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# LIBERAL DEMOCRACY'S FADING ALLURE

*Marc F. Plattner*

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I did not have the privilege of knowing Ralf Dahrendorf other than through some correspondence with him in 2003 when he contributed an article to the *Journal of Democracy*. But I have known several people who were close to him—not least my good friend Professor João Carlos Espada, the organizer of this conference, who included an eloquent short chapter on Dahrendorf in his new book *The Anglo-American Tradition of Liberty*.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, I also am familiar with Dahrendorf through his writings, especially his wonderful little book *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe*, which appeared in 1990 shortly after communism fell in Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>2</sup> This wise appraisal of the situation facing the former communist countries in the year following the revolutions of 1989 stands up remarkably well more than a quarter-century later. Although Dahrendorf (as his book's title suggests) was quite aware of following in some respects the model of Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, he differed from Burke in being clearly on the side of the revolutionaries, and had no sympathy for the *nomenklatura* and *aparatchiki* of the old totalitarian regime.

As a true liberal democrat, Dahrendorf was naturally delighted by the downfall of communism and the initial stages of its replacement by democracy. But his tone and his analysis are cautious rather than triumphalist. Not only does he grasp the magnitude of the immediate challenges facing the new democracies; he also offers some prescient words

on the possible dangers in former communist countries of a tyranny of the right, one that “appeals to reactionary sentiments and dreams of the purity of a bygone age rather than Utopian visions of a better future.”<sup>3</sup>

But do the events of 1989 truly merit being called a revolution? On this point Dahrendorf is of two minds—and rightly so. For the remarkable transformation wrought by these events in the concrete political world was not accompanied by a comparable revolution in thought. He approvingly cites the judgment of French historian François Furet: “With all the fuss and noise, not a single new idea has come out of Eastern Europe in 1989.”<sup>4</sup> And for good measure, Dahrendorf recounts the statement of his British colleague Timothy Garton Ash: “The ideas whose time has come are old, familiar, well-tested ones. (It is the new ideas whose time has passed.)”<sup>5</sup> This was one of the distinctive features of the revolutions of 1989—and indeed of the “third wave” of democracy as a whole. In the realm of ideas it brought not a discovery of new truths but a recovery of old ones. The old principles and practices of liberal democracy had been losing their global appeal, an erosion that reached a low point in the 1970s, but the democratic transitions of the third wave gave them a new lease on life.

Looking at the global situation today, a quarter-century later, we see a vastly different picture. Those same principles and practices, which by the 1990s seemed to have fully regained their former attraction and to have spread to a much wider range of countries than ever before, now seem again to be losing their luster. Today liberal democracy is clearly on the defensive. Authoritarian regimes of various stripes are showing a new boldness, and they appear to be growing stronger as the confidence and vigor of the democracies wane.

A scant two years ago, the view that democracy was in decline was still sharply contested. Those who disputed this view were able to point out that the number of democratic regimes in the world had hardly receded from its high point in the early 2000s, and that there had still not been anything like the reverse waves that Samuel P. Huntington had discerned after previous periods of democratic expansion.<sup>6</sup> Today the overall number of democracies has fallen only slightly further, but the signs that the world is in what Larry Diamond has called a democratic recession are unmistakable.<sup>7</sup> Liberal democracy is being eroded in a number of key countries. The failure of democracy to take root in Russia is already an old and depressingly familiar story. More recently we have witnessed the erosion of liberalism even in EU members Hungary and Poland, as well as its demise in Turkey. But the most worrisome development of all has been the rise of populist parties and candidates in the long-established democracies of the West.

Today the growing vulnerability of liberal democracy is recognized not only by scholars, but by political leaders and commentators around the world. These days it seems as if a week does not go by without the publi-

cation of a new essay, newspaper column, or book calling attention to the perilous state of democracy and the growing fragility of the liberal international order that since 1945 has accompanied democracy and helped to sustain it. The real question now is no longer *whether* democracy is at risk but *why* the condition of democracy has become so troubled.

