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Liberal democracy: the threat of counter-narratives

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Abstract The universalism of liberal democracy is under attack. While the number of democracies in the world has increased, the level of freedom in them has declined. Electoral or illiberal democracies only provide the minimum standard of democracy, where individual liberties remain unprotected. Furthermore, these illiberal democracies have developed counter-narratives that attack the liberal international order, and with it, liberal democracy. These counter-narratives, supported by Russia, China and other undemocratic regimes, confront liberal democracy in three ways: first, they trivialise the violation of individual liberties for the sake of increasing state security; second, the claim of civilisational diversity is used to reject democratic values as incompatible with their culture; and third, they accuse the West of the moral decay of 'traditional' values. Moreover, these authoritarian narratives play to the West's weaknesses. The West needs to defend its hard-won liberties, rights and values by confronting these counter-narratives. Furthermore, citizens have a moral duty to participate politically in order to ensure that democracy continues to work. The transatlantic community needs to ensure that liberal democracy remains at the top of its agenda.

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Introduction

After the end of the Cold War, it was generally assumed that liberalism had prevailed and that the remaining non-democratic countries would transition into consolidated democracies. Consolidated democracies are defined by the improbability of regression into authoritarianism, a lack of clientelism (O'Donnell 1996) and the establishment of functioning political institutions. In his paper 'Democracy's Third Wave', Samuel P. Huntington (1991) points out that a new wave of democratisation can easily be set back by a reverse wave, affecting both first-time democracies, which transitioned from authoritarianism to democracy for the first time in the last wave, as well as governments that have experienced previous waves of democracy. However, a reverse wave becomes more and more unlikely as democracies gain more experience and set up consolidated political institutions that guarantee a successful democratic transition (Diamond 2008).

Within the present international order based on liberalism, the West is the only bloc in which all countries have developed liberal democracies. The latter protect our core values and hard-won liberties; without them, the West would lose its identity and its power. Therefore, the issues of liberal democracy must remain high on the transatlantic agenda. However, liberal democracy often remains undiscussed while other crises make it to the table. Complacency in this matter will have very serious consequences: a new reverse wave of authoritarianism is storming ahead and damaging young democracies on the path to liberal democracy. Authoritarian states do not apply liberalism but follow other narratives that form the basis of their regimes. If not stopped, these 'counter-narratives' to the liberal paradigm will be able to gain a stronghold in government and allow suppression free range. This article will make a case for liberal democracy and reject the counter-narratives that have become popular among authoritarian regimes.

Why democracy needs to be liberal

That democracy is not perfect has never been a secret. As former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill (United Kingdom 1947) put it: 'democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time . . . ' After the first (1820–1926) and second (1945–62) waves of democratisation, the third wave commenced in the 1970s (Huntington 1991, 12).¹ However, it seems that now, after 30–40 years, it has peaked and has tipped over into a reverse wave. Over the past decade, the trend of enthusiastic democratisation has slowed down and, for some countries, has even stopped.

¹ Each wave was followed by a reverse wave; the first reverse wave set in around 1922 with the coming to power of Italian dictator Mussolini, while the second reverse wave lasted from 1960 to 1975.

The failure of Communism and Fascism has left liberalism as the surviving major narrative. However, not everyone adheres to it: the classic claim is that liberalism is mostly followed by the West and is rejected by others who say that ‘democracy is a Western idea that is inappropriate for some cultures in the contemporary world, whether these be Asian, Islamic [or] Confucian’ (Beetham 2009, 286). However, these political, cultural and economic counter-arguments against implementing democracy are invalid. Even though liberal democracy is more common in the West, it is not a ‘thing’ of the West. Democracy has a universal claim for two reasons: first, there are good reasons for people everywhere to see democracy as valuable on intrinsic, instrumental and constructive grounds (Sen 1999);² and second, the justification of universal applicability is underpinned by shared human nature, which does not stop at the borders of a country or region (Beetham 2009). Furthermore, the key to liberal democracy is good governance,³ something that should be achievable without the cultural, political or economic prerequisites needing to be in place, anywhere in the world (Diamond 2008). There only needs to be political will.

The shortcomings of democracy alone

While the number of democracies has increased over the years, freedom is declining due to a lack of good governance (Freedom House 2015). As renowned international relations analyst Fareed Zakaria (1997) put it: ‘Democracy is flourishing [while] constitutional liberalism is not.’ While scholars may discuss the various forms of democracy, not all—as will be shown below—are capable of protecting core values and liberties.

