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The Paradoxical Perception of Contemporary Democracy, and the Question of its Future

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Abstract

This article explores the perception of democracy today, at the national and international levels. This perception is rather paradoxical. On the one hand, democracy is celebrated. As such it functions as a benchmark of political legitimacy. On the other hand, it is criticized. The article provides explanations for this state of affairs. Among the explanations put forward in order to account for the criticisms of democracy the article stresses the deepening of economic inequalities and a sense of social alienation that has been growing in recent years among the people that globalization and its associated policies are affecting negatively. For the way forward the article offers suggestions in order to improve the reputation and reality of democracy. In this regard it argues that the possibility to improve democracy, both at the national and international levels, is to a large extent based on making it more inclusive (especially economically speaking) and reflective.

Policy Implications

- It is both at the domestic and international levels that measures have to be taken in order to address and hopefully mitigate the problems democracy, especially in the West, is encountering.
- At the domestic level, in the West, addressing the crisis of political representation is imperative. New mechanisms have to be found to make the participation and representation of people more vibrant and meaningful. This calls for revisiting the culture of political parties and changing the attitude of political elites.
- Again at the domestic level in the West, there is the need to put in place economic policies that could stop the growing inequalities between rich and poor.
- At the international level, the structure of the global political economy has to be rethought. Globalization is now viewed in the West as creating much economic disparities. It has also encouraged industrial delocalization. This has to be addressed.

The paradoxical perception of democracy

The current perception of democracy is quite paradoxical: on the one hand, as a normative paradigm, it continues to be by and large celebrated; on the other hand, the way democracy functions, or does not function has become heavily criticized, to the point that the idea of democracy has itself become contested.

Democratic paradigm celebrated

The celebration of democracy,¹ defined at the most basic level as a type of governmental regime and organization of society where the power of the executive is constrained, citizens participate in the exercise of power and have their rights guaranteed,² is on display both at the national and international levels.

At the national level, democracy serves as a benchmark of legitimacy. It remains the norm or 'gold standard' against which other types of regimes tend to be evaluated and ranked. Democracy is the norm in countries and regions of the world where it has emerged, and flourished, as the modern political and legal culture, essentially in the Western

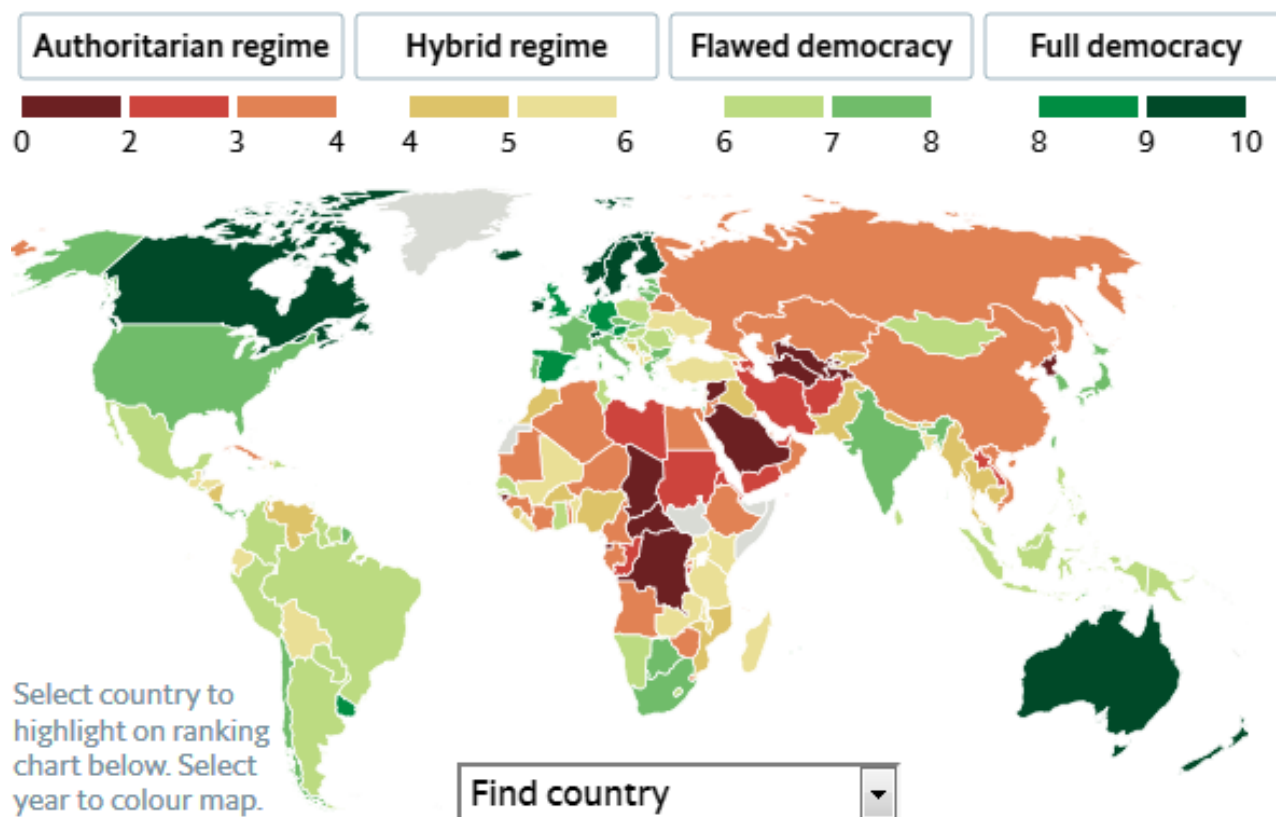
world. But it is also a goal to be achieved in many other parts of the world where democracy continues to inspire people. Hence the fact, for instance, that when former colonies became independent in the aftermath of World War II, embracing democracy, at least formally, was for many of them a rather natural move.³

This is not to say that the whole world now lives under democratic rule and that all democratic regimes are perfect. But, as Figure 1 indicates for the year 2016,⁴ a significant number of countries are, to varying degrees, presently governed by regimes labeled as democratic.

