Empowered*.

## 1989 and All That

Today, twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, there is a growing ambiguity about the historical significance of 1989 and about the state of democracy in Europe (particularly in Central Europe). Trust in democratic institutions (including elections) is steadily declining. The political class is viewed as corrupt and self-interested. Disenchantment with democracy appears to be growing. According to 2008 Eurobarometer survey – only 21 per cent of Lithuanians, 24 per cent of Bulgarians, 24 per cent of Romanians, 30 per cent of Hungarians, and 38 per cent of Poles believe that they have benefited from the fall of the Berlin Wall (Eurobarometer 2008: 58).

There are many today who believe that it was not the people but the old elites who broke free and collected the jackpot of 1989. The end of communism, this account goes, set in motion a process that has liberated ex-communist elites from fear (of purges), from guilt (for being rich), from ideology, from the chains of community,

from national loyalties, and even from the necessity to govern. The offshore elites and not democratic publics turned to be the biggest beneficiaries from 'the end of history'. The democratic revolutions of 1989 puzzled many with their anti-egalitarianism and anti-utopianism. Alex de Tocqueville will be surprised to learn that in contrast to the previous waves of democratization the last wave widened the income inequalities in the new democracies.

It is not only people on the street but also democratic theorists who have second thoughts about the real historical meaning of 1989. The leading democratic minds reflecting on the legacy of the three decades of spread of democracy since Portugal's democratic revolution of 1974 are coming to the sobering conclusions. In the article published in the *Journal of Democracy* Philippe Schmitter (2010: 17–28) asserts that the democratization has proven far easier to accomplish in the contemporary historical context than it was previously thought but at the same time the last wave of democratizations was less consequential than the previous ones. In Schmitter's analysis it was easier exactly because it was less consequential. The old elites benefited from the current political changes much more than their predecessors.

It is exactly the fact that old elites have turned to be the biggest winners of the game that provoked a wave of revisionist interpretations of the recent history. In his new book *Uncivil Society*, the US historian Stephen Kotkin (2009) powerfully argues that, the Polish case aside, the communist collapse across Central and Eastern Europe is best understood as the implosion of an ineffective and demoralized communist establishment (the 'uncivil society' of his title) than by a revolt of civil society. The people on the streets of Prague and Sofia were not so much revolutionary citizens as dissatisfied consumers. In Kotkin's final analysis both political freedom and the market economy were not the fulfilled goal of a successful revolution but the unintended consequences of the bank run on communism.

In short, in the way democracy has become the victim of its sellers' excesses, the revolutions of 1989 are on the way to fall victim of its trivialization. There is a need to ask questions as old that we have forgotten the right answers like: what makes democracy the least unacceptable form of government and what is the role of the revolutions in 1989 in re-making Europe's democratic tradition.

My argument is that the revolutions of '89 without being the end of history were a turning point in Europe's experience with democracy. They did succeed in reconciling liberalism and democracy – but at a cost. The ideology of normality that was their driving force (the attempt to present democracy as a natural state of society and to free it from its historical contradictions) contributed to its current crisis by weakening the democratic immune system.

### **Farewell to Weimar**

It is now difficult to imagine how radical was the rupture between the way Europeans thought about democracy before the fall of the Berlin Wall and how they thought about it afterward. It is difficult to accept that everything we take for granted today was not only in jeopardy but seriously questioned even by its defenders just yesterday. The revolutions of 1989 as a collective European experience have remade Europe's political culture.

Modern European history has been strongly shaped by a deeply rooted ambivalence toward democracy as a political regime. In 1934 the Portuguese dictator Antonio Sala-

zar bravely predicted that ‘within twenty years, if there is not any retrograde movement in political evolution, there will be no legislative assemblies left in Europe’ (quoted in Keane 2009). The revolutionary upheavals of the long nineteenth century (a century whose quietude is overrated in many conventional accounts) and the collapse of democracies during the interwar period made many Europeans skeptical regarding the merits of mass political participation. After 1918, there were hardly any European countries blessed with governments that lasted longer than twelve months. The short, unhappy life of Germany's Weimar Republic and its tragic death – ‘part murder, part wasting sickness, part suicide’, in Peter Gay's famous phrase (Gay 1968: xiii) – left a lasting imprint on European attitudes toward democracy. The association between Weimar democracy and the fascist violence that grew within it and ultimately rose to power on Weimar's carcass remained strong in the minds of many. The postwar Western democratic theory is nothing more than competing interpretations on the fall of the Weimar republic.

