

DEMOCRACY: LONG-TERM PROJECTS, NOT A SINGLED FIXED RECIPE

Discussions of democracy in the European Union have a typical focus – parliaments, parties, party competition and competitive elections; the wider media environment is also mentioned. The model invoked is essentially liberal. But there are criticisms: the central Brussels machinery lacks democratic legitimacy; recent member states from the sometime Soviet sphere evidence authoritarian tendencies; and some established member states have influential nationalist/populist parties. These criticisms are all important but low-level. The idea needs to be revisited. It will be asserted here that the notion of democracy can be unpacked: first, as philosophy, then as an institution and finally in practice, and only at this point does it makes sense to return to substantive inquiry in respect of this or that particular polity.

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Discussions of democracy amongst European commentators are directed both to the political systems of individual member states and to the machineries of the European Union and discussions are typically cast in liberal or liberal-democratic terms; hence a focus on elections, a concern for the public sphere along with anxieties about failures to meet expected standards (unreliable electoral procedures, biased press, controlled judiciaries, remote bureaucracies and so on). Recent decades have seen doubts voiced about the health of democracy in Europe¹ but received models do not offer a reliable answer; the notion of democracy must be unpacked so that substantive discussions can take place.

In respect of these matters, philosophical objections can also be made; crucially, that liberalism is not the same as democracy and that any attempt to fuse them together (as liberal-democracy) whilst familiar, does not work.² The idea of democracy needs to be revisited; here discussion is turned towards *informing practical criticism of extant politics*. The notion of democracy can be unpacked in three ways: (i) in terms of the philosophical commitments of key agents; (ii) in terms of particular institutional forms within which agents work; (iii) and finally as a historical achievement, the practical track record of political work over the years. In this way, the underlying dynamic or logic of extant political systems can be grasped.

Democracy as a Concept: Some Core Claims

Political philosophy, in simple terms, seeks to uncover the central logic of the relationship of members of society to the means whereby decisions about that society are made and the ends to which such decisions are oriented.

The European (and American) centered debate is extensive³ but two general lines of reflection could be identified: liberalism and democracy. First, ‘liberalism’ begins with ‘discrete-autonomous-individuals’ and characterizes their relations with others in terms of contracts; such contracts aiming to satisfy intrinsically arising needs and wants. The social world appears as a dense network of contracts and minimal government chosen in ballots secures contract law and thus the social world. Then, second, ‘democracy’ begins with ‘persons-as-social-beings’, that is, individuals are constituted within the wider social world, where the social world is a dense network

¹ P. Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (London: Verso, 2013).;

² An embarrassing statement of the obvious for political philosophers, but to recall, after C.B. Macpherson, liberalism is not the same as democracy; C.B. Macpherson 1973 *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval* (Oxford University Press, 1973); for critiques of liberalism, A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981); a survey of debates is offered by D. Held, *Models of Democracy*, (Cambridge: Polity, 1987).

³ Surveys: R. Plant, *Modern Political Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); A. Vincent *The Nature of Political Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

of relationships, and government secures the environment within which these relationships can flourish.

“The shift to the modern world of natural science based industrial capitalism saw the emergence of mass populations; they sought access to political power, which was resisted by elites.”

The European tradition also distinguishes between direct or representative democracy. In the former, the citizens get to decide matters directly and here numbers count for direct democracy is either small scale (clubs, societies or perhaps factory councils and the like) or occasional (periodic referendums). The latter is where citizens elect representatives, who then make decisions on their behalf, and once again, when the community or polity is large, as with most modern states, indirect systems are used.

There are multiple varieties of representative models; each offers an internally complex set of ideas; *schematically*:⁴ (i) republican democracy, designed during early Enlightenment, for example, France and the USA, rooted in models of humankind as rational⁵ – hence liberty, equality, citizenship and law; the founders wrote constitutions,⁶ embraced separation of powers via executive, legislature and law (core ideas: citizens, elections and governing parliaments); (ii) liberal-democracy, hybrid systems, evolved over early modern period, for example Britain and Northwest Europe, rooted in hierarchical models of society, nominal separation of powers but elements overlap with monarchy as head of state; in Britain executive has significant discretionary powers, with parliament subordinate (core ideas: elite/mass, elections and rule setting parliaments); and finally (iii) people’s democracy, designed over short post-revolutionary era, rooted in utopian ideals of democracy, party-state system (no separation of powers, rather a double-hierarchy of policy formulation and administrative practice) where party elite has significant discretionary powers (core ideas: the people/citizens, party-state consultations and formal parliaments).