At the international level, democracy has also a strong appeal. In the contemporary era, most of the normative and institutional recommendations put forward to make the world better managed and altogether better refer, directly or indirectly, to democratic modes of global governance and ask for more democratic modes of global governance. In this regard, even the regimes that domestically are not democratic call for more democracy at the international level, which entails, among other things, better levels of representation and participation in international institutions and their decision-making processes. An example of this phenomenon is China. As a result, in efforts to reform international organizations,

Figure 1. Democracy around the world

167 countries scored on a scale of 0 to 10 based on 60 indicators



particularly the United Nations and its institutions, as well as the world system of global governance, most stake-holders, whoever they are, are prone to ask for stronger democratic mechanisms. At least from the point of view of the rhetoric put forward by member-states, including the regimes rejecting (Western) democratic models at home, more democratic forms of global governance seem to be a basic requirement, a basic condition for a more principled and better managed international system. Against this background, for some liberal thinkers, not surprisingly, democratic governance is viewed as the best way to address and resolve competitive interests among actors and to ensure cooperation internationally (Held, 1995).

Democratic reality under stress

Yet, today's reality of democracy is probably criticized as much as democracy as a paradigm is celebrated. In fact, the concrete economic, social, and political challenges a number of Western democracies have been facing in the past several years, and what seems to be the successes of illiberal regimes, China to begin with, are doing much to undermine the credibility and attractiveness of democratic reality. In this perspective, democracy appears increasingly disconnected from its foundational values.

At the national level, the democratic narrative tells a happy story in many countries, such as in established democracies in Nordic countries, Switzerland or Canada, or in those young democracies functioning relatively well and remaining somewhat optimistic for the way forward (Taiwan, in spite of its ambiguous international status, its tense relationship with China and its increasing diplomatic isolation,⁵ could be seen as one of them).

At the same time, in the regions of the world that are historically home to democracy (Western Europe and the United States), democracy in practice has been the subject of harsh criticisms. In European countries like France, the United Kingdom, Spain, and Italy, discredited policies seen as ineffective and contrary to the interests of the average citizen and the national political establishment that endorses them are a case in point. In addition, the European Union, meant to bring countries together and at one point viewed as part of a postnational evolution, (Habermas, 2001) is heavily criticized for its democratic deficit. People have come to think that not only they do not have a say in European policies, but national policies themselves have become out of their reach due to the growing influence of the European Union on the destiny of European countries. In the United States, the critiques addressed to the reality of democratic politics are no less severe. For instance, Congress

is perceived as serving special interests⁶ more than the principles and demands of the will of the people. The rise of populism in recent years both in Europe and the United States is illustration of this state of affairs. As such, while populism may further weaken democracy, more than anything else it is the product and the result of the failures of the democratic system. This is the case in Europe: in Southern Europe (Greece, Cyprus) and Central Europe (Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia for instance) but also in Western Europe (Germany, France, Spain, Italy, and the UK) as well as in Scandinavian countries, most notably Finland and Sweden. And it is the case in the United States with the election of Donald Trump in November 2016 as President. Arguably in none of these countries could populism have risen to the extent it has if the political system, and perhaps society as a whole, had not been in a state of severe crisis.

At the international level, the reality of democracy is also under a cloud of suspicion. To start with, the international system as it has been established under the influence of the big Western powers has never been as democratic, benign, and benevolent as its proponents want us to believe. Recognizing its positives and benefits should not lead us to overlook its negatives. In this regard, the international projection of power of democratic countries, especially the most powerful among them, is often seen by less powerful countries as self-centered. To this day, their predatory track record (such as colonialism and imperialism) has not been forgotten and continues to create much resentment. The allure of regimes like Russia and particularly now China have in the developing world is not only the result of the interest of developing countries in seeking alternatives to relations with Western developed countries. It also has its roots in a lack of real trust in powerful Western nations. The fact that, in the post-Cold War era, as much as before, when they have to choose between their national interest and international human rights considerations (human rights as one of the defining features of democratic values), powerful democratic Western nations rarely fail to choose the former over the later and even use at times human rights considerations to further their interest and impose their views,⁷ only reinforces mistrust (Coicaud, 2007). Moreover, the role of powerful democratic countries in promoting democracy (ideas and institutions) in the system of global governance is problematic. Be it in the context of international law or of international organizations, which continues to be a Western construct, this promotion tends to be at times part of a one-sided and rather hypocritical agenda, motivated more by self-interest than by any genuine interest in democratic demands. At worst, this conduct of Western democratic powers is the case when international law and international organizations constitute straightforward tools of Western democratic powers' interests. At best, this conduct is the case when the progressive/democratic aspects of international law and international organizations do not stop being the captives of their conservative framework, recognizing the rights of the powerless only on the basis of the terms and to the advantages of the powerful (democratic countries).⁸

Explaining the paradoxical perception

This paradoxical perception of democracy is not new. Democracy, ancient, and modern, has always had its supporters and its detractors. But what is new are the factors at work in the present context, which make the current state of democracy especially remarkable. A brief review of the elements accounting for democracy's celebration and the reality of democracy as a source of disenchantment helps to show this.

Accounting for the celebration of democracy

To be sure, not everybody around the world identifies with and endorses democracy. Far from it. As alluded to above, the fact that democracy is often associated with Western interests and their promotion under the pretense of democratic values promotion can play a role for countries that repudiate or have an aversion to democracy. Also, the democratic culture never entirely covered the whole planet. For instance, the so-called 'global democratic revolution', which saw the number of democracies nearly double after the end of the Cold War, had already peaked by 2000 and encountered further setbacks with the unfulfilled promises of the Arab Spring and backslidings in Egypt, Venezuela and Turkey.⁹

That said, there are reasons why democracy has traditionally been valued as a political system. Five are of particular significance.

First, to this day no other form of organization of politics and society enjoys the type of influence and legitimacy that the paradigm of democracy enjoys. Nationally, whether people like it or not, whether other types of society and forms of regimes like it or not, it is in comparison with democracy that their quality of life is prone to be described, assessed, and ultimately judged. Internationally, as mentioned earlier, even non-democratic regimes mobilize the language of democracy in challenging the international order and seeking its improvement.

Second, the worldwide influence of democracy as a norm is a testimony of the sustained material power of the West. This material power, which has played a key role in modern history in underwriting the global spread of democracy, has remained hugely important since the end of the Cold War. Although in recent years it is challenged by rising powers, China to begin with, the combined forces – especially economic – of Western Europe and the United States continue to offer the democratic culture a significant support to push internationally, within and among countries. In comparison, for all the talk about China becoming a global power, its impressive achievements and their modalities are presently probably not such that they would be translatable in a situation of worldwide material primacy that could undermine the universal appeal of democracy.