One cannot understand the political experience of twentieth century Europe without grasping the fear of the revolutionary masses that underlay so much of that experience. ‘We tend to see revolution as in theory a movement to bring liberation’, wrote Raymond Aron in the 1970s. ‘But the revolutions of the twentieth century seem rather to promote servitude, or at least authoritarianism’ (Aron 2003: 163). A century earlier Jacob Burckhardt was even clearer: ‘I know too much history to expect anything from the despotism of the masses but a future tyranny, which will mean the end of history’. In short, on the Continent, liberalism and democracy were not married but divorced for almost two centuries. Liberals were convinced that talk of liberal democracy is oxymoronic. They often found themselves waging a two front struggle as they fought against both the proponents of authoritarian stability and the advocates of radical (populist) democracy. The very different meanings of the word ‘populism’ in the US and European political traditions (mostly neutral in the former, overwhelmingly negative in the latter) reveal two contrasting patterns of relations between democracy and liberalism. French liberalism in particular – born as it was as part of a response to the excesses of the French Revolution – saw itself not as a part of but rather as an alternative to mass democracy. For someone like François Guizot, an essential part of being a liberal was refusing to be a democrat.

Even as ‘democracy’ was Western Europe's battle cry in its confrontation with Soviet communism, mistrust of democracy was part of the Cold War European consensus. Democracies were regarded as weak and unstable. They were ineffective at combating destructive enemies. They were too idealistic and too slow to act when it came to making tough decisions about the use of violence. Democratic decision-making was shortsighted, divisive, and prone to demagoguery and manipulation. It was not anybody else but Winston Churchill himself who wittily observed that ‘the best argument against democracy is a five minute talk with the average voter’. Meritocracy, not democracy, was the ideal of Europe's educated classes. Meritocracy and liberal rationalism – not democracy – lay at the very foundations of the project of European integration. Meritocrats and not democrats were at the foundation of the European Union.

It was in 1983 – just six years before the Wall was torn down – that Jean-François Revel articulated the fears of the Cold War generation when he wrote that ‘democracy may, after all, turn out to have been a historical accident, a brief parenthesis that is closing before our eyes’ (Revel 1983: 3). What made him so pessimistic was his conviction

that democracy receives too little credit for its achievements and at the same time must pay an infinitely higher price for its failures and mistakes than its adversaries do for theirs. In short, on the very eve of the 'velvet revolutions', democratic regimes continued to be perceived as weak as inadvertently self-destructive if not outright suicidal. It took the revolutions of 1989 to erase the Weimar experience and to change profoundly Europeans' attitudes toward democracy. The night of November 9 that year, when joyous crowds of Germans decisively breached the Berlin Wall, served at last to suppress memories of the November evening exactly 51 years earlier when the Nazis' anti-Semitic Kristallnacht atrocities put the world on notice that the 'wall' between civilization and barbarism was falling in the heart of Europe. In the mind of many a European, the revolutions of 1989 succeeded at last in reconciling the experience of revolution with the ideal of liberal democracy. Seeing the nonviolent nature of the change and the firmness of the fledgling democracies' resolve to adopt new constitutions through orderly means, liberals found themselves at long last won over to democracy's cause. The revolutions of 1989 made manifest to West Europeans the attractiveness of their own much deprecated political model.

The revolutions of 1989 and the experience of post-communist transition also helped to put an end to a long running intra-European debate over the relationship between political democracy and market capitalism. It was for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that European Right was haunted by the fear that mass democracy will end up destroying the property rights and personal freedom while Marxist Left was passionately arguing that bourgeois democracy is only a façade for the dominance of the property classes.

Today, historians find themselves tempted to tell the story of Central and Eastern Europe's post-communist transitions as a tale of the irresistible attraction between democracy and capitalism. But twenty years ago, the goals of market building and democracy building were often seen as contradictory. Most of the East European dissidents (being men of letters) shared the anti-capitalist sentiments so common on the European left. And while political theorists in the late 1980s agreed that free markets and freely competitive politics tended to strengthen each other in the long run, the fear was that political and economic reforms, when pursued simultaneously, would work at cross-purposes. How can you give people the power to make free choices and at the same time expect them freely to mandate the pain of slashed budgets, reduced subsidies, and fired workers? German sociologist Claus Offe spoke for many when he wrote in the early days of transition that 'the market economy is set in motion only in pre-democratic conditions' (Offe 1996: 67).

### **Normality and its Discontents**

Happily enough, sometimes what does not work in theory works in practice. Central and Eastern Europe did manage to make a simultaneous transition to both markets and democracy. It took a magical mix of ideas, emotions, circumstances, external pressure, and leadership to make that success possible. In their efforts to transform their societies, the region's reformers found the communist legacy to be a natural if unwilling ally. People were patient in the face of reform's cost because they were impatient to break away from communism. The early 1990s were surreal years that saw trade unionists calling for job cuts and ex-communists professing their eagerness to advance economic privatization.

