

THE CRISIS OF LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC SYSTEMS

Democracy and the crisis of liberalism

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The Prime Minister of Hungary Viktor Orbán addresses the Hungarian Parliament in Budapest on Hungary's National Day, 15 March 2022. Photo: Jordi Borràs

Europe prides itself on being the cradle of democracy, but history throws up a more nuanced picture. Although the nations of Europe top all democracy indexes at present, the worst atrocities committed in human history were perpetrated by the regime of Adolf Hitler, which came to power through free elections. The defeat of Nazi Germany did not liberate the whole of Europe from autocratic regimes, however. A large part of Southern Europe remained under fascist rule for many years, while most of Eastern Europe was part of the communist Soviet bloc.

The democratic renaissance that began five decades ago went hand in hand with the embracement of liberal ideals by the mainstream centre-left and centre-right parties. The concept of liberal democracy was not just about winning elections: democracy was to be fair, tolerant, inclusive, restrained and reflective. Liberal democracy was not just about law and order; it was also deeply concerned with civic and human rights and the rights of minorities. Power was to be checked, divided and constrained by the constitutional provisions in the liberal model of democracy. The emphasis was on dialogue, deliberation and compromise not only between politicians, but also, if not primarily, between citizens. The liberal notion of democracy always emphasised citizen participation in the decision-making process and encouraged grassroots citizen initiatives.

The democratic “revolutions” in Southern and later Eastern Europe involved considerable grassroots pressure, but the transition from autocracy to democracy was relatively peaceful in most cases because the new and old elites were able to strike uneasy compromises and pacts, such as those signed in Spain’s Palacio de la Moncloa in 1977 or Poland’s Pałac Namiestnikowski in 1989. All of Europe’s new democracies embraced the liberal blueprint, regardless of such complicating factors as relative poverty, inequality, weak civil society, hostile or unstable neighbours, and paternalistic, clientelistic or misogynistic culture. [1]

Liberal democracy is not just about law and order; it is also deeply concerned with civic and human rights and the rights of minorities

Democracy in the United States and in Western Europe represented a source of inspiration, if not a model to imitate. [2] In fact, the old democracies willingly extended a helping hand to new democracies, provided the emerging system was developed along liberal lines [3] (in the aftermath of WWII, the United States demanded its NATO allies keep illiberal parties out of government, a policy that kept the Italian Communist Party on the sidelines despite its sizeable electoral gains). [4]

Of course, the capacity and willingness of political elites in new democracies to follow the liberal path was anything but uniform. Venelin Ganev coined the term “post-accession hooliganism” to refer to states that departed from the liberal course after being admitted to the European Union (EU). [5] Some states emphasised individual freedoms, others communal ones. Some adopted a parliamentary system, others chose a presidential system. The separation of state and church has been interpreted and practised in different ways. Ethnic minorities, migrants or LGBT+ groups have enjoyed uneven rights and protection. Media systems have also varied from state to state. Despite all these variations, a liberal model of democracy nevertheless became the “only game in town” across Europe in the 1990s. Mainstream politicians refrained from illiberal rhetoric because challenging the liberal consensus was prohibitive in electoral terms at that time.

The situation has changed profoundly in recent years as European politicians have increasingly followed Viktor Orbán in declaring a lack of interest in liberal democracy. However, you would be wrong if you thought that Mr Orbán’s Hungary was the worst democratic performer in the EU. The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) Democracy Index 2023 ranks Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia below Hungary. The same index classifies no less than seventeen member states of the EU as “flawed democracies”. [6] After the EIU index 2023 was compiled, illiberal politicians won elections in Slovakia and the Netherlands. In Poland’s November 2023 elections, the overtly illiberal party PiS finished a comfortable first in the ballot, despite failing to secure a parliamentary majority. Even in such “champions” of democracy as Finland or Sweden, governments are no longer able to function without the support of illiberal politicians; and although liberal governments remain at the helm in Germany and France, they find themselves under ever greater pressure from the illiberal Alternative für Deutschland and Rassemblement National.

The political map of Europe is nevertheless indistinct. This is because illiberal politicians try to look respectable and normal when they first take up office. For instance, Ms Meloni toned down her anti-European, anti-immigrant, anti-libertarian rhetoric after coming to power in Italy last year (although it should be noted that her party, Fratelli di Italia, has refused to unequivocally refute its neofascist roots). At the same time, numerous politicians from traditional liberal parties have adopted illiberal rhetoric and policies

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Consider the position of the Danish Social Democrats, not only on immigration, but also on global trade and the free movement of labour within the EU. The Dutch People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy has also shifted from a libertarian stance to one that restricts individual freedoms: current policies restrict the option of dual citizenship, argue that social security should be fully available only to Dutch nationals, and demand that migrants meet increasingly strict integration requirements. It is also striking that President Macron’s recent immigration bill should be praised by the leader of the French illiberal camp, Marine Le Pen. [7]

The unravelling of the liberal consensus

The liberal consensus was seriously challenged for the first time in 1999, when a xenophobic politician from Carinthia, Jörg Haider, led his party to a historic electoral success that made him the leading candidate for Austria’s prime minister. [8] This prospect caused outrage in numerous European capitals and the heads of fourteen EU Member States agreed to suspend cooperation with Austria. The Austrian government was eventually formed under the leadership of a more moderate politician, Wolfgang Schüssel, Haider resigned from the leadership of his party, and EU Member States returned to business as usual in their relations with Austria. However, the fact remained that an overtly illiberal party had become part of the governing coalition in the heart of Europe.