Third, the spread of the democratic paradigm is also an indication of its attractiveness and strength in terms of soft power – a soft power that Chinese values do not appear to be well-positioned to match at the international level

(Coicaud, 2016a,b). Indeed, in spite of its economic and social achievements in the past decades in terms of poverty alleviation, it is difficult for China as a one-party political regime to find the normative resources that could make it very attractive internationally. Hence the fact that its current international diplomatic success is less the sign of an endorsement and embrace of the values at the core of its political system and more the recognition of its newly found global material status. The 'China model' may find supporters in countries where the democratic tradition is weak. But it is unlikely to be the case in countries with long and established democratic traditions, even in times of economic, social and political crisis. That said, while there is no clear and overarching normative, moral, and political alternative to democracy, this should not lead, as the title of a famous book seemed to indicate (Fukuyama, 2006), to declare total victory on other models and announce the end of history. History goes on, and goes on as a movement of constant ups and downs. Democratic ideals and beliefs have become dominant¹⁰ to an extent that they somewhat constitute the zeitgeist, the spirit of the time.¹¹ But in history nothing is carved in stone.

Fourth, as the spirit of the time, democracy has a power of attraction that results from what it stands for. This power of attraction has been widening and deepening at the collective/political and individual levels. At the collective/political level, some of the key policy guidelines at the heart of democracy have gained greater currency in recent years, in the West in particular. Demands for accountability, transparency, public ethics, greater political participation, and representation of people, always part and parcel of the democratic political philosophy, are increasing. Nationally and internationally, they are front and center as patience and tolerance for politics behind closed doors, the monopolization of power by a few, corruption and lack of respect for those less fortunate by those in positions of leadership¹² are running thinner and thinner.¹³ At the same time, at the individual level, the identification with the democratic way of life is growing. People want to have their (democratic) rights taken seriously. This entails wanting to be given credit for who they are, that is, to be viewed and treated as people of equal worth and quality, as peers, whoever they are in their sameness and differences. Related to this, and despite the existential and moral responsibilities and burdens that can come with it,¹⁴ they want to have a say in how to live their lives as well. In these domains, democratic values and principles offer guarantees, including predictability and reliability of protection of rights that other forms of regime and society arguably cannot match.

Fifth, and finally, there is the positive track record of democracy and of its values, practices and institutions. Once again, this is not to say that all is perfect in this track record. But as a whole democracy has amounted to better conditions of living for people in society. And, indeed, democracy has over time contributed very significantly to improving their daily lives. Without such improvement, the democratic paradigm would not have become hegemonic.

Accounting for democratic disenchantment

However, the celebration of democracy goes hand in hand with discontent toward democratic societies as they function, or do not function. From this perspective, it would be very foolish not to see and hear the extent of this discontent considering the seriousness of the reasons behind it. This is especially the case since in recent years these reasons have been connected and mutually reinforcing in their negative effects. Four are worth highlighting here.

Instrumentalization of the discourse of democratic politics is a first reason accounting for the current discontent. The self-interested use of the language of democracy on the part of those seeking power has long been a source of concern and criticism. But far from decreasing, this phenomenon seems to have increased recently. As the attractiveness of democratic values makes them prone to be used as lures and as democracy has become a defining feature of the time, it has become unavoidable to call upon its attractiveness as a resource and a means to achieve power. How elections, like presidential and parliamentary elections, in democratic countries regularly and spectacularly display promises made, and quickly betrayed, exemplifies this point. In this regard, over and over again actions and policies that do not match campaign rhetoric inevitably take a toll. In recent decades, democracy's credibility has only been undermined by elections that have failed to alter the status quo and to improve the situation of the less fortunate even as policies continue to benefit the economically privileged regardless of the party in power. At minimum these results give politicians and political parties a bad reputation. They come to be viewed as lacking integrity and having transformed what should be a matter of public service into a self-referential, self-serving, and ossified profession (low level of political mobility or turn-over). In the worst circumstances, mistrust goes as far as affecting negatively the credibility of democratic institutions and mechanisms, if not of democratic values or of democracy itself. Adding to this situation is the fact that referring to democracy primarily in a self-interested way is not only on display at the national level, in both developed¹⁵ and developing¹⁶ countries, but can also be present internationally. At this level powerful democratic countries are open to overlooking their stated commitment to democracy beyond borders as long as it fits their interests (Pogge, 2010).

The gap between democratic ideals/values and reality, already implicit in the distinction we established above between democracy as a paradigm and democratic reality, is a second factor that has contributed to eroding significantly democratic credibility, in a number of Western advanced democracies in particular. To be sure, the gap between democratic ideals/values and reality is never supposed to disappear entirely. After all, democratic ideals/values serve as foundations, guidelines, and as a horizon of actions and policies, and they are meaningful because people identify with the worldview that they express. And because this worldview is inspirational and aspirational, animated by a constant sense of forwardness and progress,

and as such geared toward the future, it is never to be realized fully. Their value rests in part in their ability to motivate people and give meaning to their desire to move forward by transcending reality. At the same time, a reasonable threshold of realization, of implementation of democratic ideals/values and of the expectations that come with them is required in order for them to be credible, and even motivating, and, as such, to continue to function as foundations, guidelines, and a horizon of democratic legitimacy. This threshold calls for democratic ideals/values to be translated into rights that have to be real enough to show that they are taken seriously, that is, implemented and respected. Short of this, people not only start to disbelieve democratic values, mechanisms, and institutions as a source of collective and individual motivation but they become a cause of major frustration as well. This phenomenon has facilitated the development of the politics of disenchantment and resentment, of which populism is an expression. Unfulfilled aspirations turn the politics of hope into the politics of desperation. Against this background, it has become highly problematic that in various advanced democracies, attaining this threshold of realization for the less privileged appears to be increasingly beyond reach. In the West, this divide has been particularly apparent for economic rights, with the gap between rich and poor having grown dramatically in recent years. This is a major issue since ultimately overlooking economic rights undermines individual rights themselves, so dear to democracy. And yet, while the signals have been in the red for now quite some time (in particular the rise of radical right parties at elections in Europe), it has been very hard for the progressive forces in democratic countries – for example the Social Democrats in Europe and the Democrats in the United States – to acknowledge and take the full measure of the gravity of the situation.¹⁷ To this day, in Europe and in the United States mainstream progressive parties seem to be still somewhat in denial when it comes to the extent of their electoral defeats, the causes behind them, in the process remaining quite reluctant to take responsibility for their political debacle. In the United States, for example, had Hilary Clinton been elected in November 2016 it is quite probable that the structural reasons of the discontent that led American people to elect Trump as President would have continued to be overlooked or only be given lip service.¹⁸ Regardless of what one thinks of Trump and its policies, this point deserves attention.¹⁹

