Culture, Values, and Identities

Democratic Nostalgia

Jan Zielonka[1,2][a]

[1] Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK, [2] Economics, University of Venice, Ca Foscari, Venice, Italy

Global Perspectives

The reviewed books nicely expose several factors behind democratic "degeneration," but they do not question the assumption that democracy is a matter for nation-states only. This is problematic because states' ability to perform their traditional functions has been progressively eroded. The internet revolution, in particular, has accelerated social communication, economic transactions, and the process of unbounding with profound implications for democratic performance. Rather than cultivating nostalgia for the "glorious years" of democracy, we must think hard how to make democracy triumph in the digital era.

Liberal democracy has been the famous Western brand for several decades.[1] It has managed to mediate conflicts among diverse groups of citizens, arrest abuses of power, and secure the rights of minorities. Democracy has also been able to secure wealth and divide it relatively fairly (Acemoglu et al. 2019). There is even a considerable body of evidence suggesting that democracy has helped to maintain peace (Russett 1993; Huth and Allee 2002).

Democracy has always had its shortcomings and critics, but those like myself who grew up in countries without democracy were envious of the Western world and tried hard to become democratic too, often taking considerable risks. In recent years, this fascination with democracy has largely vanished, and the reviewed books expose several factors why this is so.

The authors blame neoliberalism for its simplistic and opaque interpretation of liberal ideals. They castigate selfish individuals for turning their backs on the notion of the public good. And they criticize rampant inequalities, the polarization of political discourse, and the role of money in politics. Despite all the critique of political practice in recent years, they argue, quite convincingly, that autocratic and illiberal alternatives will make our lives much worse rather than better.

However, one fundamental point is missing in their analysis, which makes me wonder whether democracy will be able to regain its sex appeal anytime soon. None of these books questions the assumption that democracy is a matter for nation-states only, even if those states are currently unable to perform most of their traditional functions. States are not withering away, of course, but they are increasingly unable to offer an overlap between administrative borders, military frontiers, cultural traits, and market fringes.[2] States' proudly proclaimed sovereignty is increasingly illusory as power slips into the hands of transnational and local actors, public and private, able to handle money, migrants, and sometimes even violent predators better than states. As the American guru of democracy studies, Robert Dahl, always argued, democracy ought to be participatory and effective, and many states can offer neither (Dahl 1994, especially p. 33; see also Dahl 1970, 372–73). Effective power is increasingly in the hands of networks that benefited most from the digital revolution. Manuel Castells already wrote about this most eloquently three decades ago (Castells 1996, 2001). The problem is that networks are not the sites of democracy, as understood by the three reviewed books. Yet networks of cities or NGOs are usually more skillful than states in alleviating poverty, accommodating migrants, and coping with transnational issues such as climate change. Frequently, these networks also offer citizens more sensible forms of deliberation, participation, and contestation than the vast majority of states.

The internet has done more than empower informal horizontal networks over hierarchical, heavily institutional states. Digital connectivity and communication has also eroded state borders and made the world ever more flat, to use the catchy expression coined by Thomas Friedman (2005). Speed of transactions and communication has increased immensely thanks to the internet. Some scholars

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a   jan.zielonka@sant.ox.ac.uk

1   Review of Craig Calhoun, Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, and Charles Taylor, *Degeneration of Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022); Francis Fukuyama, *Liberalism and Its Discontents* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2022), and Stein Ringen, *How Democracies Live: Power, Statecraft, and Freedom in Modern Societies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

2   Providing this overlap is seen as the major state asset compared to other governance units. See, e.g., Bartolini 2005 or Poggi 1978.

even talk about a high-speed society and turbo-capitalism at present, but in a democracy, acceleration of decision-making is usually seen as paving a path to authoritarianism. Rule by decree and negotiating via WhatsApp were scorned during all recent emergencies by democracy experts, but they have not explained how to make democracy function more quickly during a fire or an earthquake (Agamben 2005; also White 2019). Digital hyperconnectivity, as labeled by Rogers Brubaker, has also "profoundly transformed self... how we think, desire, remember, and attend to the world and to one another" (Brubaker 2022, 20). This has obvious implications for the notion of the public good and the social contract so dear to democracy.

