

EDITORIAL

Editorial: Defending democracy

Pere Almeda, Adam Majó



Voters exercising peaceful resistance in front of a polling station on October 1, 2017 in Barcelona. Photography by Jordi Borràs

Democracy at risk

Political transitions in Portugal, Spain and Greece during the 1970s marked the beginning of the so-called third wave of democratisation that characterised the world in the last decades of the 20th century [1]. During the 1980s this wave continued in Latin America, the Philippines and South Korea. In the nineties, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union triggered for the spread of democracy in Eastern Europe. With the fall of apartheid, democracy also reached Nelson Mandela's South Africa, which served as a reference for many countries in the rest of the African continent. Now that we have entered the 21st century, it looked as if a new democratising impulse was taking place in 2010 with the Arab springs in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria and with the protest movements against the region's despotic and corrupt regimes. Except in the case of Tunisia, it was merely a mirage that ended up triggering a violent and authoritarian reaction that has led these countries once again to repression, collapse and civil war.

Since then, the spread of democracy appears to have been interrupted despite a few exceptions. The political regression in the Middle East and the Arab world, the impacts of globalisation and technology, the economic crisis and growing inequalities or new geopolitical inertias prone to authoritarianism and national populism have led to a change in the political context. A change of trend that we are witnessing with the decline of

democracy in many parts of the world. A regression that is leading to the erosion of fundamental rights and civil and political freedoms under authoritarian forms of power that are opposed to pluralism and tolerance, in a regressive wave that threatens the democratic advances achieved in the preceding decades.

There are many expert voices [2], from the academic, institutional or international world, analysing the evolution of democracy and warn of the weakening of democratic principles and values throughout the world. The [EU annual report on human rights and democracy in the world](#) notes this change in the global context and warns that the international framework for the protection of human rights is being severely violated and the protection of civil societies is deteriorating throughout the world. The consequences of this regression affect countries where democracy is not consolidated and openly authoritarian regimes, but also many liberal democracies that are declining under the leadership of populist leaders and the influence of the extreme right.

According to the [Freedom in the world 2020](#) report, issued by [Freedom House](#), in the last year 64 countries experienced a worsening of the situation of political rights and civil liberties, especially among national and religious minorities, due to the action and abuse of both authoritarian and democratic governments. A pattern repeated with the attacks on the rights of immigrants and especially aggravated in democratic countries “contributing to a permissive international environment of massive violations of fundamental rights that erode institutional guarantees and the whole body of law that should protect the freedoms of all persons”.

The impacts of globalisation and technology, the economic crisis and growing inequalities or the new geopolitical inertias prone to authoritarianism and national populism have led to a the decline of democracy in many parts of the world

The decay of liberal democracies is also noticeable in the increasing mistrust of the citizens towards the representative institutions. This is a tendency that has been increasing since the beginning of the century and has been described by some scholars as a “global democratic recession”. Since then, the proportion of “dissatisfied” citizens has very considerably increased according to the Centre for the future of Democracy at the University of Cambridge, which publishes regular analyses of its evolution in the [Global Satisfaction with Democracy report](#). According to the most recent study from 2020, comparing data from the last decade of the 20th century with the current data, the percentage of people who are dissatisfied with democracy has grown by almost 10 percentage points, from 47.9 to 57.5 %, reaching in 2019 the highest peak since the beginning of the data series. Some of the most populous democracies, such as the USA, India and Brazil, are leading this trend and in the case of the United States the level of dissatisfaction has increased by more than a third in just one generation.

Catalonia is also no stranger to this phenomenon. This was confirmed by the report *Actituds Polítiques i Comportament electoral a Catalunya* from 2008, ccoordinated by Josep M. Vallés, which stressed the growing political disaffection of Catalan citizens and the mistrust of institutions. The data from the last Centre d'Estudis d'Opinió Barometer still shows the same pattern and 72.4% of those surveyed say they are today little or not at all satisfied with democracy, although 81.1 consider democracy to be preferred to any form of government. These high and constant levels of dissatisfaction with democracy have severe consequences that affect the credibility and legitimacy of the political system and reveal a global structural crisis.

Increasing inequalities and democratic regression

There are several causes for the mistrust towards democracy, but one of the determining factors are the growing inequalities that fracture societies. If during emancipation from the Old Regime the struggle for equality was one of the driving forces behind the achievement of the democratic rights and freedoms that gave rise to modernity, today the increase in economic inequality is one of the vectors that structure the world, producing increasingly asymmetrical and illegitimate forms of power. When this trend is consolidated and the disparities are not corrected, the foundations that make liberal democracies possible disappear, opening the door to authoritarianism.