In contrast to liberal systems that were designed/evolved in the later modern era, the state apparatus is rule-setting and affirms the separation of powers, which

⁴ The point here is that these are constructed *packages* of ideas – none of them are self-evident ‘givens’

⁵ M. Hollis, *Models of Man: Philosophical Thoughts on Social Action* (Cambridge University Press, 1977).

⁶ L. Colley, *The Gun, the Ship and the Pen: Warfare, Constitutions and the Making of the Modern World* (London: Profile, 2021).

means executive, legislative and judicial power. In the underlying assumptions, the individual is advised to be in a position to handle their own concerns and, in the wider society, it is expected to observe consistent behavior, which is the purpose of contract and law (the core ideas: individuals, elections, and the minimum state).

Democracy as an Institutional Arrangement: Some Core Claims

Political theory, in similarly simple terms, aims to characterize the institutional machineries of governance of modern states: the formal distribution of responsibilities; the distribution of power; and the manner in which functionaries are recruited. Key questions revolve around the nature of access (open or closed), the manner of decision making (transparent or opaque) and, thereafter, the relationship of these governance machineries and the wider civil society is also in question; whether or not citizens have a means to debate issues and impact decision makers.

Institutional machineries of governance of the state can be varied; there is no single pattern; there is no single model and institutions are made, evolve, and are subject to amendment and change, so forms vary.⁷ However, with states in the modern era, there are commonalities: some form of decision-making executive, some form of deliberative body (advisory or consultative or with legislative powers); some form of regulatory body (law, which might be variously located within the overall machinery); and some idea of the machinery's relationship to those in the wider polity.⁸

The Particular Role of Elections: Some Familiar Assumptions

Elections are a feature of European modernity. The shift to the modern world of natural science based industrial capitalism saw the emergence of mass populations; they sought access to political power, which was resisted by elites. There was a slow shift and now elections are seen as a functional and ideological element of liberal-democratic systems.

Karl Popper, a reformer in pre-war Vienna, later a conservative reactionary in post-war London,⁹ characterized elections in a liberal-democratic system as a way of getting rid of incompetent politicians without recourse to violence; thus, the Western bloc style elections were compared favorably to Eastern bloc procedures.

⁷ On institutional analysis as a distinct theoretical approach, see V. Lowndes and M. Roberts, *Why Institutions Matter* (London: Palgrave, 2013). London, Palgrave

⁸ D. Rueschemeyer, D Huber Stephens and J D Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992).

⁹ M.H. Hacoen, *Karl Popper: The Formative Years 1902-1945* (Cambridge University Press, 2000). This intellectual biography identifies 'two Karl Poppers' where the first is a Viennese radical whilst the latter is an increasingly reactionary cold war liberal.

“There were problems confronting the machineries of the European Union, where post-2008 there were a sequence of problems involving German and French banks, in particular their exposure in Greece, relations with Russia, in particular around conflicts in Ukraine and the issue of migration, where Chancellor Merkel’s 2015 invitation caused widespread problems.”

In standard discussions of elections, a familiar logical slide confuses ‘elections-in-general’ with ‘liberal-democratic elections in particular’ and then goes on to equate these with ‘democracy in general’ and then goes on to take the American system as exemplifying this democracy; a bad habit amongst some political scientists.¹⁰

If elections are read in terms of an ideal type, that is, a summary idealized model of how the system works, then it is clear that there is a host of ways to manipulate the procedure: control the franchise; control the boundaries of constituencies; control the participants; control the timing; control how the ballot is run; control the ballot count; and control what counts as winning.