The books reviewed are not particularly interested in the implications of the digital revolution, although they lament the polarization on social media platforms and the monopolistic position of the internet giants. I believe that from a democratic point of view, the unbounding effect of the internet on nation-states is much more important, and it is curiously ignored by my distinguished colleagues. If the internet transformed the ways we communicate, move, trade, and even conduct wars, then the state and democracy must adjust to these transformations. Initially, democracy was confined to city-states, such as Athens, and when cities encountered troubles governing beyond their walls, democracy did not die but was transferred to a larger unit better suited to cope with these pressures: the nation-state (Held 1993). Democracy as such also changed in this process—it became a representative democracy rather than an assembly democracy at the level of the city-state. Representative democracy has also undergone regular adjustments. On the eve of the twentieth century, many parliamentary governments were still dependent on their local monarchs, elections were hardly free, and electoral rights were severely restricted. In France, Italy, and Belgium, women were allowed to vote only after the Second World War.

Today, both nation-states and the system of parliamentary representation are in trouble (see, e.g., Alonso, Keane, and Merkel 2011). Perhaps we need to locate democracy on levels above and below nation-states. Perhaps democracy needs to rely on representation alongside citizens' participation, deliberation, and contestation. Perhaps dispersing power between different territorial actors will make democracy more effective and legitimate. This is not what the authors of the reviewed books suggest. Stein Ringen rejects the need for bold democratic experiments and innovations because "the point of democracy is not to make policies democratically, but to make good policies" (Ringen 2022, 143, 18–19). Other authors are happy with modest adjustments that will renew communities, strengthen intermediate associations, and build national solidarity. However, this is easier said than done in the unbounded world of hyperconnectivity generated by the internet.

The clock, in my view, cannot be turned back. Today, one can well imagine the world without democracy, but it is hard to imagine the world without the internet. We may not like this new situation, but we must face it rather than bury our heads in the sand. I therefore cannot stop thinking that the reviewed books are longing for a world that no longer exists. This is why I entitled this review "Democratic Nostalgia." Social prerequisites of democracy so crucial for Calhoun, Gaonkar, and Taylor, such as solidarity, collective identity, or civic virtues, are hard to re-create in a new political space that is "stretched, mobile and immaterial," to use Zygmunt Bauman's words (Bauman and Mauro 2016, 4). How can democracy confined to state borders deliver the protection so dear to Ringen if financial markets operate with little regard for state borders? How can the deliberation and persuasion so dear to Fukuyama take place between stakeholders of diverse cultural backgrounds, speaking different languages? Surely, something is going to be lost in translation even if we use such sophisticated software as Redokun or Smartcat. Moreover, when moral values and political messages are floating freely through the digital space with little control by the state and its religious and educational pillars, it is difficult to arrive at a common definition of the public good. And who belongs to the public in a world of porous borders and cascading interdependence? Reducing inequalities, investing in better education, and offering citizens meaningful forms of participation in public affairs are noble aims, but these efforts will not do away with democracy's basic problem—namely, its confinement to a nation-state that retains its selfishness but loses effective control of its borders.

To be fair, the books discussed are not examples of historical amnesia. On the contrary, each of them offers a long historical perspective and points precisely to what worked well in the glorious years of democracy and what has caused democratic backsliding. However, it is not clear whether good historical experiences can be replicated in the contemporary political, economic, and technological circumstances. I completely agree with Calhoun, Gaonkar, and Taylor that the social democratic compromise with capitalism has benefited democracy immensely. I fear, however, that a social democratic welfare state is difficult to maintain, let alone strengthen, in states with fuzzy borders, and efforts to reinforce these borders have proved largely futile if not counterproductive even in strong states such as Germany or France. Calhoun, Gaonkar, and Taylor also invest hopes in movements advocating bold action such as Black Lives Matter and the Green New Deal. The problem is that these movements focus on specific public problems and not on democracy as such. In fact, they gave up on democracy, which is unable to address their grievances through the ballot box and the system of parliamentary representation. Moreover, as Margretts et al. (2016, especially pp. 196–227) have documented, the nature of protest and collective action has also changed with the arrival of the internet. Successful mobilizations usually focus on single if not narrow issues; they are unpredictable, unstable, and often unsustainable, generating a chaotic form of politics that is at odds with prescriptions contained in the reviewed books.