Hence, in recent decades the evolution of the processes of globalisation, conditioned by the hegemony of neoliberal thinking has accelerated the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few, stressing the disproportion between a very small percentage of the population that accumulates a large part of the wealth and the rest of the population. A dynamic that has disempowered and particularly affected the middle classes, which are the social base on which liberal democracy is structured. These inequalities are the result of a political programme, the neo-liberal agenda, which placed the idea of the free market above all other values and which set in motion a series of reforms and policies to encourage, among other things, financial deregulation, generalised tax cuts, the proliferation of tax havens and the decreasing capacity of public authorities and trade union organisations to act. Neo-liberal globalisation, which has also been accompanied by social dumping and industrial relocation to the emerging economies and in countries such as China. Moreover, in the last two decades, the changes produced by technological transformation and robotization have done nothing but increased the fracture of inequalities and democratic societies are now suffering.

As inequalities advance, the danger of democratic involution becomes real. Non-action in the face of inequality provokes social discontent and political disaffection, and ends up feeding the growth of populisms and the extreme right that endanger democracy itself

In this regard, the inequality indicators from the World Inequality Database (WID.world) show a continued decline in the income of the working and middle classes in Western countries and the interruption of social mobility, debunking the myth of meritocracy and opening a gap in the cohesion and stability of these societies. At the same time, as the income of the middle classes declined, it consolidated a new economic elite that absorbs and capitalises much of the economic growth, concentrating wealth and resources and creating huge disparities and inefficiencies. The irruption of this plutocracy as a global extractive class affects the whole system, creating asymmetries and implications at many levels, especially in the capacity to monopolise all the levers of economic, political and media power, interfering with and emptying democratic processes of their content. Some authors, such as Colin Crouch, speak of the fact that we have entered a post-democratic stage, where the formal institutions of liberal democracy survive, but power and transformative energy are located in reduced circles, where the economic elites have a great deal of decision-making capacity and influence. As inequalities advance, the danger of democratic involution becomes real. Non-action in the face of inequality provokes social discontent and political disaffection and ends up feeding the growth of populisms and the extreme right that endanger democracy itself.

National populisms and authoritarianism

Inequalities and the huge difficulties in governing the complexity of contemporary challenges are, in part, the context and breeding ground for the forces and leaders of national-populism. When the scope of action of public policies and the promises of liberal democracies do not respond to or do not effectively resolve the demands of the citizenry, we see how part of the social discontent looks at discourses that retroactively challenge the liberal system and exploit its weaknesses.

These are discourses fuelled by some elites that are opposed and warring to any change in the status quo, when they believe that their privileges are in danger, shaping their project by taking advantage of the frustration of the middle classes threatened by globalisation and the economic crisis. These movements are also fed by the support of vulnerable, desperate and precarious people harmed by the economic and social context and easy to involve into their simplifying rhetoric. A nostalgic return to order recreating a past imaginary evoking the essences of homelands and alleged national interests, while confronting in a xenophobic way minorities and immigration, as scapegoats and perfect culprits of the evils of society, but without questioning the real causes. The seduction of the discourse of national populism and the extreme right is based on openly false diagnoses that often attract the attention of public opinion, causing a strong emotional polarisation and being a step forward in noticing social resentment and disappointment. A manipulated reading of reality at the service of a reactionary response. The fascist temptation in the face of the vulnerability caused by capitalism in Polanyi's words.

During the years of the economic crisis in 2008, many voices in the establishment warned against left-wing populism, which was aimed at structural transformation in response to the crisis. Today, however, in 2020, those who question and threaten liberal democracies and

their system of rights and freedoms are the national-populists and the extreme right, occupying many spaces of power and eroding democratic values.

The rise of national-populist leaderships and the so-called strong men in some of the world's largest democracies, such as Donald Trump in the United States, Narendra Modi in India and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, as well as the cases of Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, confirm this worrying tendency. All of them, despite the anti-liberal rhetoric, gained power by participating in competitive elections and then shared some common patterns by attacking or dismantling the institutions able to limit their power to deploy their political project.