The minimum standard for falling into the category of a democracy is to have elections. Indeed, elections are at the heart of any democracy, but the other key words that must be inseparable from them are ‘free’, ‘fair’, ‘transparent’, ‘open’ and ‘competitive’. According to the International Republican Institute (n.d.), ‘[d]emocratic elections are the cornerstone of a representative government, the best way to ensure the peaceful alternation of power between competing political groups and the only means of choosing leaders based on the will of citizens’. If an electorate makes a poor choice in one cycle, it should be able to vote out the disappointing leader in the next cycle. However, elections can be easily manipulated by the ruling elite to ensure that they remain in power forever. Yet, with one or two exceptions, the popular vote has never willingly ended democracy (Huntington 1991, 18). Therefore, there has to be more to a liberal democracy than the minimum of ‘electoral’ democracy.

² In his article ‘Democracy as a universal value’, Amartya Sen describes intrinsic value as important for human life and well-being; instrumental value as important for ‘enhancing the hearing that people get in expressing’; and constructive value as important for having the ‘opportunity to learn from one another’, and helping ‘society to form its values and priorities’ (Sen 1999, 10).

³ Good governance refers to the quality of public administration, and according to UN resolution 2000/64 it includes transparency, responsibility, accountability, participation and responsiveness (to the needs of the people) (UN Refugee Agency 2000).

Without a system of checks and balances, Zakaria (2007, 99) argues, elections are merely legitimising power grabs and create a strongman, as in Russia and Belarus. Zakaria blames the focus on support for elections as the main reason for the rise of these ‘illiberal’ democracies (Plattner 1998, 171). He even concludes that liberal autocracy, such as that found in Thailand and Malaysia, is preferable to illiberal democracy because the former at least better protects individual liberties through the established rule of law: thus these political regimes are presumably more liberal and more affirming of the rule of law, despite being less democratic. However, if political systems are less accountable to their people, then why would they protect civil liberties? In contrast, political sociologist, Larry Diamond (2003, 169) reasons that liberal autocracy is an illusion and states that it is important to think about ‘how democracy can be strengthened and reformed where it exists and introduced where it does not in ways that restrain populist, illiberal, and crudely majoritarian practices.’ While democracy may have become the norm in the world—the most common, and only broadly legitimate, form of government—it often functions in ways that abridge liberty. Liberalism protects these liberties and Plattner (1998, 171) may have been right when he wrote: ‘Liberalism and democracy: [you] can’t have one without the other’.

The only form of governance that embodies fully fledged democracy with fair and free elections and checks and balances is liberal democracy.⁴ A liberal democracy is based on the rule of law, freedom of speech and association, a multiparty system, and a strong civil society. Moreover, in a liberal democracy strong political institutions are in place that provide the checks and balances on the ruling elite, and ensure the stability of the democracy while power is being transferred. The necessity of these institutions and the above-mentioned elements is demonstrated by the inadequacy of electoral democracies to remove non-democratic leaders from office and to prevent the reversion of the democratic structure of a country. Therefore, if democratic structures are to endure, citizens’ voices must be heard, their participation must be facilitated, their protests tolerated, their freedoms protected and their needs responded to (Diamond 2008).

The false alternatives to liberal democracy

While the West is convinced that liberal democracy is a very attractive governance model for the ruling elite and the citizens, other narratives, which denounce liberalism and democracy, have gained ground. Freedom House (2015) reported ‘a disturbing decline in global freedom in 2014’, showing that the third reverse wave is in full bloom. Not restricted to one particular area of the world, non-democratic narratives are cleverly challenging all that the West deems good. How do these narratives find ways to (re-) emerge and strengthen their foothold?

Because it is such an open system, democracy can easily be abused by demagogues and autocrats. The reverse wave is strengthened by young democracies that

⁴ ‘The word “liberal” in the phrase liberal democracy refers not to the matter of who rules but to the matter of how that rule is exercised’ (Plattner 1998, 172).

have halted the small steps they have taken on the road to democracy: for example, by power-hungry leaders falsifying elections and threatening any opposing political party (Diamond 2008). However, the promise of a wise and benevolent despot is deceiving, a tale that will never come true.