The EU’s inability to curb the rise of illiberal politics in Austria did not go unnoticed in neighbouring Hungary. Having lost the office of prime minister in the 2002 elections, the mainstream conservative politician, Viktor Orbán, began to embrace an illiberal agenda. On his return to office in 2010, Orbán effectively put an end to media freedom, castigated migrants, persecuted liberal NGOs, and curbed the rights of LGBT+ people. While his rhetoric became overtly nationalistic and anti-European, his voicing of ideas allegedly incompatible with Christian values also came under fire. As Liz Fekete wrote:

“Under Orbán’s utilisation of the ‘Christian-national idea’, with its anti-Semitic undertones, Christianity is hitched to the nativist

cause, rallying popular views against refugees, the Roma and the ‘indolent’ poor.” [9]

Around the same time, the financial crisis struck the Western world, hitting the indebted states of Southern Europe particularly hard. The hardship inflicted on ordinary people by liberal governments trying to avert a total financial meltdown and the collapse of the euro was widely criticised by radical politicians on both sides of the European political spectrum. The financial crisis also undermined public trust in such liberal tenets as European integration, the globalisation of financial markets or compassionate capitalism. Even the most fundamental liberal principle – freedom – has been perverted by liberal governments, according to critics. George Monbiot notes that:

“Freedom from trade unions and collective regulation means the freedom to suppress wages. Freedom from regulation means the freedom to poison rivers, endanger workers, charge iniquitous rates of interest and design exotic financial instruments. Freedom from tax means freedom from the distribution of wealth that lifts people out of poverty.” [10]

Although one could argue that neoliberal economics rather than liberalism as such is to blame for the hardship caused by the financial crisis, nevertheless the crisis took place on the liberals’ watch. Liberal democracies allowed, even encouraged the neoliberal excesses that have led many voters to seek alternatives.

Public trust in the liberal consensus was further undermined by the refugee crisis of 2015-2016. Respect for human rights and citizenship fell victim to hastily adopted, inhuman measures to halt the mass movement of people at land and maritime borders. A striking example of this was the decision to abandon the Mare Nostrum Operation, whose mission was to prevent refugees from drowning in the Mediterranean Sea. Much more recently, human rights defenders argue that the EU’s new migration pact agreement will curtail international protection standards and increase human suffering. [11]

It is common knowledge that refugee flows are usually produced by three factors: war, poverty and climate change. Yet most liberal governments have failed to live up to their development aid pledges, while commitments to combat climate change often remain on paper. Post-conflict state building efforts in unstable parts of the world are either limited or non-existent. In fact, liberal governments have often joined forces with autocratic governments in North Africa and the Middle East to deflect migrants from European shores. Increasingly, refugees are portrayed as an economic burden and a cultural threat. Some European governments have also been accused of treating refugees as criminals and even terrorists. It is little wonder that citizens have come to perceive liberal pledges as

either hypocritical or wholly false, encouraging illiberal politicians to exploit the topic of migration for their electoral ends.

Liberal democracies allowed the neoliberal excesses that have led many voters to seek alternatives

The restrictions on citizens' freedom imposed by liberal governments during the COVID-19 pandemic have also been exploited by illiberal politicians. Most of these restrictions have since been lifted, although some emergency powers acquired by governments at the time have remained in place. [12]

Explaining the illiberal turn

Liberal politicians tend to attribute their predicament to external factors beyond their control, such as the financial and refugee crises. Yet, as I have tried to show, their own policies caused these crises to some extent, whether by default or design. Moreover, numerous domestic factors have caused people to switch their vote to illiberal political parties. To start with, the application of liberal principles has often been opaque. This is probably because liberalism has become the ideology of those in power rather than that of the disadvantaged or oppressed, as in its beginnings. Those in power tend to be insensitive, arrogant and primarily interested in defending their own privileged position. To paraphrase a famous saying, power tends to corrupt.

In recent decades, democracy has increasingly become an art in institutional and technocratic engineering with little space for citizen participation. Elections are organised, but they fail to generate genuine policy changes, while key decisions are taken by unelected bodies such as central banks, constitutional courts and the European Commission. There were good reasons for the depoliticisation of the judicial or financial systems, but by shifting ever more powers to non-majoritarian institutions, liberalism has effectively deprived the electorate of a say in politics.

Moreover, liberal parties have become "cadre" and "cartel" parties with few members and no loyal electorate. No longer acting as a bridge between the state and society, they have become part of the state machine, detached from the electorate. The highly respected political scientist Peter Mair concluded over a decade ago:

"Although the parties themselves remain, they have become so disconnected from the wider society, and pursue a form of competition that is so lacking in meaning, that they no longer seem capable of sustaining democracy in its present form." [13]

However, it is difficult to organise democratic elections without political parties, and the disenchanted electorate has switched its vote to illiberal parties not associated with the problems that evolved during the liberal rule.