It seems clear that the familiar taken for granted model of liberal-competitive elections is sustained by a host of unexamined assumptions, all of which need to be examined; the practice itself is not a guarantee of a democratic polity.

Democracy as a Historical Achievement: Some Core Claims

Historical sociology,¹¹ once again in simple terms, seeks to grasp patterns of change over time; any system of governance is read as a contingent historical achievement. Thus, agents, here elites, pursue goals; the circumstances in which they operated can be detailed; their records can be investigated; and the historical development trajectory of countries can be sketched. The multiplicity of the variant forms of governance, including democracy, can be appreciated in terms of the multiplicity of available goals.

¹⁰ The liberal-democratic electoral idea is lodged in modernization theory and globalization theory – for explicit arguments, F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992); a technical variant is offered by *Freedom House*.

¹¹ Classic text: B. Moore Jr, *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Boston: Beacon, 1966).

Ludwig Wittgenstein,¹² writing on the relationship of language and reality, denies any simple fixed relationship, rather there are ‘families of concepts’, which in turn carry particular ‘forms of life’; so cast in these terms, political structures are various and they are not constructed to any fixed pattern. Thus, for example, the historical contexts and resultant forms of governance of the French or American or Chinese or Russian Revolutions; or, contrariwise, the adaptive evolution of British state;¹³ or comparatively, the characteristics of recently independent post-colonial states, say, Singapore or Malaysia or Indonesia¹⁴ and so on.

Zygmunt Bauman, writing about political objectives characterizes theoretical goals as an ‘active utopia’,¹⁵ a goal to which a community can aspire, an ever-receding goal (there are always improvements to be made); this is typically not how states in Europe read matters, instead, they simply assert that they are democracies, that is, the finished goods.¹⁶

The global system comprises multiple discrete development trajectories, and so it contains multiple variants of the idea of democracy (and variant forms of liberalism, liberal-democracy and so on, with, thereafter, assorted dictatorships, theocracies, narco-states, failed states and so on).

Democracy in Practice: Some Quite Different Examples

Then, finally, substantive characterizations (judgements) can be made. By way of illustrations:

- The Republic of Singapore: often labeled in media commentary as an authoritarian single-party state, the goals of its elite were originally social democratic, more recently inflected with neo-liberalism; best read as a species of communitarianism;¹⁷ the post-1965 development record is one of dramatic advances in levels of living;¹⁸
- The People’s Republic of China: routinely labelled in European media as authoritarian or simply a dictatorship; best seen as a party-state

¹² L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Cambridge University Press, 1953).

¹³ Classic text - Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (Yale University Press, 1992).

¹⁴ P.W. Preston, *After the Empires: The Creation of Novel Political-Cultural Projects in East Asia* (London: Palgrave, 2014).

¹⁵ Z. Bauman, *Socialism, the Active Utopia* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1976).

¹⁶ An implausible claim for UK – recall ‘Nairn-Anderson thesis’ – no break with the old pre-democratic regime, instead a backward looking modernization looking to oligarchic form of early Dutch Stadtholderate.

¹⁷ Chua B.H., *Liberalism Disavowed: Communitarianism and State Capitalism in Singapore* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2017).

¹⁸ On Southeast Asia generally, W. Case, *Politics in Southeast Asia: Democracy or Less* (London: Curzon, 2002).

double-bureaucracy (an hierarchical party machine with a standard career structure conjoined to an analogous state machinery); the one formulating policy, the other executing it; the post-1949 historical development trajectory has seen remarkable advances in levels of living;¹⁹

- The United Kingdom: nominally a long-established liberal-democratic system, but best read as a successful ‘soft-oligarchy’; there is a ruling elite, which is not wholly closed and which orders a largely acquiescent mass; the post-1945 system is secure.²⁰

In these three cases, each polity has sketched out a distinctive historical development trajectory; each has created a distinctive system of governance; each claims to be a democratic polity; and each affirms a distinctive ideal of democracy.