Several standard explanations are on offer, ranging from slowing economic growth and rising economic inequality, to political polarization and gridlock, to globalization, to moral and cultural decadence. There is probably some element of truth in most of these explanations, but they seem a bit like “rounding up the usual suspects.” For the most part, they refer to problems that have long been present and thus can hardly account for the surprising speed with which democratic decline has become a central storyline of present-day politics. Moreover, while these explanations often seem to give a plausible account of what is troubling the advanced democracies of the West, they are much less compelling when applied to the newer democracies in other parts of the world. And yet the latter, for the most part, seem to be suffering many of the same ills as their older brethren, and often in more acute form.

## Harbingers of Trouble

During the year before Britain voted for Brexit and the United States voted for Donald Trump—the two events that have crystallized worries about the health of democracy in the West—a series of elections elsewhere foreshadowed the dangers ahead. As the editor of a journal that tracks the fortunes of democracy around the world, I was especially struck by the election results in Poland, the Philippines, and Peru, three countries that are close alphabetically but very far apart geographically. All were democratic success stories of the third wave, and all three also had been faring quite well in terms of economic growth. Yet each of these countries saw populist candidates surging at the polls.

In October 2015, Poland, the poster child of democratic transitions from communism and one of the best-performing economies in Europe, gave a parliamentary majority to the illiberal Law and Justice Party (PiS) of Jarosław Kaczyński. Once in power, the new government quickly took controversial and arguably unconstitutional steps to limit the independence of the judiciary, prompting a warning from the European Commission that urged Poland to correct a “systemic threat to the rule of law.”

In April 2016 in Peru, voters handed a landslide congressional victory to Popular Force, the party of populist former dictator Alberto Fujimori, who is serving a 25-year prison term for severe human-rights violations committed during his presidency. The party’s 2016 presidential candidate, the former leader’s daughter Keiko Fujimori, won a very substantial plurality in the April first round—almost 40 percent, nearly

twice the vote share of second-place finisher Pedro Pablo Kuczynski. Yet this still left her well shy of a majority, and she was forced to face Kuczynski in a June runoff. She lost to him by less than a single percentage point, but her party's legislative majority means that her influence on Peru's political direction is considerable.

In May, while Fujimori was squaring off against Kuczynski in Peru, populist Rodrigo Duterte won election to a six-year term as president of the Philippines. The mayor of Davao City on the large far-southern island of Mindanao, Duterte easily outdistanced a field of four other candidates. He has since become notorious around the world for his vulgar language and for his administration's extrajudicial killings of drug dealers; less widely known perhaps is that, soon after taking office, he arranged to give former dictator Ferdinand Marcos an honored reburial in Manila's Cemetery of Heroes.

In short, a trio of leading and apparently successful third wave democracies—including both the Philippines, the home of People Power, and Poland, the birthplace of Solidarity—saw their citizens cast votes in large numbers for candidates whose commitment to liberal democracy was highly questionable. These events convinced me that the vulnerability of liberal democracy was much greater than I had thought, but I still was not prepared for the suddenness and the magnitude of the populist surge that soon was to hit the West itself.

It is not easy to identify direct linkages between the troubles afflicting the newer democracies of the third wave and those that have now surfaced in long-established Western democracies. Yet it can hardly be a simple coincidence that disaffection with liberal democracy and support for populists are growing simultaneously in both sets of countries. So it would seem that some common causes must be at work. To my mind, this weakens the force of any explanation of democratic decline, such as the direct impact of the 2008 financial crisis or the damage done to Western industrial workers by globalization, that does not also apply to developments outside the West.

### **The Authoritarian Temptation**

One factor that appears to be fueling the malaise of democracy in both the West and “the rest” is what has been called “resurgent authoritarianism.”<sup>8</sup> This term refers to the growing international assertiveness of leading authoritarian regimes such as those in China, Russia, and Iran, and the extraordinary determination and lavish resources that they have been devoting to building up not only their military strength but especially their “soft power.” Although these regimes differ widely from one another and have many conflicting interests, it is striking how often they collaborate in working toward their shared goal of weakening democracy in the world.