Authoritarianism in its many forms

Various forms of authoritarianism have taken root across the world (Huntington 1991). Religious fundamentalism has been used as a justification for establishing authoritarian regimes both by those who support it, such as the Iranian clergy, and by those who oppose it, such as former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. Oligarchic authoritarianism can develop in both poor and rich countries, but is common in countries where corruption is high and business has free range. Populist dictatorships move into the vacuums that are sometimes created within democracies. They seduce people with their simplistic proposals but fail to deliver. A fourth type of authoritarianism is communal dictatorship, where sectarianism is used as the reason for one group to ‘protect’—that is, to control—ethnic or religious separation. Interestingly enough, in 1991 Huntington defined a possible future form of authoritarianism as that ‘in which authoritarian rule is made possible and legitimated by the regime’s ability to manipulate information, the media, and sophisticated means of communications’ (Huntington 1991, 20). However, Huntington (1991, 20) thought that this ‘electronic dictatorship’ would be highly improbable, though not ‘totally impossible’. Today’s Russia has proven him wrong. The emergence of the Internet and new ways of communication have been used by President Vladimir Putin’s regime both to control the country and to expand his influence in democratic countries. Through the use of party finances and consistent propaganda on Russian-speaking TV channels, Putin has been able to exert political influence both in Europe and in countries with a Russian-speaking population (Klapisis 2014; Samadashvili 2014). Putin’s Russia appears to be offering an attractive alternative model, and Europe needs to be aware that the continent is facing an ambitious ideological challenge to its liberal democracies. Unfortunately for the citizens of authoritarian countries, the promises of autocratic rulers are never fulfilled and their countries are always far from becoming safer, more prosperous or more powerful.

The main counter-narratives to liberal democracies

The overarching idea among autocrats is that the liberal democratic discourse is a cover for the West’s geopolitical interests. It claims, therefore, that the West’s paradigm is no better than anyone else’s. Authoritarians have ‘[o]ver the past decade . . . experimented with and refined a number of new tools, practices, and institutions that are meant to shield their regimes from external criticism and to erode the norms that inform and underlie the liberal international political order’ (Cooley 2015, 49). Three counter-narratives are often used by today’s autocratic leaders to defend their regimes. The first counter-narrative emphasises an alleged trade-off between state security and individual liberty. In order to guarantee security for all, the authoritarian regime represses human

rights and political diversity. Furthermore, it claims that the West is doing the same: that the West is sacrificing the individual rights of citizens in order to ensure their protection. In the post-9/11 era there has been a surge in counterterrorist legislation in which civil rights have become subordinate to state security. While this trade-off might seem legitimate on paper, in practice it can have dangerous consequences if power falls into the wrong hands. This issue is often used by authoritarians as a retort to Western criticisms. Belarus, Turkey and Iran are firm supporters of this counter-narrative. The second counter-narrative emphasises the cultural differences between countries and civilisations. It is supported by, amongst others, China, and touches on the aforementioned claim of the ‘incompatibility’ of some cultures with liberal democracy’s universalism. Protecting the principle of sovereignty and non-interference, like-minded unfree regimes, under the umbrella of the ‘democratisation’ of international relations, are building the foundations of an ‘openly-illiberal international body constituted to check the current . . . international system’ dominated by the West (Gilley et al. 2010, 10). These regimes are setting new norms that counter liberalism and, amongst other things, reject the imposition of political and economic conditionality by global governance systems (Cooley 2015, 52). The third counter-narrative defends ‘traditional’ values and claims that Western individualism has reached a state of moral decay. Mainly backed by Russia, it accuses the West of being decadent and calls for a return to heritage, culture and religion. Here again, the undemocratic regimes use global democratic institutions to pass bills against fundamental human rights, relying on the support of their counterparts. However, using traditional values in this discourse will result in a ‘misleading interpretation of existing human rights norms’ (Cooley 2015, 53) and will undermine their universality. The three counter-narratives mutually reinforce each other and dispute liberal democracy’s universality.

Illiberalism in Europe

Unfortunately, these narratives are not limited to autocratic regimes outside the West. Liberal democracies in the West, or elsewhere, are not immune to autocratic traits. The line between data collection and privacy limitation in the name of national security has been shown to be a fine one. Individual liberties are now more at risk, as was demonstrated when computer specialist Edward Snowden breached confidentiality and leaked classified information from the US National Security Agency that showed that the organisation had violated the privacy of citizens for the sake of keeping them safe from terrorist attacks. Furthermore, the freedom of the media also needs to be protected. Without an independent media, the information in the public domain would soon become unbalanced, one-sided or even incorrect. This could easily put an end to independent thought. Finally, tolerance of political opposition and the right of public protest must also be protected, while corruption needs to be stopped.