The gap between democratic ideals/values and rhetoric, on the one hand, and reality on the other, is related to a third factor accounting for the current sentiment of democratic disenchantment. It concerns the evolving relationship between Western democracy and capitalism/the free market economy and, more specifically, between democracy and globalization. Throughout modern history, in the West, democracy and capitalism/the free market economy have been two defining and inseparable features. This is not to say that all democratic political systems have displayed the same type of relationship between democracy and capitalism. Some democratic regimes, where the state exercises more control over economic life, in France for instance, have

been less free market oriented than others, where the state plays a more constrained or limited role, as in the United States.²⁰ But, beyond the differences, democracy and capitalism have developed hand in hand. Far from having been easy, this relationship has been tense, replete with competition and cooperation.²¹ As such, finding mutual accommodations and points of equilibrium between the two has been an enduring objective so that, at best, they would benefit from one another and, at worst, they would not destroy one another. After all, if too much capitalism ruins democracy, democracy unbridled is probably an impediment to capitalism. In any case, in Western advanced democracies, the peak of these accommodations and points of equilibrium, in the process creating²² both for democracy and capitalism a somewhat win-win situation, was probably reached in the post-World War II era, when major economic growth made possible the expansion of the welfare state in Europe and stable and good conditions of employment in the United States. Part of this accommodation was a form of national contract between the public and the private sectors, organized to ensure the prosperity of the country and its inhabitants. This arrangement started to unravel in the last decades of the 20th century and has only become weaker in the 2000s. In this regard, globalization, endorsed as much at the national level as at the international level, has had a significant impact. It may have produced many benefits (like the drop of global inequality between countries thanks to high growth in emerging countries – China in particular) but it also has brought about problems, such as deepening inequalities between rich and poor within countries (including in developed countries).²³

In the past decades in the West, as the liberalization of the global economy grew (with the increased openness of national economies to trade in goods and services, the movement of capital and technical know-how) and as the national and the international realms became increasingly intertwined thanks, among other things, to the support of national and international legislation,²⁴ companies, eager to maximize their profits, gradually dissociated themselves from their national base and from the sources and modalities of employment that, as part of the national economic eco-system, they had offered up to now to local populations.²⁵ In the (Western) democratic countries where governments have not been able to manage and mitigate the negative effects of this evolution, the economic and social prices have been low growth, high unemployment, underemployment, and employment precariousness, with people made essentially expendable, and growing inequalities between rich and poor. More often than not workers who produced lost the ability to demand a share in what they made and, later on, as delocalization of industries increased and companies became eager to move their operations to locations that allowed them to lower production costs, they even lost the ability to find proper jobs²⁶ and salaries.²⁷ The 2008 financial and economic crisis, illustrating the financialization of the economy that started in earnest in the 1980s²⁸ and is part of the transformation of the globalized economy, deepened the perception of failure of

democratic political leadership. This perception of failure has been all the more apparent insofar as none of those who in the financial sector contributed to the crisis were sanctioned for their misdeeds (both criminal conduct and recklessness). Not only were tax payers left to foot the bill while bankers still received their bonuses despite their catastrophic performance, but the reforms that were put in place to better regulate financial actors did not produce much change.²⁹ And the arguably anemic safeguards that were put in place have been under attack by the Trump administration.

This evolution points to a fourth negative perception, especially prevailing nowadays in Western democracies by those feeling left out, that of amputation of democratic sovereignty.³⁰ In these circumstances, the political elites (elected) as well as the administrative elites (selected based on expertise) are prone to be seen as unable to prevent the damaging impacts of globalization either because they have lost control or leverage over economic policies and their social implications, or because they are complicit of engineering the transformations under way.³¹ Neither perception is good. It conveys a sense of failing democratic sovereignty. In this context, four elements in particular contribute to a sense that democratic sovereignty is being amputated. a) Actors (national and international, and principally private) not mandated to play a political role and all the more difficult to make accountable because they are rather invisible to ordinary people, seem to be much more in charge than public, and visible, official actors.³² b) The alignment, active or passive, of political leadership with these actors – namely multi-national corporations (MNCs) – can only give rise among the losers of the new economic and political order to the sentiment that they are not properly represented nor able to participate meaningfully in the democratic political process. c) Law-making, in principle a key aspect of the exercise of democratic sovereignty, ends up being also negatively affected. When the adoption of laws does not succeed at addressing – let alone resolving – the problems at hand, the credibility and legitimacy of law-making, and with it of democratic processes and institutions, gets questioned.³³ d) While democratic theoreticians stress that qualitative public debate and deliberation, meant to provide the right information and justification on the decisions and policies at stake, is required by democracy,³⁴ the current state of democracy is far from being able to fulfil this requirement. This is true both at the legislative level (where negotiations and decisions have frequently more in mind the interest of a few than those of the many) and concerning public opinion. Regarding the latter, it is striking how media is ethically and politically often failing at supporting an authentic atmosphere of informed discussion. Mainstream TV, including TV news,³⁵ for example has by and large made the choice of entertainment guided by the lowest common denominator.³⁶ As for new media, it is not clear that its claimed commitment to empowerment sits well with its efforts of reducing citizens to consumers. None of this is helpful to the public.³⁷ Hence, unfortunately, the temptation to think, cynically, that democracies are not simply

communication and knowledge societies. They are the organization of generalized ignorance and of the commodification of all and everything and, perhaps, even, of voluntary servitude as well. This is as far as can be from the democratic philosophy of individual and collective emancipation.

Implications for the future of democracy

What are the implications of these positive and negative perceptions, for the future of democracy? Although political forecasting, like other types of social forecasting, is an uncertain exercise, two lessons can be drawn for the years ahead. First, democracy is going to continue to be a benchmark of legitimacy. But, second, there is an urgent need to recognize the necessity of reforming, if not reinventing democracy.

Democracy has a future

Despite the challenges democracy is facing today, it has a future, and probably a stronger future than any other form of regime and organization of society. This is the case because democracy constitutes a benchmark of legitimacy that has no real alternative.