Francis Fukuyama rightly states that liberalism and democracy go hand in hand, although they are about different things. However, his suggestion that getting rid of the neoliberal pathologies will heal liberalism, and by extension democracy, make me think about my youth in communist Poland. After each public upheaval, the communist

elite claimed that we should condemn distortions of communist ideals rather than communism itself. Of course, paralleling communism to liberalism is like comparing stones to apples. Yet after a few decades of neoliberal rule, it is hard to expect contemporary voters to believe that liberalism is not about inequalities, tax havens, and destruction of public schools and hospitals. Fukuyama is right to argue that liberalism is a big intellectual tent, but it was Friedrich Hayek and not Carl Popper who attracted the attention of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. The rest is history.

All three books denounce excessive individualism and call for communitarian initiatives and spirit. I very much agree with them. The Fabian Society influenced my early studies of modern Britain, and the American communitarians such as Philip Selznick, Michael Walzer, or Stephen Holmes were my intellectual heroes. However, contemporary communitarians are chiefly nativists if not fascists. They come from diverse cultural backgrounds, but they all cherish a proud and sovereign nation-state with rather peculiar "illiberal" forms of democracy. This is another reason to question the state as the prime site of contemporary democracy. After all, nation-states are the breeding ground for ethnic chauvinism and sovereignism, which we have tried to put to rest in the last eight decades, especially in Europe. Despite the long process of European integration, we are faced with a remarkable revival of nationalism in Europe. Nativists and sovereignists despise multiethnic cities offering citizens economic opportunities, welfare provisions, and meaningful forms of participation. These nativists equally detest international organizations and European integration for showing that shared sovereignty can meet citizens' needs better than their opaque national democracy. Selfishness is the order of the day at all international fora controlled by nation-states, including the European Union. This is not necessarily because our leaders are greedy and egoistic, although some of them certainly are. This is because state-based democracy demands that these leaders benefit their own voters and not those outside state borders. The end result is governance paralysis exploited by big business—and often by criminals. How many "headline goals" and pledges on equality, climate change, or migration have been adopted by international bodies controlled by states, and the result was "blah, blah, blah," to use Greta Thunberg's words (Carrington 2021). An international alliance of sovereignists is as much a misnomer as illiberal democracy is, and in the current political discourse, they go together.

I suspect that reluctance to contemplate alternative sites and forms of democracy comes from the failure to put in place any forms of cosmopolitan democracy as advocated by globalization scholars (see, e.g., Archibugi and Held 1995). However, this failure does not necessarily mean that sticking to the state as the only site for democratic decisions is a good option either. Rather than citing globalization theorists to flesh out my point better, I will refer to Albert Hirschman's (1978) simple dichotomy of "voice" and "exit." Exit is about escaping from a given regime, and voice is about efforts to change a regime rather than escape from it. Constraining exit options through boundary building fosters the development of systemic structures for internal political negotiations. This is how democracy is born, it is argued. Those who are unable to exit will raise their voices and press for creating institutional channels to make themselves heard. When boundaries are soft and individuals can easily exit, voice becomes difficult to channel, organize, and discipline. In this scenario, there is less need to convince the rulers to change their policies, and no complex procedural techniques develop to weight and combine the preferences of the affected. The "full exit" world is therefore a world without voice and without democracy.

