

THE SOLUTION TO THE
ILLS OF DEMOCRACY IS
MORE DEMOCRACY

ROBERTO FREGA

CNRS (French National Center for Scientific Research)



Volume 5 · Number 2 · 2021 · Pages 71 - 80

In the last decades there has been much talk about the crisis of liberal democracy in almost all quarters of political theory and political science, in Europe as well as in the United States. The idea that the greatest threat contemporary societies are facing is the crisis of liberal democracy is at the same time accurate and misguided. Accurate, since some of the central tenets of the liberal conception of democracy are effectively under siege in the most advanced democracies of the world. The dismantling of constitutional protections in Poland and in Hungary, and the steady rise of authoritarian regimes across the world raise more than legitimate worries. But this diagnosis is also somehow misguided because it tacitly reduces the democratic project to its later, partial, liberal variant.

Liberal democracy is not the alpha and omega of democracy, but merely a version among others. 20th century's political theory had a more fine-grained understanding of the rich variety of available models of democracy. Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, for example, distinguished between an Anglo-American, a Continental,

and a Scandinavian model of democracy. In their path-breaking work on political cultures, they sought for the different responses to totalitarianism in diverse sets of social and cultural attitudes and values. In their wake, Arend Lijphart coined the term 'consociational democracy' to describe the unique features of a model of democracy that has been key to the social and political development of post-WWII Europe. The large debate between the liberal and the socialist variant of democracy that has sparked till the fall of the Socialist block in the late '80s reminds us that we have unfortunately lost the sense that democracy means more than the defense of individual rights against the arbitrary interference of the State in people's lives.

What these and similar approaches have in common, is the idea that democracy does not denote merely a set of formal political institutions – the rule of law, constitutional guarantees, separation of powers, universal suffrage, etc. – but more broadly a full-blown social system. The

French philosopher Claude Lefort considered democracy to denote the 'form of society' that stemmed out of the French and American Revolutions and that set up a

new type of form of life based on the rejection of privilege. Before him, Alexis de Tocqueville dubbed the democratic society “the society of equals”, to underline the revolutionary advent of a society in which social status did not provide exclusive rights. And John Dewey, of course, has extensively argued that democracy denotes first and foremost a way of life. That is, a set of values, practices, institutions that permeates all quarters of social life, from the family to the workplace. According to this ‘wide view of democracy’, democratic political institutions merely complete such a democratic order, which mostly consists of social habits, routines, shared values, patterns of interaction.

The idea of democracy that authors such as Dewey and Lefort have in mind cannot be reduced to what today we mean by ‘liberal democracy’, for at least two reasons. The first is that today’s debates on democracy are almost exclusively concerned with the fate of formal political institutions. Democracy is said to be in crisis when formal political institutions are under siege, such as in Poland or in Hungary. Or when populist parties seize power and challenge liberal and cosmopolitan values. We seem to have

almost forgotten that democracy is equally under siege when workplaces, educational institutions, or families are dominated by authoritarian patterns of interaction. The second is that the democratic project as it unfolded from the twin French and American revolutions did not merely install 'freedom' as the overarching modern political value. The French revolutionaries saw this in clearest when they set the three values of freedom, equality, and fraternity at the heart of the revolutionary process.

The democratic societies born out of these revolutions are based on a fragile combination of these three values. To that extent, they are no more 'liberal' than 'egalitarian'. During the 20th century, the ideological battle between socialism and capitalism kept this intuition alive in the conceptual battle between liberal and socialist conceptions of democracy. Yet even this view is insufficient, since it conveys the false idea that a democratic society can be built privileging the one to the detriment of the other. Nor the attempt done by philosophers such as Etienne Balibar to synthesize these views into a unified account of democracy as being based on the value of equaliberty is

sufficient to recapture the unique meaning of the democratic project.

The fall of the socialist block has proven beyond doubt that there cannot be democracy without freedom. But the more recent crisis of liberal democracy tells us that the liberal alternative is equally incomplete: there cannot be democracy without equality *and* solidarity.

Renewing the democratic project requires that we move beyond the idea of liberal democracy. Liberalism can be the appropriate foundation of a modern society only to the extent that, as once again Dewey noted, it is understood under the very radical view of a *social* liberalism. Liberalism thus understood overcomes the dualism of liberalism and socialism, and to an extent the concept becomes so stretched to lose its original meaning. Thinkers such as Piero Gobetti and Carlo Rosselli clearly understood this, and concluded that such a view could be called either liberal socialism or social liberalism.

With Dewey, Tocqueville, and Lefort, we may then simply want to call it 'democracy'. Democracy as the name of the project that defines Western modern societies,

thrives only when the social order makes adequate room for individual freedom, social equality, and solidarity.

From this perspective, what is in crisis today is not *liberal* democracy, but democracy overall. Compared to any past era, there has never been so much individual freedom as we experience it today. Even though equality has been diminishing almost everywhere, what seems to be even more lacking, is an appropriate form of solidarity, if by solidarity we mean this unique form of social cooperation that is appropriate among free and equal individuals. It is the glue that keep people together once pre-modern forms of social bond are rejected.

For a society to be democratic, individuals ought to be free, equal in terms of civil, political, and social rights, and capable and willing of interacting in ways that respect and promote these values.

Cultural and Economic Democracy

Dewey has been at the origin of a school of political thought later called the cultural theory of politics, which clearly understood that a democratic society thrives only when democratic political institutions are backed by a solid set of cultural values and social practices. That is, when it builds on a wider social ontology of democracy. The social ontology of democracy defines those individual habits, shared patterns of interaction, and forms of organization through which individuals can cooperate as free and equal in all walks of life. It is only when society is built on these solid ontological foundations that democracy is healthy and thriving. So, the obvious question is: how then to promote such a democratic culture?

The solution pragmatists foresaw was to invest in social institutions as places where to train and develop democratic habits. Yet, contrary to J. S. Mill, democratic workplaces and democratic schools have not to be seen merely as 'schools of democracy'. Their aim is not instrumental: working in a democratic workplace, learning in a democratic school is certainly a means to develop

democratic habits that will hopefully spill-over into the political realm. But more than that, living in democratic environments is an end in itself: if democracy is the only appropriate form of cooperation among free and equal individuals, then I can be free and equal only if interactions with others respect these values in any walk of life.

Modern individuals can fully realize their identity only to the extent that they make the experience of their freedom and equality any time they encounter other individuals: in their family, at school, in the workplace, in public spaces. To that extent, the solution to the ills of democracy is today, as it has always been, more democracy. More democracy not in the sense of more voting opportunities, but in the sense of more social spaces organized democratically.

Today the priority is by all means the workplace: workplaces are organized despotically everywhere. An authoritarian culture of management dominates. Universities and schools are similarly organized in undemocratic ways: in many countries, professors have a limited say in the election of their governing bodies, and the

administrative and technical staff is almost everywhere denied decision-making rights. As citizens of their organizations, they are passive subjects with limited individual autonomy in organizing their jobs, and almost nonexistent collective autonomy in governing their places.

To renew the democratic project, we should make the democratization of work our first priority. Democratizing work according to the wide view of democracy sketched in this paper does not merely mean endowing employees with decision-making rights on the electoral model of political democracy. It means, first and foremost, to transform authority structures, and to promote more democratic forms of management. It means embedding social and environmental values in companies' charts so as to subordinate profit to higher values. It means opening firms and other organizations to the scrutiny of the public eye, and to the judgment of external stakeholders whose well-being is affected by firms' operations.