The European Union

The European Union began with six geographically close members whose recent histories involved the shared experience of destructive war.²¹ As a result, their elites were disposed to talk about unification and in this, the USA was an influential voice. Later this core group was joined by further members: in turn, Britain,²² plus Ireland and Denmark, the Mediterranean countries, the Nordic countries and most recently the countries of Eastern Europe. There were distinct motives among local elites in all these countries, as well as in Brussels. The result of expansion has been to turn an organization with six members into one with twenty-seven: these members have brought benefits in the form of larger markets and more social interchange, along with new problems of political and cultural coherence/legitimacy.

The Issue of Democracy

Critics of the European Union suggest that it is an elite level project lacking popular legitimacy. Member states choose to join. The accession process is long and drawn out. The decision as to whether or not to opt for membership is made by national level parliaments and thereafter all existing members indicate their agreement (ratified by their parliaments). Thereafter, all legislation of the European Union is scrutinized in three ways: first, by members state representatives in Brussels at elite level, where broad proposals are put forward to the European Council, and then at a detailed level

¹⁹ S. C.Y. Luk and P.W. Preston, *The Logic of Chinese Politics: Cores, Peripheries and Peaceful Rising* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2016); Zheng, Y., *The Chinese Communist Party as Organizational Emperor: Culture, Reproduction and Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2016).

²⁰ P.W. Preston, *Britain After Empire: Constructing a Post-War Political-Cultural Project* (London: Palgrave, 2014).

²¹ On post-war Europe: T. Judt, *Post-War: A History of Europe Since 1945* (London: Allen Lane, 2005).

²² Now withdrawn: Brexit 2020, after forty or so years of a membership.

they are discussed in the Council of Ministers. Second, there is a co-decision or review by the directly elected representative European Union parliament; and thirdly, it must be incorporated into member state law by that state's parliament.

Critics say that Brussels is dominated by elites and their actions are not subject to democratic (that is, popular) inspection or approval; that is, the system is turned inwards and those outside have no status.²³ The European Union reflects the current historical achievement of elites in Europe. Opinions on this achievement differ. Jürgen Habermas²⁴ would argue for a more developed public sphere. William Case²⁵ might be more content with elite level corporatist democracy. Wolfgang Streek²⁶ would say the institutions have become neo-liberal, prioritizing the needs of capital with democracy as a nuisance for the elite. In this vein, critics sometimes say that Brussels fears direct involvement of ordinary people, arguing that if the elites were confident of their project, then they would be happy to seek popular approval via referenda.

There are various strands of debate in respect of solutions to these problems. Some suggest returning some Brussels competencies to the member state level; the argument claims that reducing the power of Brussels will automatically strengthen the power of member states and thus be more democratic. Some suggest that the European Parliament's powers to scrutinize the European Union law should be strengthened; thus, if the parliament serving all Europeans is strengthened then the system will be more democratic. Some suggest strengthening the machineries governing the euro-currency, thus one important part of the wider Union would become subject to greater scrutiny. Yet others are more pessimistic, arguing that the Union is unreformable and it would take a major crisis to provoke significant change.

The Issue of Regional Parties

Various geographically concentrated, perhaps linguistically distinctive groups in Europe lay claim to regional identities and on that basis to distinctive treatment from local state authorities or Brussels; the issue can be read as a mix of grass-roots upwards pressure (the claims of people living in an area) plus top-down invitation (thus the European Union acknowledges regions and speaks of subsidiarity whereby decisions are taken at the lowest possible level). The upshot is that within Europe, there are a number of political movements that claim to represent distinctive peoples lodged geographically within existing nation states.

²³ European Union parliamentary electoral systems are surveyed in Tim Bale, *European Politics: A Comparative Introduction* (London: MacMillan International Higher Education, 2005).

²⁴ J. Habermas, *The Crisis of the European Union: A Response* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012); J. Habermas, *Europe: The Faltering Project* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012).

²⁵ W. Case, *Politics in Southeast Asia: Democracy or Less* (London: Routledge, 2002).

²⁶ W. Streek, *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2014).

This issue opens up a number of general issues to consider: the nature of regions, the nature of regional parties and the spread of responses available to state authorities. Regions are not simple givens and there is no a priori reason to expect conflict between state authorities and assorted regionally based minorities.