Does this mean that the authoritarians are driven by the goal of toppling democratic regimes as quickly as possible? In other words, are they engaged in a campaign of “authoritarianism promotion” that mimics the way in which some observers mischaracterize democracy promotion by the West? The answer is no. But the authoritarians do see democracy and its spread as forming the biggest threat to their own power, and therefore have undertaken a long-term effort to sow doubt and confusion among the citizens of the democracies and to sully the image of democracy around the world. A year ago, even this contention seemed unduly alarmist to many, but such skepticism now has largely evaporated in the face of growing evidence that Russia has been covertly trying to influence democratic elections in Europe and the United States.

The vigor of the leading authoritarian regimes has fostered the sense that liberal democracy is not the only form of government suitable for a strong and modern country. The amazing economic progress that China has achieved has been especially important in this regard. To be sure, talk of other countries choosing to follow the “China model” is exaggerated, at least insofar as this is taken to mean that they are trying to copy Chinese institutions or that they would succeed in doing so if they tried. Yet in a looser sense, China does provide a powerful example of a path that has enabled rapid economic growth without introducing democratic government or liberal freedoms. Needless to say, this is a combination that can be very appealing to political leaders in developing countries, as it promises that they can achieve the economic growth that their people seek without having to observe democratic norms.

Nor is it only developing-country leaders who may find it hard to resist the authoritarian temptation. One of the most telling signs that liberal democracy was heading for trouble was the notorious July 2014 speech praising the concept of an “illiberal state” delivered by Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán,<sup>9</sup> who had once been a leading figure in his country’s transition to democracy. That the head of government of an EU member state would so openly denigrate liberalism—effectively dismissing it as a vital component of democracy—was a sign that liberal democracy’s ideological appeal was beginning to fade. And the relatively muted reaction to the speech on the part of Orbán’s fellow European leaders suggested that defending liberal democracy was not a high priority for them.

Orbán began his July 2014 speech by asserting that the transition away from communism should no longer be considered the primary “point of reference” in thinking about his country’s future. For, he claimed, a new transformation had occurred, one of comparable magnitude to the three previous “global regime changes” brought about by the ends of World War I, World War II, and the Cold War, respectively. The “starting point” of this new period, said Orbán, had been “the great

redistribution of global financial, economic, commercial, political and military power that became obvious in 2008.”

In support of his claim that such an epochal shift had occurred, he cited various recent criticisms of Western democracy offered by Western (and especially U.S.) political leaders and analysts, among which he includes several comments that can be seen as foretastes of the populist drift in U.S. and European politics. Orbán then went on to note that globalization, along with the need that it imposes upon countries to be competitive in the world economy, has become a preoccupation of economists. But he added that the most important competition under post-2008 conditions is not economic but political:

The determinative moment in today’s world can perhaps be described by saying that there is a race underway to find the method of community organisation, the state, which is most capable of making a nation and a community internationally competitive. This . . . is the explanation for the fact that the most popular topic in thinking today is trying to understand how systems that are not Western, not liberal, not liberal democracies and perhaps not even democracies, can nevertheless make their nations successful. The stars of the international analysts today are Singapore, China, India, Russia and Turkey.

Orbán claimed that the policies of his own government in Hungary since his Fidesz party’s return to power in 2010 were guided by the search for “the form of community organisation, the new Hungarian state, which is capable of making our community competitive in the great global race for decades to come.” And to accomplish this, he asserted, it is necessary to have the courage to make a statement “categorized as blasphemy by the liberal world”—namely, that “a democracy does not necessarily have to be liberal. Just because a state is not liberal, it can still be a democracy. And in fact . . . societies that are built on the state organisation principle of liberal democracy will probably be incapable of maintaining their global competitiveness.”