In the book *How democracies die*, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt [3] list some of these defining features: rejection or disregard for democratic rules and order; promotion of clearly undemocratic measures such as restricting political or civil rights, freedom of expression and demonstration, especially of the opposition and civil society; prohibiting the existence of certain political organisations or blocking the participation of opponents by means of all kinds of appeals or even suspending or intervening in electoral processes. Also the use of exceptional measures and changes in institutional systems that play in their favour or that undermine the strength of democratic competition; disqualification of election results when they are adverse; denial of the legitimacy of political opponents whom they define as enemies of the system, of national security, or of social welfare and the values of country, religion or family; predisposition to restrict media pluralism and promotion of false rumours, disinformation or fake news; glorification of repressive actions by other governments in the past or present; tolerance of violence; manipulation of the institutional system or weakening of the independence of the judiciary to bring it under their control.

The rise of national-populist leaderships, the so-called strong men, incorporates a neo-sexist rhetoric that questions the advances of the feminist struggle

A political action strongly anti-liberal and contrary to democratic values that also incorporates a neo-sexist rhetoric that questions the advances of the feminist struggle [4] in recent decades, challenging the gender perspective and unashamedly advocating a return to women's traditional roles of subordination to the patriarchal system. At the same time, national populism neglects to solve the problems of contemporary society, denies or ignores the scientific evidence on climate change and planetary emergence, and dramatically reduces its concerns in an interpretation *à la carte* of "national", geopolitical interest and the agenda of the ruling elites.

The impact of technological change on democracy

Technological change is having a profound impact on all aspects of our lives and also on the evolution of political systems. The case of China is paradigmatic. Technology has become an essential instrument of the political structure serving the objectives of the Chinese Communist Party. A symbolic detail of the importance of Artificial Intelligence in China that was not unnoticed by some international media, was the setting that presided over the institutional address by Xi Jinping to celebrate the beginning of the Chinese New Year. Among the volumes displayed in the presidential library and alongside Marx's Capital, two outstanding books on Artificial Intelligence, algorithms and robotics could be seen [5]. On the road to becoming the new global superpower, China has designed a regime that combines an authoritarian system monopolized by the Communist party, capitalism and the free market, and strict social control to maintain order and stability. To achieve this, China has deployed a huge Artificial Intelligence strategy and *machine learning* to process the big data of the population, to control the life and behaviour of individuals and to punish or reward citizens according to their behaviour and adherence to the regime

The use of technology to extract information for surveillance and social control, however, is not exclusive to authoritarian regimes and in countries such as the United States, there is growing evidence of massive citizen monitoring from the harvesting of "metadata" by government security and intelligence agencies in collusion with large technology corporations. This monitoring invades the privacy and intimacy of individuals and interferes with and alters the relationship between citizens and their government.

The analysis of big data is used exhaustively to know all the acts and movements of people. A parameterised society where every time we do a Google search, it is Google that ends up finding the data it is looking for about us. Consumption patterns, mobility and leisure or much more private and intimate aspects such as beliefs, ideology or even sexual preferences and personal relationships are analysed at the service of what Shoshana Zuboff calls *surveillance capitalism*. The total commodification of our personal data in the pursuit of business and profit. A pervasive and dystopian network that questions and limits our autonomy and freedom in a re-creation halfway between Orwell's *Big Brother* and Foucault's panoptic society in digital format.

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Data are therefore the new raw material of today's societies and the information they provide is the new oil that fuels the era of the digital economy. Those who have access to and control over our data, the elites of the technology corporations, are the ones who

concentrate a large part of the power and capacity to influence and decide on many political processes. Today, empowering us as free citizens again means protecting ourselves from *data extractivism* and gain a new digital sovereignty.

Likewise, with the entry into the digital era and the emergence of social networks, new opportunities for political participation appeared and a new flow of information that seemed to be able to help shape a freer and more pluralistic public opinion. The revolts of the Arab spring and the extensive use of social networks to bring down autocrats presaged this. However, the last decade has seen the other side and its negative impact through the amplification of expressions of calls for hatred or violence and the design of strategies and campaigns of disinformation and fake news, aiming at intoxicating and manipulating citizens to prevent quality public deliberation. The massive use of social networks in the hands of national populism has fuelled extreme political polarisation, sacrificing certainties to create stories that forge data and manipulate reality to obtain electoral returns.

Democracy, fundamental rights and the pandemic

Democracy is the institutional framework for the protection and effective implementation of human rights and civil and political rights. These same rights are also the pitch where democracy is possible. Democracy, therefore, is not a mere succession of electoral contests, but rather shapes a political system through the self-government of citizens and their participation in collective affairs within a framework of guarantee of rights and freedoms, which can only be effective from the fulfilment of general principles of equity in the social and economic domains. The global democratic regression and the increase in inequalities therefore directly and reciprocally affect the situation of fundamental, civil and political rights in the world.