There was anger against capitalism, but there was neither a party nor even a viable political vocabulary to give force or voice to the inchoate anti-capitalist feelings of those who saw themselves as net losers from the transition. Any criticism of the market was equated with nostalgia for communism. Anticommunist and ex-communist elites both backed the changes – the former on principle, the latter out of self-interest. The popular longing to ‘return to Europe’ helped post-communist societies to reconcile the redistributive instincts of democracy with the market's penchant for producing inequality. Disciplined in the straitjacket of European integration, Central and Eastern Europe embraced political and economic opening at one and the same time. Democracy, liberalism and capitalism were reconciled not only in Eastern Europe but also in the Western part of the continent. In its attempt to imitate Western liberal democracies East Europeans invented them.

In short, the ideology of normality that was the driving force of the revolutions of 1989 deserves the credit both for the successes of the transition and for the hollowness of post-transition politics. The desire to be normal encouraged Central and East European political leaders to look for pragmatic solutions, and to imitate Western institutions and practices. The ideology of normality was particularly useful in advancing the decade long process of the EU accession, during which many a post-communist polity busied itself with passing laws over which it had scarcely paused to deliberate. This same ideology of normality, however, is at least partly responsible for the intellectual paralysis that grips Central and East European politics today, as well as for the larger failures of the new democracies to reinvent themselves. The politics of ‘normalization’ replaced deliberation with imitation, inspired respect for banality, and allowed policy makers to pull off the rhetorical sleight of hand involved in using ‘democracy’ and ‘good governance’ as synonyms. Central Europe made a virtue of being uninventive. In the post-communist era, the very word ‘experiment’ took on negative connotations. The paradox is that when it comes to political experiments Chinese post-communist authoritarianism is in many ways more inventive and experiment friendly than post-communist democracies.

By declaring democracy the normal state of society and restricting democratization to an imitation of the institutions and practices of developed democracies, Central Europe's ideology of normality failed to give rein to the creative tensions that do so much to supply democracy with its flexibility and endurance. The tensions between democratic majoritarianism and liberal constitutionalism, for example, are not transitional ‘growing pains’, but lie at the very heart of democratic politics. These tensions cannot be wished away or simply resolved; instead, societies must learn to live with them and turn them to good use. Democracy is a federation whose constituent republics constantly squabble over and renegotiate their shared borders. Democracy is a self-correcting regime that is sustained by its own contradictions. It is instructive that even while the current ideologues of normality tend to interpret the rise of populism in Central Europe as a leap into the abyss of political pathology, the expressed level of citizens' trust in democratic institutions in countries with populist governments (Bulgaria and Slovakia, for instance) has dramatically increased (Mesežnikov *et al.* 2008).

In seeking to explain how and why societies seem constantly to oscillate between periods of intense preoccupation with public affairs and times when private concerns hold the upper hand, Albert O. Hirschman demonstrated that acts of participation in



public affairs, which are undertaken because they are expected to yield satisfaction, also yield dissatisfaction (Hirschman 1982). Hirschman's insight that the rise of consumer society and the broadening of individual choices will be accompanied by the boom of dissatisfaction in my view should be at the heart of the new debate on the advantages of democracy over its authoritarian competitors.

Democracy's advantage over authoritarianism lies not in some inherent democratic ability to offer citizens instant gratification of their needs and desires, but rather in democracy's superior institutional and intellectual readiness to cope with the dissatisfaction produced by its citizens' choices. In this respect democratic triumphalism of the last two decades is a real and present danger for our understanding of the challenges democracy faces today. Whereas before 1989 democracies tended to take people's dissatisfaction for granted, the normality obsessed democracies of post-1989 Europe tend to view such dissatisfaction as baffling and unintelligible. Democracy is not an alternative to bad governance, it is an alternative to revolution.

In fact, it is democratic societies' capacity to overcome their own failings and learn from experience that gives these societies their deepest and most durable appeal. And this is especially important in the moment when most of the Europeans fear that their future will not be as prosperous and peaceful as their past.

By defining democracy as the natural state of society while limiting the sanctioned policy choices available to the public, the post-1989 consensus paradoxically undercut this very basic advantage of democratic regimes. Democracies are not and cannot be 'satisfaction machines'. They do not produce good governance the way a baker turns out doughnuts. (Good governance is a welcome but far from inevitable product of democratic governance.) What democracies do offer dissatisfied citizens is the satisfaction of having the right to do something about their dissatisfaction. So, democracy is the political regime that fits best for the current age of dissatisfaction.

#### NOTE

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