



## The Future of Democracy:

### A Roundtable and Planning Workshop

Inter-University Centre, Dubrovnik – April 3-5, 2018



By Lloyd Etheredge

Democracy was trusted widely at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the best political system for human progress. However, unexpected global trends across the past fifteen years arouse serious concern, and the possibility that they will continue is alarming. Democracy-generated progress has stalled. A new, unforeseen politics of fear and anger has brought democratic values and institutions under siege in many places, including several of the world's most powerful countries. What should we do? The challenge, to be discussed at an international roundtable and planning workshop organized by WAAS and WUC, can be summarized in three dimensions:

- 1.) **The global spread of democracy has stopped.** Democracy spread in Eastern Europe after the Cold War, but not much has happened since. Instead, China and Russia have consolidated authoritarian oligarchies that rule 1.5 billion people. Once-promising democracies (e.g., Turkey, Venezuela) have eroded. Violence to create religious dictatorships has spread in the Islamic world. In Africa (and elsewhere - e.g., Haiti and parts of the Middle East) history's evolutionary pathway has led to failed or fragile states, decades of assistance for economic and political development notwithstanding.
- 2.) **Progress within democracies has stalled.** The implied promise that liberal democracy will bring economic and social justice for everyone is no longer reliable.<sup>1</sup> The distribution of the world's wealth has become more unequal, with the top 1 % owning half of the world's wealth (about \$140 trillion.) Newer democracies grant a right to vote. However, their democratic political processes are manipulated and remain superficial. Behind the scenes, traditional oligarchies still select candidates and decide what to exclude from agendas. An apparent rise of corruption (e.g., Brazil) suggests an erosion of values in some democratic Establishments.
- 3.) **In developed democracies, voters are turning against democratic values and institutions, expressing and building a new politics of fear and anger.** At one level, democracy may be working: voters are removing unsatisfactory politicians and elites. However, new demagogic and divisive leaders also are arising whose solutions are unlikely to work and who increase fear and polarization. Elected, the new leaders (e.g., in America) attack the formal and informal rules, cultural norms, and other institutions that support democracy. (They use fake news; aggressive, loud, message-of-the-day media attack machines; and sophisticated negative campaigning to increase turn-out by arousing fear and anger). The new demagoguery is bringing nationalism and ethnic prejudice, greater military investments, and renewed talk about building more nuclear weapons.

---

<sup>1</sup> Rather than use Western liberal democracy, the Chinese success of lifting hundreds of millions of people above the poverty line used a more authoritarian, Confucian model and guided capitalism.

A three-day international Future of Democracy roundtable and planning workshop should seek to understand these trends, designate priorities, and create needed strategies. Below are ten issues grouped into three categories for discussion. The intent is to begin crafting a policy framework for the best application of knowledge to the future of democracy: 1.) Where are we? 2.) What do democracies need to know? and 3.) Planning.

## **I. Where are We?**

### **1.) Lessons from History**

Liberal democracies often are analyzed as incandescent achievements, requiring many centuries and causal contributions, including the preaching of religious authority, *and violence* to change a political world of authority, obedience, exploitation, and injustice. What worked best? Is the right answer to repeat these strategies?

### **2.) Lessons from the Front Lines**

What is happening now? Are there new types of strategies that will work if applied more widely? Many roundtable participants will have first-hand observations of human rights advocacy, social marketing and cultural strategy, non-violent methods, the ending of the Cold War and the earlier nuclear arms race (after 70,000 nuclear weapons were built), democracy-building in Eastern Europe, the Arab Spring; and UDC nation-building cases. How did the world achieve the enlightened global behavior of the environmental movement, the cooperation for international public health, and coordinated global responses to humanitarian emergencies?

### **3.) Are We Asking the Right Questions?**

The Axial Age (800 BC to 200 BC) laid the foundations for philosophy and brought the world's major religious and ethical systems to life. Leading thinkers shared the goal of human flourishing as the defining purpose of governments and the standard to evaluate governments. Also, they shared a diagnosis: “[T]he unbridled pursuit of wealth, power, fame, sensual passion, arrogance, and pride” impeded the achievement of the good. (Schwartz, quoted in Bellah, Religion in Human Evolution, 2011, p. 422). Are the same motivations again undermining progress?

Or are there other explanations? One possibility is that dysfunctions of the American political system are responsible.<sup>2</sup> Another possibility is that the size of modern democracies requires enormous (and inhibiting) investments of time and money to create agendas and momentum. [If this diagnosis is correct, a solution may be needed or other remedies will fail.]

---

<sup>2</sup> The worst global economic crisis since the Depression, with costs to billions of people since 2008, was shaped by high-powered lobbying and negligence of American politicians, government regulators, journalists, academic economists, and many others. Concerning global instability: Behavioral science models have predicted (and the intelligence community has warned), beginning in 2008, that a prolonged recession in many countries (especially with high youth unemployment) would increase political instability, aggressive political conflict, recruitment to terrorism and other change-oriented movements on a global scale. To extend the new causal argument: American leadership for invasions and prolonged and unwon

## **II. What Do Democracies Need to Know?**

The next three topics [4.) Equal Justice Under Law: Metrics; 5.) Economics and Politics; 6.) Achieving Enlightened Behavior] identify a second dimension for discussion: To achieve the goal of democracy (the flourishing of all human beings, someday), what do democracies need to know? Especially in a complex and pluralist world of 7.5 billion people (most of whom might not be listening)? Since almost all democracies assign decisions to elected representatives, a related analysis is to inventory what these elected representatives would need to know to organize swifter progress for everyone?