## **The Fallout of the Financial Crisis**

There is no question that Orbán was consciously seeking to break with the Western heritage of liberalism (or, as he put it in another passage, “with the dogmas and ideologies that have been adopted by the West”). This helps to explain why, in seeking potential models for Hungary to emulate, he cited a string of countries that were non-Western as well as nonliberal (although one could certainly dispute whether India deserves to be placed in the latter category). Though Orbán elsewhere in his speech tried to fill in a few domestic features of the illiberal democracy that he favored, it is clear that the question of international competitiveness was his primary concern. He had concluded, in short, that the West had fallen behind fast-growing non-Western powers whose

economic progress—so he alleged—was a product of their nonliberal character.

I would not dispute that the 2008 financial crisis was indeed widely and reasonably interpreted as a setback for the power and influence of the West. Not only were the economies of the advanced democracies severely damaged by the crisis, but it occurred at a time when the economies of many developing countries were booming and were accounting for an ever larger share of global GDP. What is more, it was widely expected that the economic preponderance of Europe, the United States, and Japan would continue to erode, in large part due to powerful demographic trends such as persistently low fertility rates. The shrinking populations of Europe and Japan, in particular, mean that these areas are almost certain to produce and to consume a diminishing proportion of global wealth.

The felt need for a global response to the 2008 crisis, combined with the growing economic weight of countries outside the West, precipitated a change in the international economic architecture. The leading Western democracies, which previously had held annual consultations on the global economy in the format of the Group of Seven (the G-7, later briefly expanded to the G-8 by the addition of Russia), decided to empower a larger group of nations in the form of the G-20 to address the crisis. At a stroke, the Western democracies, who had previously reserved seats at the economic high table only for themselves, were reduced to composing less than half the membership of the G-20.

The enhancing of the G-20 at the expense of the G-7 reflected the changing balance of power not only in the world economy but also in world politics. It did not necessarily imply, however, a wholesale decline in the influence of democracies, since at that time most of the additional countries that belonged to the G-20 were themselves democratic, including Argentina, Brazil, India, Indonesia, Mexico, South Africa, South Korea, and arguably Turkey; among G-20 members only China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia were plainly undemocratic.

The infusion of newer democracies into the ranks of major world economic powers might have seemed a promising development for the future of liberal democracy. But those who had such hopes—and I must admit that I was among them—have seen them largely disappointed. This is in part because many of these countries have recently suffered economic downturns, rising sectarianism, or political scandals and crises. Yet it is also true that they have tended not to view the defense of liberal democracy as a significant component of their foreign policies. A lingering hostility to the West stemming from the wounds of colonialism and from the Third Worldism of the Cold War era often seems to outweigh the common interests that these countries share with the longer-established democracies. As a result, even when the newer democracies remain strongly committed to liberal



democracy at home, they often cannot be counted upon to oppose authoritarianism abroad.

### **Liberal Democracy and the West**

Here it is necessary to say a word about the larger and very complex question of the relationship between liberal democracy and the West. Liberal democracy is based on universal principles—as Ronald Reagan stated in his 1982 Westminster speech to the British Parliament, “freedom is not the sole prerogative of a lucky few, but the inalienable and universal right of all human beings.”<sup>10</sup> It is no less true, however, that liberal democracy first came into being in the West and that the West remains its bastion. Although some would contend that the idea of the West is losing its hold and its relevance, I join with those who believe that it retains its force. The defense of the West is a cause that can attract and unite both Europeans and North Americans, for many of whom defending the West and defending liberal democracy are one and the same struggle.

But I also see some drawbacks in simply identifying the cause of liberal democracy with that of the West. First, it complicates the situation of democrats from countries outside the West, especially those living in places that experienced colonial rule by Western powers. There, liberal democracy’s historic ties to the West can provoke opposition rather than support. To be sure, in virtually all such countries there are people who acknowledge the universality of liberal-democratic principles. Even under repressive authoritarian regimes, there are brave souls who will risk their lives in the struggle to implant these principles in their own homelands. Yet for most citizens and political leaders in newer democracies, the fact that these principles may not have solid foundations in their own national history makes the task of defending them at home more difficult. Not all peoples are so fortunate as to have in their past a “tradition of liberty under law.”