It is in the midst of all these challenges the devastating impact of the pandemic broke out, further straining the system of rights and freedoms. The COVID-19 crisis has made us wondering what are we prepared to give up to protect an essential but not absolute good, such as health. In the general interest of global and collective health, societies around the world have been in lockdowns and shut out for many months, with a total and dystopian restriction of human mobility and freedoms. We have limited our contact with people and restricted our relationship with others, disrupting the basis of every community and the link with our environment. We have accelerated the process of digitalisation of work and all daily activities, disrupting our lives from top to bottom. Overnight, human life in the world has changed and without being able to go out, we have come to observe reality exclusively through an interface on the screens of our devices. A distancing that inevitably alters the perception of a reality that escapes us and that could reinforce the inertia of isolation and social anomie opposed to the dynamics of socialization that make democracy possible. Confined to our homes and dependent on information that is often unconfirmed, full of intoxication and with the risk of *infodemia*, we have surrounded ourselves with a certain informational chaos that has ended up generating new uncertainties about a disturbing present.

The lack of foresight regarding the global impact of the pandemic and the absence of a common strategy of solidarity from the international community has also confirmed the huge weaknesses of the multilateral system and the fragmentation of a multipolar world in the search for new geopolitical balances. Ignorance of the virus and its effects on people has in turn led public authorities to improvise their response in many cases, changing criteria in the face of an unexpected emergency and questioning the ability of current structures to address the global challenges stemming from the fragility of the planet's health and climate change. Public authorities which, focused on the management of health emergencies, have all too often articulated a discourse of militaristic rhetoric, in a logic of state of exception which is worrying from the perspective of fundamental rights. The lessons of history tell us that power structures take advantage of crises to maximise, consolidate and further expand their power. In the new digital era we are living in, technological corporations have therefore extended their dominance. But the pandemic should in no way be an excuse to backtrack on rights, but rather to exercise them responsibly.

The COVID-19 crisis has made us wondering what are we prepared to give up to protect an essential but not absolute good, such as health. The difficult management of today's uncertainties should be a pretext for acting with maximum transparency and fight disinformation

The difficult management of the uncertainties of the present moment should be a pretext for acting with maximum transparency and fighting disinformation and opacity, highlighting in a pedagogical way the complexity of public decision-making. Democracy unfolds its potential when it is nourished by collective knowledge and places the contributions of scientific debate at the centre of the public agenda, avoiding the sectarian and corrosive confrontation of partisanship that infantilises us as a society and undermines the credibility of the institutions.

A recent report from Deutsche Bank (*The Age of Disorder - the new era for economics, politics and our way of life*) pointed out that 2020 could mean the end of globalization and the simultaneous reversal of many of the current trends. The report underlines that we are about to start a new era of disorder and uncertainty where protectionism, cold wars, rising debt, price volatility, the omnipresence of technology, new geopolitics and a class struggle and also between generations will be some of the characteristics that will shape this new era. Here is the picture.

An alarm call and a glimmer of hope

We have seen the many dangers that threaten democracy and we cannot stand idly by. The monographic issue of IDEES “Defending democracy: civil and political rights at risk in the 21st century” is therefore an alarm call. All the published articles and reflections are the fruit of the shared impulse of the Centre for Contemporary Studies (CETC) and the Office of Civil and Political Rights of the Catalan Government. Together, we have conceived this dossier with the growing concern about the situation of democratic regression and the erosion of fundamental, civil and political rights throughout the world. And also, with our eyes also set on domestic issues. Many have been dealt with and are intended to respond to the same thread: the defence of democracy and its system of rights and freedoms.

Democracy is not inevitable, nor is it the final destiny of peoples and nations. We cannot take for granted that it will be the political system of the future. In fact, authoritarian forms of government such as dictatorships, monarchies or oligarchies have predominated throughout history. No country is immune to national populism, we know that only too well. Authoritarian drifts feed on despair, fears and the inability of societies to make real the values of progress and well-being reflected in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and born from the republican tradition. We know that when democracy regresses, this means the advance of alternatives based on the withdrawal of rights, abuses of power, intolerance and, in the end, injustices and violence that take us back to the horrors of the past.