There are attempts to replace democracy as the framework of reference, at the national, regional, and international levels. At the national level, we see this effort in the Middle East where the failures of imported Western modernity and democratic models (including secularism³⁸ and nationalism³⁹) can lead people to turn to local traditions and cultures. This is also the case in Asia, especially with China. In addition to its expanding material power,⁴⁰ it is now eager to call upon Chinese values, such as Confucianism or socialism with Chinese characteristics, as a way to counter Western influence and promote more local visions of the world.⁴¹

In certain circumstances, these attempts of alternatives could possibly prevail nationally. In fact, considering what has been the sense of cultural displacement and even alienation that the import of Western models (including democratic models) has at times meant for populations attached to and identifying with local traditions and identities, some sort of new balance has to be found in many non-Western developing countries, in the Middle East, in Asia but also in Africa, between external (Western) influences (including democratic influence) and local cultures. It is probably in Asia that this process of hybridization is most advanced and has been, in one way or another (particularly in economic terms), the most successful.

But it is difficult to see how the alternative models that could emerge from the local and national levels could lead to the removal of democratic considerations at the regional and international levels. As mentioned earlier, today even regimes that domestically are undemocratic seems eager to see more democratic representation and participation at play in regional and international affairs. At least so long as it benefits their national interest.

From this perspective, at the regional and international levels the current rising powers – China in particular – are

probably inclined to project their soft power and make their mark on regional and international systems of governance. Non-democratic regimes could see this projection of soft power as a useful way to diffuse the pressure that international democratic norms can exercise on their domestic life and forge an alliance of convenience. But there are limits to how far this can go. At the regional and international levels member states, whoever they are, democracies or not, are more likely to ask for greater democratization than for less democratization. In other words, there are limits to the non-democratic reforms rising non-democratic regimes could introduce internationally in the future. Furthermore, it is unlikely that the majority the world's population will embrace the values and practices of Muslim and Chinese societies as international ones, if only because in these societies people tend not to enjoy the kind of protection of rights that exist under democratic rule.⁴²

Recognizing the necessity to reform or reinvent democracy

Democracy may be the horizon of thinking and feeling of a lot of people around the world.⁴³ Nevertheless, this does not mean that democracy is not a troubled enterprise, hence the need for democracy to reform, if not to reinvent itself.

The recognition of this need, as obvious as it is for those who are deeply dissatisfied with the reality of democracy today, is not universal. For the democratic leadership in a position of power and benefiting from the status quo, at the national and international levels, there is much blindness and deafness, and willful obtuseness to the problems at hand.⁴⁴ The insensitivity of political elites to current economic and political problems points to the challenges of self-reform even in a democratic setting. The groups in power would rather risk the overall sustainability of a system and preserve their privileged situation in the short-term than put themselves at risk for the sake of the collectivity and the long-term viability of democracy. Despite the fact that plasticity, world-making and world-remaking, that is change and progress are in principle at the heart of the philosophy of modern democracy (Mangabeira, 1998), this does not make the reform of democracy an easy task.

Renewing democracy, nationally, and internationally

Two sets of considerations could serve as guidance for the reform and renewal of democracy as a meaningful path for the political, social, and economic organization of society. One set of considerations is related to philosophical and normative issues. Another set deals with more practical issues. Each of these two sets of considerations is so central to the future of democracy, nationally, and internationally, that they deserve much more attention than I can offer in this last section. The comments below should therefore be read more as an allusion to an agenda for further exploration than anything else.

From the philosophical and normative standpoints

Six types of philosophical and normative considerations seem relevant for putting democracy when and where it is in trouble back on track, within and between nations. While each is already part of democratic culture, they need to be revisited and reemphasized. They are related to: deepening and widening democracy; formal and substantive democratic rights; universalism and pluralism (diversity); righteousness versus reflectivity; accountability and shared responsibility, and solidarity; and negative and positive emotions and passions.

Deepening and widening democracy concerns the following fact: as far as there is a crisis of democracy today, this crisis is probably not an indictment of democracy per se – or, at least, not yet. It is more about the fact that the reality of democracy is not fulfilling as much as expected the promises of democracy as a set of core empowering principles and values. In a most general way, this puts the need to widen and deepen democracy front and center. This is connected with the issue of the relationship between democracy and capitalism. I said earlier that historically, in the modern era, these have developed hand in hand, in the midst of tensions and mutual accommodation. But it seems that in recent years tensions increasingly predominate over mutual accommodations. The evolution of capitalism at the end of 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, with the rising inequality that has accompanied this evolution, appears to be undermining more and more the idea of community of beings, of solidarity, and responsibility toward one another, and that of individual rights (both the expression of a functioning and healthy democracy) and, as a whole, the possibility of democracy. This is rather paradoxical as we are also living at a time when rights, the culture of rights (individual rights and human rights) appear to be celebrated more than ever. The question then becomes: can we rescue democracy from unbridled capitalism? Can we make capitalism more socially responsible, more civil?

Part of the answer to this question resides in recognizing, perhaps more than has been the case in the liberal approach to issues of economic and social justice, that formal and substantive democratic rights are both required to secure a sense of justice in a democratic setting. From this perspective, formal rights should not be pursued at the expense of substantive rights, and substantive rights at the expense of formal rights. These two types of rights are mutually constitutive and dependent. Thinking that one can exist and flourish without the other is a mistake. Taking the two seriously is part and parcel of the process of reducing the gap between values and realities. In order to make this happen, in order to dovetail formal and substantive rights, it is essential to take the production of and access to public goods seriously, at the national and international levels. What do the right to education, the right to health, etc. mean if they only exist on paper? What do these rights mean if they are not secured by a fair access to them – a fair access to rights that public goods, in these areas as in others, help making possible. Needless to say, the

engineering of public goods as a condition of possibility for realizing rights presupposes a sense of burden sharing, a sense of solidarity and responsibility toward one another that seems to be more and more difficult to find in 'advanced' democracies.

Another aspect of deepening and widening democracy, nationally, and internationally, entails continuing to attempt to balance universalism and pluralism (diversity). To the extent that democracy has not been the captive of righteousness, of being certain to be right (we come back to this point below), this search for a balance between the two has been of primary importance since the beginning, nationally, and internationally. Although at both levels the tension between universalism and pluralism is a challenge, pursuing within and among nations the quest of common and still differentiated ground for democratic justice remains imperative. It comes down to identifying where and how to draw a legitimate line between the (legitimate) universal and the (legitimate) particular. It also comes down to distinguishing rights that are so essential that they transcend cultural diversity (universal rights, that have to be universally respected) from rights that are still very important but more locally anchored (allowing pluralism and diversity).