Second, it must be acknowledged that the precise meaning of the West is not easy to define. It is a compound idea that embraces a number of strands and tensions—between Athens and Jerusalem, between Christianity and secularism, and between Europe and the United States, to mention only a few. As such, it might be called a cosmopolitan concept, one that stretches beyond the narrower and more specific attachments that animate the life of political communities and that people are willing to fight and die for. So ultimately I do not think that the idea of the West is capable of substituting for attachments closer to home.

It is the attenuation of these attachments, or the difficulty of accommodating them within the framework of universal liberal principles, that seems to me to be at the core of the contemporary malaise of liberal democracy. This certainly is the thrust of the complaints voiced by dis-

satisfied citizens in the West who find their own political institutions to be too cosmopolitan, too remote, and too out of touch with the concerns and sentiments of voters. For the countries of the European Union, of

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course, this problem has an added dimension, as the Brussels institutions that govern so many areas of political life are separated from the national contexts in which most Europeans are still firmly rooted. Yet similar concerns seem to have animated many U.S. voters in 2016, which strongly suggests that the tendency to regard democratic institutions as too distant from popular sentiments is not peculiar to the EU.

Of course, one can always blame the people for their unworthy sentiments and their poor electoral choices. I certainly do not think they should simply be let off the hook. Where else, for example, should one place the blame for the sky-high support that President Duterte still holds in Philippine opinion polls despite some of his outrageously illiberal actions? Liberal democracy is able to rely upon the separation of powers and other constitutional mechanisms to restrain the translation of temporary and potentially destructive popular whims into political action. Yet there is no denying that liberal democracy ultimately depends on the will of the majority. If voters keep making poor electoral choices or unreasonable demands on their governments, especially ones that threaten to erode the liberal aspects of the regime, then liberal democracy cannot endure.

Liberal democracy will regain its former health only if voters are convinced not only of its intrinsic merits but also of its superiority to all the possible alternatives. I realize, of course, that today this is easier said than done. After the end of the Cold War, little effort was required to make the case for liberal democracy. Following the sudden death of Soviet communism, the international landscape appeared to contain no serious ideological challengers and no plausible competitors for military or economic supremacy. But the so-called unipolar moment proved to be surprisingly fleeting. It is now over. The events of the past two or three years have given the democracies a wake-up call. Their leaders and their citizens can no longer claim to be unaware of the dangers facing them, and there are some signs that they are beginning to respond to the challenge. In past eras of crisis, when their peoples realized that freedom was under threat, liberal democracies often showed their greatest strength. There is reason to hope that they can do so again.

## NOTES

1. João Carlos Espada, *The Anglo-American Tradition of Liberty: A View from Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2016). See also James H. Nichols Jr.'s review, "Two Traditions of Liberty," *Journal of Democracy* 28 (January 2017): 172–75.
2. Ralf Dahrendorf, *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe: In a Letter Intended To Have Been Sent to a Gentleman in Warsaw* (New York: Times Books, 1990).
3. Dahrendorf, *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe*, 112.
4. Quoted in Dahrendorf, *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe*, 27.
5. Dahrendorf, *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe*, 27–28.
6. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991). See also Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, "The Myth of the Democratic Recession," *Journal of Democracy* 26 (January 2015): 45–58.
7. Larry Diamond, "Facing Up to the Democratic Recession," *Journal of Democracy* 26 (January 2015): 141–55.
8. Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, and Christopher Walker, eds., *Authoritarianism Goes Global: The Challenge to Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016).
9. The Hungarian government's official English version of this speech, from which all quotations are taken, may be found at [www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp](http://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp).
10. Ronald Reagan, "Address to Members of the British Parliament," 8 June 1982, <https://reaganlibrary.archives.gov/archives/speeches/1982/60882a.htm>.