Democracy is not inevitable, nor is it the final destiny of peoples and nations. We cannot take for granted that it will be the political system of the future; if democracy survives, it is because many people still believe and actively defend it despite structural weaknesses and current threats, in a daily conquest to reach new spaces of freedom

The unrest that revolts us is to fall into the loop of the 1930s. Authoritarian leaders are working to trivialise and erase the advances made by democracy. Authoritarianism is on the rise and today, when we analyse the decline of recent years, we find that a greater percentage of the world’s population lives under authoritarian regimes than under democracies. We are going backwards. Societies with a long democratic tradition, such as the United States, are living under strong emotional and political polarisation and the tensions are beginning to break their institutional system down. There are several voices warning of the danger of violence and civil war if the drift continues. Democracies at risk are being fuelled by exclusionary leaderships that comply with each and every one of the guidelines of national-populism, and which may become worse in the future. Europe is no exception. And in those places where democracy is less consolidated, we find within the very structure of the state, dynamics and concerted actions by the public authorities that

are opposed to democratic principles and undermine civil and political rights. We have experienced this in Catalonia in recent years and it will be the European Court of Human Rights that will end up ruling on the judicialisation of political conflict and the conviction, imprisonment and exile of the entire Catalan Government. The repression experienced by the pro-independence movement for holding the referendum on October 1, 2017 is a symptom and expression of this worrying reality.

The success of democracy as a system of government in the last century could therefore become ephemeral, if the principles and conditions that allowed it to develop and consolidate disappear. These principles stem from the liberal and republican tradition, from a free market economy subjected to the rules of a political power freely elected by the citizens and a social framework that favours welfare, justice and social cohesion.

If democracy survives, it is because many people still believe and actively defend it despite structural weaknesses and current threats, in a daily conquest to reach new spaces of freedom, justice and peace.

Today, the challenge is to make democracy the system of governance that is not only more legitimate, but also more efficient, stable and effective for the successful management of the problems and challenges of today's societies, serving the general interests of all citizens. Indeed, democracies will be strengthened if their institutions and citizens are empowered by the scale of the problems to be solved. These democracies should be focused on rebuilding our societies to overcome the pandemic and redirect the socio-economic system towards a sustainable horizon that will allow us to face the climate and social crisis we are experiencing.

Contemporary societies must continue to have solid tools to guarantee and protect civil and political rights: separation of powers, promotion of pluralism and dialogue, freedom of expression, right to protest and demonstration, universal suffrage, education in democratic values, protection of minorities. These are key elements for an effective democracy; but beyond that societies and humanity as a whole need a shared horizon to restore confidence and hope in the future and collective progress.

REFERENCES

- 1 — Samuel P. Huntington (1991). *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*.
- 2 — See [Human Rights Watch](#); [Freedom House](#); [The Economist-Intelligence Unit](#); [Pew Research Center](#) or [V-Dem](#), among many others.
- 3 — Levitsky, Steven; Ziblatt, Daniel (2018). *How democracies die*. Random House.
- 4 — For further reflection on the feminist movement, read the articles from IDEES magazine special issue on [Feminism\(s\)](#), which includes contributions by more than 50 authors.

5 — See *The Master Algorithm: How the Quest for the Ultimate Learning Machine Will Remake Our World*, by Pedro Domingo (2015) and *Augmented: Life in the Smart Lane*, by Brett King (2016).



Pere Almeda

Pere Almeda is the director of the Institut Ramon Llull, a public body founded with the purpose of promoting Catalan culture and language abroad. Previously, he has been the director of the Centre for Contemporary Studies of the Catalan Government and of the IDEES magazine. Jurist and political scientist, he holds a MA in Political Science and a postgraduate in International Relations and Culture of Peace. He is also an associate professor of Political Science at the University of Barcelona. He has collaborated and worked as advisor in different institutions such as the Catalan Parliament, the European Parliament or the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs at the UN Headquarters. Has served as coordinator of the International Project of Sant Pau and Director of the Think Tank Fundació Catalunya Europa leading the project *Combating inequalities: the great global challenge*.



Adam Majó

Adam Majó Garriga is a philologist, journalist and writer. He is currently Director General for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights of the Generalitat de Catalunya. He has a Master's degree in Construction and Representation of Cultural Identities from the University of Barcelona, and regularly collaborates with various media, including the newspapers Regió7, Llibertat.cat, Vilaweb and Nació Digital. He is the author of the book *Europa, la utopia practicable* (Icaria, 2022) and the essay *Set de mal. Desxifrant el feixisme del segle XXI* (Pagès Editors, 2020).