One way to achieve this goal is to invest more in the reflective nature of democracy. In the past, democracy, its values, institutions, and practices have often been the expressions of a righteous approach to and understanding of what is right, of an absolute certainty of being right. The idea that democracy is the epitome of civilization, superior to other cultures and social and political philosophies and forms of organization of society, and does not have to listen to others is part of this story of arrogance, and ignorance (the arrogance of ignorance). This notion has done much to contribute to the ambiguous reputation of democracy abroad. However, this should not lead us to underestimate the profoundly integrative nature of democratic values on the basis of being reflective, that is on the basis of being self-aware and critical of themselves (for the sake of themselves) and respectful of diverse others.⁴⁵ This does not mean that, in this perspective, anything goes. For, all the while, the validity claim of democratic values rests in a fundamental concern for justice.⁴⁶ As such, for democratic values, moving away from and transcending righteousness mean drawing the line between right and wrong, good and bad, better and less good not out of a position of disrespect for others but out of a position of analysis/understanding and respect – being understood that what should guide this position of analysis/understanding and respect for other ways of thinking and doing should include the extent to which these other ways of thinking and doing are themselves respectful, and not essentially oppressive, of their own people and others. In the process, it would be possible to call upon a type of analysis, evaluation and, possibly, judgment mechanism that would avoid as much as possible 'being a judgmental' trap. Considering its commitment to recognizing and accommodating pluralism and diversity,⁴⁷ including evolving pluralism and diversity, democracy, certainly more than any other normative and political

paradigm, has the potential to succeed in this. When understood this way, democratic values have the power to endorse a truly progressive agenda.

Succeeding in this direction would allow us to address better another philosophical and normative requirement, that of expanding the realm of accountability (as far as can be from impunity) and shared responsibility and solidarity. Indeed, a democratic world (that is a world community that would be more democratic) that would be more than is the case today unified while being mindful of differences (more integrated without being homogeneous) would probably be an invitation to enhance accountability and shared responsibility and solidarity. Not leaving anyone out is a way to bind citizens and force accountability and a sense of shared responsibility and solidarity upon those who are part of the formed community as such. But, of course, at the international level, this presupposes at a minimum that the major democratic powers currently underwriting the international system will themselves be bound by the rules in their foreign policies. For what is frequently on their part a lack of consistency *vis-à-vis* democratic values and an insistence to have many rights and few duties, to bind others without being bound themselves, is not a very attractive and productive situation.⁴⁸

Finally, there is the question of negative and positive emotions and passions – being understood that by negative emotions (and passions) I mean emotions (and passions) that express tensions and even conflicts within oneself, with others and the world in general, and are likely to trigger destructive reactions and attitudes; as for positive emotions (and passions) I mean emotions (and passions) that express a sense of reconciliation and peace with oneself, others and the world in general, and are prone to encourage constructive reactions and attitudes, geared to make people and the environment better. In this regard democracy can generate pathologies, among which are negative emotions and passions, both at the individual and collective levels, such as envy, resentment and jealousy, which themselves can generate violence against oneself and others at the individual and collective levels. But at heart democracy is about delivering a positive message, including in terms of emotions and passions. So here is a question to think about in the context of the normative and philosophical requirements needed for improving democracy: how to contain and combat the negative emotions and passions associated with or produced by democracy, and how to enhance the positive and empowering emotions and passions in the service of a better democracy?⁴⁹ Part of the answer to this question concerns the issue of democracy in relation with the key problem of equality and inequality – a problem that has acquired a new acuity in recent years as the gap between rich and poor has grown significantly. From this perspective, in those Western democracies where populism has made headway, it is not that people who are not the winners of the current state of affairs and appear to support populism are demanding absolute equality or are unwilling to endorse the idea of acceptable inequalities. It is not that they are necessarily against competition or resent not being the winners of the on-going competition.⁵⁰ It is rather that they feel that they

are not being given a fair chance. Not all of them dream of becoming billionaires or living a lavish life style. What they are opposing and what is for them a source of deep resentment is the feeling that they are progressively losing a chance to make a decent living in their own land. The targeting of immigration is a significant part of this story of feeling alienated in own's country.

From a practical standpoint

From a practical standpoint, at least three sets of issues must be addressed in order to preserve or restore the democracy's credibility: first, as alluded to previously, revisiting the relationship between democracy and capitalism/the free market economy; second, revisiting the relationship between democracy and representation and participation; and third, rethinking and changing the attitude of elites, including political elites.

Concerning the relationship between capitalism and democracy/the free market economy, in the West as in the East, each in its own way, it is as if capitalism has become more and more triumphant, and democracy more and more on the defensive. And yet capitalism/the free market economy is unlikely to be sustainable if it does not make allowances for the rights of people. After all, no human enterprise can ignore altogether the human dimension without becoming self-destructive. Against this background, three problems have to be addressed: how to rebalance democracy and capitalism, so that democracy does not unravel further in the Western industrialized world? And how to make this change possible? More specifically: how to have a political system committed to the public good more in a position to regulate better a free market economy, so that that public interest does not take a back seat? Needless to say, these are difficult questions. Part of the answer to these questions probably rests with better international cooperation, and a better balance and coordination between national public policy and international policy, the national interest and the international interest, as well as corporate/special interests and people's interest.

Short of being able to address these challenges, chances are that political representation and participation⁵¹ in a democratic setting will become more and more meaningless, and with it the possibility of democracy itself.

This leads us to a third and final point, one concerning the attitude of elites (political and bureaucratic) in many (Western) democratic countries. By bringing up this issue at the end of the article, the point is not to make them responsible for all the current ills and shortcomings of democratic reality. Elites face real challenges and complexities in their tasks, and often most of them take their responsibilities seriously and really try the best they can. At the same time their credibility and legitimacy is probably now more questioned than ever. A reason for this is that while in advanced democracies we often hear that the people in charge in top positions are the best experts possible, among the best educated, the smartest, the more experienced, etc., the results of their actions and policies do not seem to

match what we are told is their stellar capacity.⁵² This begs the question: if these people are so good, why are so many democracies, particularly in the West, in Europe, and the United States, in such a state of a crisis? How to explain the failures and what seems to be the growing problems of social and economic integration? Is it because those in charge are not as smart as they think they are or because their agenda is, regardless of their rhetoric, foreign to the pursuit of the interests of the average citizen? Whatever the answers to these questions, at minimum what appears to be their rather poor track record for democratic societies overall should be an invitation for those at the very top to come down from Mount Olympus. Humility is all the more necessary in view of the fact that in a democracy a person with public responsibilities (be it a politician or a bureaucrat) who does not avoid the appearance of superiority and who does not show respect for the common people he or she is meant to serve generally does not fare well. It amounts to wanting to be respected without being respectable.⁵³ In contrast, more humility, less arrogance, less self-centeredness, and cultivating an authentic sense of public ethics would be a good start for public officials who aspire to be taken more seriously as democratic leaders.