Cast in general terms, regional political parties typically call attention to a definite group of people whom they argue should be understood to be a self-conscious group. The claim made is that the group identified share common characteristics (geography or history or economy or society or culture) and should therefore be treated by wider political communities as a coherent unit, that is, polity. This claim enables regional parties to argue that the demands of democratic legitimacy require the recognition of their putative coherent polity. It should have its own parliament. This stance can point to some species of regional autonomy or federalism or outright secession.

There are many examples of regional parties in Europe; for example:

- In Britain, the Scottish National Party;
- In Italy, the Northern League;
- In Germany, the claims to distinctive status of Bavaria, thus CSU;
- In Belgium, multiple parties for Flemish and French speakers;
- In Spain, parties affirming Basque Nationalism or Catalan Nationalism.

Each of these parties has its own history and set of goals. The elite of the relevant nation state have to decide how best to deal with them. Such decisions are likely to be governed by the familiar political trio of principle (what ought to be done), pragmatism (what could be done) and opportunism (what advantages might be secured) and familiar answers range from trying to block change through varieties of repression or devolution or federalism through to resisting secession (hence the disintegration of former Yugoslavia) or contrariwise agreeing secession (thus, the Velvet Divorce of Czechs and Slovaks).

National Identity versus European Identity

Ordinarily, political-cultural identity will be unpacked as membership of a nation; the business of identity has arisen as power has been relocated to those wider trans-state networks that make up the global system. In recent years, this wider system has appeared ever more remote, so too Brussels and one result has been a renewed appreciation of the centrality of membership of a nation state.²⁷

²⁷ On this: B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983); Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983); P. W. Preston, *Citizens and Nations in a Global Era* (London: Sage, 1997).

Problems of self-understanding work differently when the issue of the European Union is mentioned. It is not clear what it is to be ‘European’. It is not clear that being ‘European’ is same as being ‘citizen of European Union’. It is also not clear that the Brussels apparatus can invent an European Union-centered notion of being European and thereafter disseminate it amongst the 500 million citizens (a top-down empire-style project, but where empires could and did deploy violence to suppress dissenters, the European Union cannot). Commentators might look to slow the creation of an idea of being European; Jurgen Habermas²⁸ calls for a minimal juridical notion, a ‘constitution patriotism’, that is, a commitment to the rule of law and democracy, where these could be filled up with detail depending on the social location of the individual.

The Union has now been around in its various guises since the ECSC 1951: it has advanced towards ‘ever greater union’; it has also drawn in further members; and it is a success. The next step is anyone’s guess, but one clue might be the complicated set of issues surrounding the euro, for while some political problems can be delayed or ignored, financial crises cannot be.

Democracy: Philosophy, Institutions and Historical Practice

The early decades of the twenty-first century turned out to be politically unstable. There were questions about mainland member states with shifting political patterns in Central Europe, tagged by commentators as ‘populism’ and/or ‘authoritarianism’. There were problems confronting the machineries of the European Union, where post-2008 there were a sequence of problems involving German and French banks, in particular their exposure in Greece, relations with Russia, in particular around conflicts in Ukraine and the issue of migration, where Chancellor Merkel’s 2015 invitation caused widespread problems.²⁹ In Britain a long-mooted referendum in June 2016 was followed by Brexit in January 2020. In addition, from around the same time, Covid-19 added to the anxieties of populations and the burdens of states.

Three thoughts going forwards:

1. Democracy: after Wittgenstein, language games underpin forms of life and so substantively democracy is available in multiple forms;
2. Democracy: after Bauman, democracy is an ever-receding active utopia;

²⁸ Habermas (2012).

²⁹ Looking, after 2021, to the post-Merkel era, there are many criticisms of Chancellor Merkel: J.W. Muller, “‘Prussian Disneyland’,” in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 43, No.17 (September, 2021); W. Streek, “‘Plus Ca Change’” in *New Left Review*, No. 131 (September/October 2021).

3. Democracy: after Moore, democracy is a historical practice;

It is only when these lines of argument are invoked that useful judgments can be made about the democratic condition of this or that particular polity.