Perverted party politics are also partly responsible for the crisis of parliamentary representation. Gone are the days when parliaments resembled a marketplace for ideas; today parliaments are voting machines disciplined by party whips. Members of parliament follow the party line and hurl insults at each other, making a mockery of the ideal of deliberative democracy. Parliamentarians are also repeatedly tainted by corruption scandals and found out in the telling of blatant lies; there have even been scenes of violent brawls in parliament chambers. It is little wonder that public trust in parliaments and parliamentarians has significantly declined in recent years.

Democracy has become an art in institutional engineering with little space for citizen participation

A democratic arrangement that generates conflicts, rewards demagoguery, hype and spin, and produces accidental rather than fair and effective outcomes is not sustainable in the long run. Illiberal politicians are perverting the system of parliamentary representation still further, but this offers no consolation to the liberal democrats.

Impotent democracy

Dysfunctional parliamentary representation is an easy prey for illiberal politicians pretending to act on behalf of ordinary people against the liberal elite. However, if democracy is to provide meaningful forms of representation, it must effectively address citizens' problems. The apparent impotence of democracy to address such epochal challenges as climate change, the erosion of social protection or the mass migration is clearly bad news for liberal democrats in Europe and beyond. Why is democracy ineffective? In my latest book - *The Lost Future* - I argue that democracy is no longer in sync with time and space, and this makes it weak. [14]

First, democracy is tied to nation-states defending the selfish interests of a given territory and community. Second, democracy is hostage to present-day voters with detrimental implications for future generations. This explains why democracy is stumbling in an increasingly intertwined global environment that is running at an ever faster pace; it explains the growing feeling of democratic vulnerability and impotence despite all our technological advances.

If democracy is unable to halt climate change, protect social provisions or reduce migration, citizens are likely to turn its back on it, even with an improved system of representation. Unlike illiberal politicians, the liberals are not denying climate change. But climate change can hardly be effectively addressed within the borders of a single nation-

state, however democratic. Moreover, our grandchildren – who will live to experience the full devastating impact of climate change – will not cast votes in the next elections, and politicians are reluctant to adopt costly measures that will affect the current voters who determine their careers in the short term. A similar logic applies to migration. Migration can hardly be effectively addressed at state borders. Unless there is a collective and sustained effort over many years to reduce poverty in the underdeveloped parts of the world, check violent conflicts and avert destruction of the natural environment, people will continue to flee their unfortunate countries en masse.

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Democratic short-sightedness in terms of time and space is not new, of course. Yet democratic myopia, somehow manageable in the era of coal and steel, is not so in the era of the internet. The internet revolution that began only three decades ago has dramatically changed our notion of time and space, rendering the world “flat” (i.e., borderless) and running at high speed. Is it possible to name any adequate reforms of democracy since the birth of the internet? The military-industrial sector has been able to utilise the internet for modern warfare. Banks are conducting global financial transactions in fractions of a second. Autocratic states have proved skilful in applying digital technology for mass surveillance of citizens. While, strangely, e-democracy is still rudimentary in most liberal states, and tech-savvy networks of cities, NGOs or the European agencies are excluded from key decisions and resources.

In sum, liberals must not only address the weakness of democratic representation, they should also think hard how to make democracy more effective in the digital era of turbo-capitalism and unprecedented interconnectedness.

Conclusions

The notion of illiberal democracy is a misnomer. Illiberal democracy is merely autocracy framed in a devious way. We have seen this in Orbán’s Hungary as well as in Bolsonaro’s Brazil and Trump’s America. Autocracies may well act more swiftly than democracy, but swift decisions are not necessarily wiser decisions. Moreover, autocracies are selfish by definition, and any international alliances they form with other autocracies are usually aimed at oppressing rather than liberating their own people.

How to defend democracy against the illiberal onslaught? Wolfgang Merkel and Anna Lührmann propose an interesting concept or strategy of democratic resilience [15] LDemocracy should be resilient at all four levels of the political system: political community, institutions, actors and citizens. Three types of defence can be applied by

democracies: (1) withstand without change; (2) adapt through internal change; and (3) recover without losing the democratic nature of the regime and its constitutive core institutions, organisations and processes. Merkel and Lührmann's message is that "political agency matters". [16] My question is whether the nation-state remains suited to making democracy work in the modern world. Perhaps we need to locate democracy at levels above and below the nation-state. Perhaps dispersing power between different territorial actors, including the EU, cities, regions and NGOs will make democracy more effective and legitimate.

Although democracy may well be down, it is certainly not out. Liberals should think hard how to adjust democratic institutions to the epochal challenges of the 21st century. So far, they are chiefly busy defending their record in power. I would rather hear them propose how to make economic and social networks more accessible, transparent and accountable. Networks are the greatest beneficiaries of the internet revolution and they should be employed for democratic ends. [17]

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