These fine lines need to be safeguarded. At least in Europe, institutions such as the Council of Europe are able to identify this line and warn those states that step over it or show signs that they are about to.

If these narratives are not countered, they will reshape the international environment for the worse. It is well known that success breeds imitation, and more authoritarian regimes (plus some backsliding democracies) around the world are beginning to emulate these practices. It is therefore important to vigorously oppose these counter-narratives and start defending our values and liberties again.

Defending liberal democracy

There are two sides to the defence of liberal democracy: the first is that liberal democracy must be defended from these counter-narratives, and the second is that it should be defended by its citizens.

These counter-narratives are especially dangerous to liberal democracy as they are well marketed and make use of liberalism's own reasoning. The surging wave of counter-narratives needs to be reversed by liberal democracy's confidence that it is the righteous form of governance.

First, liberal democracies should not let the democratisation of politics on the national and international level be tarnished by anti-democratic forces abusing the system. On the national level, it is paramount that the West protects and strengthens its political institutions that guarantee the rule of law and the separation of powers. Denial by Western political elites that there is 'room for improvement in the application of democracy would be a fatal mistake' (Huhtanen 2015, 46). On the international level, scrutiny and the implementation of laws, applying existing benchmarks of international law, and standard setting are crucial to countering these counter-narratives. This will also allow the West to continue to be the guardian of values and set the global framework, to which these authoritarian regimes need to adapt.

Second, this does mean that liberal democracies need to be true to their values, and respect what it means to be a liberal democracy. Liberal democracy's biggest challenge is to avoid the trap of populism, which often embraces elements of the three counter-narratives presented above. However, it cannot use the same tools as autocrats (e.g. propaganda) in order to counter these attacks.

Third, liberal democracies also need to exercise constraint: they should resist decoupling normative issues from geopolitics—values and interests are intertwined. Liberal democracies are often criticised for applying double standards regarding values: they denounce authoritarian regimes for violating the freedoms and rights of their citizens, while compromising their own values at times. Furthermore, the issues of human rights and democracy need to remain on the agenda in any type of interaction with autocratic regimes.

Fourth, it is important to make democracy work; not only should people maintain democracy after they have obtained it, but democracy should also deliver results to them. The political elite needs to continue to deliver: 'political stagnation, economic inefficiency and social chaos . . . will inevitably be seen as failures of democracy'

(Huntington 1991, 16). In times of economic hardship or political turmoil, liberal democracy faces the challenge of efficiency. In liberal democracies, citizens have many rights, but the freedom of democracy also comes with responsibility: citizens have a moral duty to make it succeed and to ensure its transfer from their generation to the next. Democracy needs to be maintained by the citizens' votes, participation and common sense.

Fifth, an important factor in sustaining liberal democracy is an independent media in order to ensure balanced news reporting. Citizens are easy targets for populists from the far right and far left. With their promising and very simplistic one-liners they appeal to the masses and are able to sell the reasons why any of the counter-narratives would be a good alternative to democracy. Moreover, worldwide, the West's largely independent media presence is diminishing, while biased media stations such as Russia Today and Central China Television are gaining ground, even in Europe. If this trend continues, it will only be a matter of time before the counter-narratives that are broadcast become the truths that people believe in.

Conclusion

Liberalism is a very dynamic, adaptable and pragmatic philosophy that offers solutions for today's problems, and liberal democracy is the best guarantee against the abuse of power (Suzman n.d.). There is a lot to gain from democracy: autocracies do not solve problems better than poorly performing democracies, and the experience of having democratic procedures and institutions in place makes it more likely that a country will convert to a fully-fledged democracy one day.

Ignoring the challenges and threats to liberal democracy will not help its future. The West can take the lead, but it should team up with other strongholds of liberal democracy worldwide to assist young democracies, and convert, or even put pressure on, non-democratic regimes. The counter-narratives may have got a foot in the door of the free world, but they can be stopped from prying it open further if the West maintains its confidence in liberal democracy. Without this confidence, the West will not only continue to lose its global appeal, but will lose itself too. Currently, the global system is still dominated by the supporters of the liberal international political order, and while this is still the case the debate on defending these core transatlantic values needs to be put back on the West's agenda.

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