Full exit is not yet in the cards, but we are moving in that direction despite states' efforts to reinforce their borders. These efforts can be partially successful against human traffickers or even foreign tanks. However, the prime factor of unbounding is currently the internet, on which we are tremendously dependent in our families, firms, hospitals, and schools. How would we have survived the recent pandemic without the much criticized internet? Can one prevail in contemporary warfare without using the internet? If we cannot beat the internet, we should adjust democracy to it. If networks operate better than states in the digital world, perhaps we should make networks part of our democratic architecture. I have particularly in mind networks performing public functions that benefit citizens, most notably NGOs, cities, and informal regions such as the Dutch Randstad. The International Labour Organization with its unique, tripartite decision-making structure that brings together governments, employers, and workers from all over the world is also operating like a network free from nation-states' binding instructions. In my new book—*The Lost Future and How to Reclaim It*—I argue that networks are already the fifth pillar or estate on which democracy rests, generating and sharing information, experimenting with new forms of governance, and revealing the misconduct or negligence of those in charge of formal decision-making processes (Zielonka 2023, especially chap. 7). However, networks have no adequate democratic powers and access to public resources that are still monopolized by states.

True, networks are seldom representative, but the reviewed books show well that the classical system of democratic representation is currently in tatters, probably beyond repair. Besides, representation is but one of the classical pillars of democracy. We should look at other pillars that show the ever greater role of networks in them: participation, deliberation, and contestation.[3] If we agree that democracy does not need to be the exclusive domain of territorially bounded nation-states, then numerous alternative institutional options emerge. For instance, the European Parliament could create a second chamber with

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3 For an eloquent elaboration of the "contestatory" type of democracy, see Pettit 1999, especially pp. 183–205. See also Cooke 2000, 956.

representatives of cities, regions, NGOs, and perhaps even business associations. The auditing of climate pledges could also be performed by NGOs, with states obliged to provide them with all the relevant information. With some imagination and courage, we can multiply analogous proposals. Yet first, we need to get away from the democratic dictum: no state, no democracy.

I realize that my proposals are not shared by most democracy experts, and in this sense the reviewed books represent the mainstream. However, this does not mean that these books shy away from taking positions that go against common wisdom. Most notably, they distance themselves from the chorus of voices blaming populism for democracy crises (see, e.g., Sadurski 2022 or Bickerton and Accetti 2021). Despite all misgivings, admit Craig Calhoun and Charles Taylor, "Populists generally do call for democracy. They seek to make the government more responsive to the people. And they reveal social challenges that conventional politics commonly fail to face (or even recognize)" (Calhoun, Gaonkar, and Taylor 2022, 211). Ringen finds it "unhelpful" to use the term *populism* for "revolts from below" in the established democracies, and he argues that for the "crumbling of confidence" it is hard to blame populists (Ringen 2022, 12–15). Only Fukuyama sides with the mainstream. Although he admits that populists are capitalizing on the faults of the neoliberal ideological reign, he believes that populists' positive vision of the good life amounts to an incoherent mixture of nationalism and sovereignism. He is particularly critical of the "nationalist populist right" involved in the storming of the US Capitol on January 6, 2021 (Fukuyama 2022, 142; see also pp. x–xi). Most democracy students will side with Fukuyama on this particular issue.

At the end of their books, the authors reveal interesting differences in their perceptions of politics and democracy. Ringen (2022, 194) states boldly that democracies live as long as their governments deal with problems and deliver. For Calhoun and Taylor, politics is not just government but society itself, and they nicely state that politics must be *poiesis* (Calhoun, Gaonkar, and Taylor 2022, 286). For Fukuyama (2022, 154), recovering a sense of moderation, both individual and communal, is the key to the revival. I wonder which of these visions will inspire the readers of these three hugely important books. I believe that all three positions have their merit, but we must think hard how to make democracy triumph in the digital era.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Jan Zielonka is professor of politics and international relations at the University of Venice, Ca' Foscari, and at the University of Oxford. His previous appointments included posts at the University of Warsaw, Leiden, and the European University Institute in Florence. Zielonka has produced eighteen books, including *Counter-Revolution: Liberal Europe in Retreat* (Oxford University Press, 2018), awarded the 2019 UACES prize for the best book on Europe and translated into several languages. His most recent book—*The Lost Future and How to Reclaim It*—has just been published by Yale University Press.

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