Words of conclusion

In this article I have argued that democracy is in a paradoxical situation. It is a benchmark of legitimacy and at the same time the target of sharp criticisms. From this perspective, although there is no real overall credible normative and political alternative to it, the exercise of democracy has become so unsatisfactory, if not a political charade, that it is in urgent need of deep reform if it is going to remain a sustainable and meaningful political and human project. Despite the difficulty of reforming, what democracy stands for (self-governance, accountability, responsibility, belief in progress, etc.) makes it worth the tremendous effort and commitment that such transformation necessarily implies. The years ahead will tell if, for its own sake, democracy will be able to be true to its ideals.

Notes

The author thanks the two anonymous peer reviewers and Daniel Schlein for their comments on previous versions of this text.

1. A classic analysis of democracy is Held (2009).
2. In this short essay I do not restrict the meaning of the term 'democracy' to a specific form of democracy, like liberal democracy, social-democracy, etc. I refer to the general understanding of democracy, which then can take specific forms and can be evaluated positively or negatively.
3. Interestingly the countries that liberated themselves from the yolk of colonialism after World War II adopted the same form of government (at least outwardly) as those of powers that had previously dominated them.
4. The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index, <https://infographic.economist.com/2017/Democracy/Index/>, accessed on July 27, 2017.
5. The number of countries recognizing Taiwan as a state has dwindled in recent years as China's diplomatic influence has strengthened. As

- of June 2018, only 19 countries continued to choose recognizing Taipei over Beijing, most of them small island states or in Central and South America – regions that in the past had limited economic ties with China.
6. Gilens and Page Benjamin (2014). See also Gilens (2012). More general and older but still useful studies on this issue include Ferguson (1995) and Judis (2001).
 7. In the words of Amitav Acharya (2018, pp. 155–156), concerning the case of Libya and its implications for Syria: 'Western pundits who lament that the world is on 'fire' ... should pause to ask: who started those fires? Part of the answer should be obvious: the failed and misguided policies of leaders of the Western world on the pretext of maintaining international stability ... The invasion of Iraq in 2003 tops the list ... There are other examples, especially the implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which authorized humanitarian intervention in Libya. Led by the UK and France, that intervention turned a mandate for civilian protection into a campaign for regime change, thereby ensuring that there would be no consensus on authorizing intervention to save lives in Syria'.
 8. In this sense, this 'at best' approach can be even more damaging than the straightforward instrumental approach because it amounts to a form of amputating and, in the end, alienating recognition. This is illustrated by the international law recognition of the rights of indigenous people only as subsumed in a nation-state structure. The benefits of self-determination leading to independence are beyond the reach of indigenous people. See Coicaud (2010, 2017).
 9. See Acharya (2018). Seven years after overthrowing its dictatorship, Tunisia, compared with other Arab Spring countries, has made progress, but disappointment surrounding the country's democratic transition abounds and Tunisia is still facing major challenges to becoming a full democracy.
 10. Even an author who challenges electoral democracy in the name of political meritocracy recognizes that: 'It is hard to imagine a modern government today that can be seen as legitimate in the eyes of the people without any form of democracy. We are all democrats today', (Bell, 2015, p. 151).
 11. This expression is often attributed to the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel (2011) although he never used it as such. Hegel talked about 'Geist seiner Zeit', (spirit of his time), for example, 'no man can surpass his own time, for the spirit of his time is also his own spirit'.
 12. One of the core values of democracy is equality, which in part means that each person is worthy the respect of others. The fact that over time those in charge have come to see themselves as above the people they are supposed to represent and serve has played a role in the resentment and disenchantment average citizens have often come to experience *vis-à-vis* the realities of democracy. Needless to say, this is not a problem that is specific to democracy. It is at work in most regimes, democratic and non-democratic, where an elite, political or/and bureaucratic, manages to more or less to monopolize power and sees it as its own prerogative.
 13. Patience and tolerance are in even more limited supply *vis-à-vis* leadership when it is not able to produce compelling results (outputs).
 14. Autonomy of the individual is one of the features of democracy – autonomy of decision, autonomy of action. This entails the individual's responsibility for his or her life and the recognition of responsibility for it. In the process, individuals become accountable for their decisions and actions, and their outcomes, good and bad. This is one of the existential and moral challenges an individual has to confront in a democratic setting where, more than in other more rigid or less fluid societies (see the weight of tradition or religion), many ethical positions rest on the individual's shoulders rather than being fully decided and regulated by society and the government.
- For example, consider the dilemmas people face in the context of abortion, end-of-life issues, etc.
15. The discredit of the political establishment we mentioned earlier in Europe and the United States is part of this story.
 16. For instance in many African countries the rhetoric of democracy is as widely used as it is foreign to the organization of society.
 17. This explains in part the seeming paralysis of progressive forces of limiting the power of hard right and authoritarian parties.
 18. Voters are desperately looking for solutions to their predicament in places that are at odds with one another. Despite their obvious differences, Donald Trump and Emmanuel Macron were elected in response to the state of crisis of the American and French democracies that has persisted for some time.
 19. In a perverse way, Trump is forcing attention to this issue. In the same inadvertent fashion, Trump is also making at least some Americans think more carefully about what their constitutional rights really mean and about the importance of good governance.
 20. By and large, the extent to which the relations between democracy and capitalism differ from one political system to another has to do with the relationship between state and society in a given system. In state-dominated societies, like in France, Japan or China, the state is a strong regulator of the market economy. In society-dominated (or liberal) society, like the United States, this is less true. That is not to say that the relationship between democracy and capitalism, and state and society, is unchangeable, at least for a while. For instance, in the United States, in the 1930s, the New Deal amounted to many and deep interventions in the workings of the market.
 21. The connection between democracy and capitalism/the free market economy calls for caution and skepticism over the notion that democracies are more peaceful than other types of regimes (the idea of democratic peace goes back to Immanuel Kant (1795). In the 1980s American political scientist Michael W. Doyle (1983a,b) contributed to the popularization of this theory. Democracies may be reluctant to go to war with one another because they share similar values and have common trade interests. This does not mean that they are foreign to self-interested violence beyond borders. Most major Western democratic powers have engaged and continue to engage in violence and predation (colonialism, imperialism, neo-colonialism, unfair terms of trade, etc.). In addition, emotions and passions associated with democracy, be it democracy in general or democracy in its relations with commerce and capitalism, are not necessarily less lethal, as was argued in the 17th and 18th centuries (Hirschman, 1977)). Modern nationalism and its potentially destructive consequences must in part be understood in connection with the universalization of democratic ideals and ideas. As for capitalism in the context of democracy, it can be anything but harmless for those in the way of the pursuit of profit, nationally and internationally.
 22. These mutual accommodations and points of equilibrium, when they were found, were more often than not the product of nasty power struggles than of peaceful and civilized negotiations.
 23. For more on this, among an abundant literature, consult for example Bourguignon (2012, Chapter 1 and Chapter 2).
 24. The making of national economies as part of the global economy would not have happened without an adjustment and alignment of national and global regulations. Beyond the national level, international organizations, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), and a regional organization like the European Union played a key role.
 25. In the West we have certainly seen the acceleration of companies (especially big companies) separating themselves from their mother countries. Companies that were nurtured by stable democracies have been eager to leave for more profitable places overseas when it suited them, increasing the burdens on the societies they leave behind.

26. There is a debate in the United States at least over what is a 'proper job'. The party in power, whichever one it is, tends to point to increased job numbers to tout the success of its economic policies. While job numbers may go up, they do not tell the whole story. If the jobs generated are mostly low-level ones with few if any benefits, for example, or jobs that effectively convert displaced employees into independent contractors who are forced to work for less than minimum wage, those jobs are not 'proper' in any meaningful sense. Economic growth masks the deeper inequality that is occurring.
27. Arguably the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which came into effect in 1994 and which Bill Clinton championed had less the aim of removing trade barriers than to make it safe for American firms to invest in Mexico – 'meaning to move factories and jobs there without fear of expropriation and then to import those factories' products back into the US', (Frank, 2017, pp. 86-87).
28. The financialization of the economy refers to the extensive role that financial actors play in the national and international economies. On the financialization of the economy, see Boyer (2011).
29. See for instance Frank (2017). Consult also Coicaud and Zhang (2010).
30. In a recent book, Simone (2015) analyzes the different aspects of this failing of democratic sovereignty.
31. In this context, the loss of legitimacy of the political establishment goes hand in hand with the loss of legitimacy of the administrative/bureaucratic establishment.
32. It would be naïve to think that non-mandated actors and interests have not played a political role before. But it seems that globalization brings this involvement to a whole new level.
33. In the case of France, for example, it is tempting to think that recent governments have been so eager to introduce and officialize social and cultural changes via legislation that they have been ineffective at improving the economic situation.
34. For instance Rosanvallon (2011, Chapter 7 and Chapter 12). On the importance of a culture of qualitative debate and justification, see also Forst (2014a,b), Part 1 and Part 2).
35. TV news does not help to make sense of the world. And yet for most people it is the main if not only source of information. How in these conditions deliberate and participate properly in the affairs of the country?
36. For this reason, corporations-controlled media driven by profit is not necessarily absolutely better for democracy than state-controlled media.
37. See Oscar Wilde (2001, p. 148): 'The Public have an insatiable curiosity to know everything, except what is worth knowing'.
38. For a critic of imported secularism in the Middle East and its impact on religion, refer for example to Mahmood (2016).
39. In the Middle East secularism and nationalism have often led to the development of hybrid forms of authoritarian governments.
40. Among other things, refer to the Chinese 'One Belt, One Road' initiative designed to build an Asia-wide infrastructure system tying China more firmly to its markets.
41. Consult for instance Bell (2008). Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, it is socialism with Chinese characteristics that seems to be receiving the strongest endorsement.
42. That said, the ever expanding material (economic to begin with) influence of China brings about a serious issue: as it expands, China gains leverage, and it is likely to use this leverage to put forward demands, at the national, regional and global levels that are not aligned with democracy. Hence the question: what would happen to democracy in a world dominated by a non-democratic power? How would democratic regimes, cornered economically, react?
43. To some extent the attractiveness of democratic regions and the life opportunities they can offer, like the United States and Europe, for immigrants is an illustration of this state of affairs. In this sense, immigration is a good test of the power of attraction of democratic legitimacy.
44. This is a point Frank (2017) makes forcefully in his book.
45. The notion of respect I have in mind here refers to Forst's optimistic understanding of toleration based on mutual recognition and respect, as opposed to a pessimistic understanding of toleration expressing disrespect and domination (see Forst, 2014a,b, 2016).
46. Arguing about democratic values and justice, Allott (1990, p. 85) stresses the following: 'Justice is the constructive critic who will never be silenced . . . Justice is permanent revolution. But it is the permanent revolution without which nothing can be permanent'.
47. On the conditions of possibility of a legitimate faculty of judging factoring in a multiplicity of points of view, see Arendt (1992). Refer also to Sen (2009), discussing Adam Smith's (1795) idea of 'impartial spectator' that is, 'the need to invoke a wide variety of view-points and outlooks based on diverse experiences from far and near'.
48. As a sign of good international citizenship, why not have as a matter of principle all the permanent members of the UN Security Council, particularly the democratic ones, ratify all international treaties?
49. For more on this, see Coicaud (2016a,b).
50. In a culture shaped by democratic values, people are all the more willing to accept the idea of inequality, of reasonable inequality when they feel that the competition among actors is fair, allowing the possibility of upward mobility, and that those who do not win the competition for material goods, wealth or high positions will not be left behind altogether but rather will remain sufficiently secure and respected despite their exclusion from the upper strata of society.
51. Today's problems of political representation and participation are not limited to democracies. They are one of the biggest challenges of modern politics across the board. In the context of Chinese politics, for example, see Wang (2016).
52. This problem has a long history. In the US context, think for example about John F. Kennedy and his brilliant cabinet that helped drag the US into Vietnam. Perhaps this issue requires us to rethink the qualifications necessary to become an effective public leader and elite. For example, Harry Truman came from rather humble origins but is generally regarded as a very good president, in part for his plain-spoken demeanor. George W. Bush went to Yale and Harvard and is probably going to be judged harshly by historians. And Donald Trump graduated from Wharton. None of these facts speak well for products of elite universities, though the reality is that they will continue to dominate their societies by virtue of their holds on power and their networks.
53. This is not a problem unique to public officials in democracies. It is a problem present in many types of regimes and situations in which people find themselves in positions of high power. More often than not, it goes to their head and they stop having their feet on the ground, so to speak, which usually marks the beginning of their end. But in the process much damage is being done to society and the credibility of politics.

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