### **4. Equal Justice Under Law: Metrics**

It might be useful, to stimulate and organize a democratic renewal, to create a full annual set of accurate metrics disclosing the distance that each society must travel to deliver equal justice under law to all citizens. Metrics help human beings to recognize comfortable complacency, remind their better selves of unjustified suffering, establish accountability and manage organizational processes, learn, identify blind spots, and accelerate progress. In a world where discrimination and unjustified suffering are ubiquitous, the new metrics might pinpoint the problems to solve so that democracies and human potential can flourish.<sup>3</sup> [Although the task may seem daunting, democracies often do not need majorities to write the future but only organized and committed minorities with gifted leadership.]

- Confucius believed that most political revolutions and reforms did not work because what was needed was a renewal of spirit and the sacredness of other people and nature. Facts alone probably will not work unless they are informed by this special knowledge that Confucius sought.

[A comprehensive metrics should allow creative measures that publicize problems that have become invisible to most voters. The new data on police line-of-duty shooting of unarmed civilians, by race, in America has been alarming. Most citizens may not have thought about how many other missing metrics would cause them to say "Something ought to be done about . . ."

### **5. Economics and Politics**

The relationship between economics (both wealth and economic performance) and power shapes societal outcomes in all forms of government, including democracy. Unequal wealth usually changes a one-person-one-vote reality in a democratic political system and can skew results.

---

wars in Afghanistan and Iraq has contributed to violence in the Islamic world and built the refugee crises and their growing political stress in Europe.

<sup>3</sup> Plato believed that Justice was the key to political stability, genuine patriotism, and military success, and to the trust and voluntary and spirited participation in all dimensions of Athenian life by citizens who knew their contributions would be recognized.

In America, this power becomes greater as the cost of perpetual political campaigns and election cycles has escalated to billions of dollars.

- A second issue has emerged from simple models of both economic market systems and democratic political systems. The economic theory of public goods identifies benefits to collective human welfare that will be underfunded by market systems. The parallel conclusion for national democratic politics occurs when future beneficiaries and victims, foreigners (etc.) cannot vote. With the increasing reliance upon democratic governments, the world might be witnessing the cumulative effects of their designed limitations. Perhaps a wise recommendation is to rely upon other systems, with comparative advantages, to fill the gaps. [Although they will currently be underfunded (e.g., scientific research, large non-profit institutions like the Gates Foundation).]

- A related issue is that unequal wealth can shift the wealthy into a separate reality, a disconnection that can make government unresponsive to the agendas of invisible citizens of lower status.

## **6. Achieving Enlightened Behavior**

If the world needs enlightened behavior, and a critical component [setting aside rationality] is a spiritual growth, how can this be brought to life in time?

The Axial Age pioneered several methods to improve enlightened behavior: 1.) Obedience to universal moral codes commanded by a supreme Deity; 2.) The invention of a new educational process (by Socrates and Plato's Academy) to produce philosopher-kings; 3.) Self-cultivation. (Confucius believed that human progress would be assured as soon as rulers understood what a fully developed human being could be.); 4.) Buddhism and other spiritual traditions advanced techniques (e.g., meditation) for a belief-independent awakening and growth of compassion.

More recently, science and other professions have contributed a new identity, set of values, and spirit. Today, new professional programs offer to train future leaders who can be trusted to apply science-based problem-solving and build international networks for progress that work better than relying upon politics or majority voting or waiting for philosopher-kings. [The sociologist Max Weber suggested that political achievements also will grow to the extent that politics evolves as a profession.]

A useful step might be to discuss the problem with Buddhist thinkers, the Catholic Church and other religious/spiritual traditions that have been working this angle for 2,000+ years and may have reached an upper bound. Can they take a fresh look at practical methods that facilitate enlightened behavior and that the world could use without requiring conversion to Buddhism or Catholicism?

## **III. Planning**

### **7. Change-Making Skills for Democracies and a Pluralist World of 7.5 Billion People**

Is it possible that democracies are in trouble because the scale of today's democratic institutions requires specialized skills and investments to develop agendas and make changes? Would a

new 21st-century curriculum for citizenship to teach effective change-making improve democratic performance? What would the new curriculum be like? [In early Athens, courage was taught in many ways and considered a part of the education for effective democratic citizenship and for other areas of life.]

## **8. More Reliable Economic Science: Anticipating the Greater Economic and Political Stress Ahead.**

The extraordinary, continuing high rates of “lost generation” youth unemployment and *de facto* messages of indifference in the EU and UDCs since the 2008 global economic crisis began, are likely to be increasingly dangerous for democracy and costly for long-term growth. As interest rates rise, the annual payments on the vast increases in national debts will eliminate new funds for better futures and force cutbacks in retirement, health, and safety-net benefits that voters expected. Politics will become even more zero-sum and angrier. Cumulative resignation of written-off youth may shift to political outrage and instability if repayments of government debts and interest to banks takes priority (as it did in Germany before WWII).

Statistically, economists can predict that new recessions in most nations will occur in the next several years. However, because of the 2008 crisis and slow recovery there will be limited options for governments to protect their people by lowering interest rates or adding deficits for stimulus. What do democracies need to know, now, to plan for the added economic and political stress that is coming?

## **9. Fixing Dysfunctional Politics: The American Test Case.**

What are specific recommendations to repair the dysfunctional political system in America? In the current era of Donald Trump et al., what might be done about urgent and dangerous problems (e.g., involving nuclear weapons) where there could be catastrophic effects for other countries? How might faked news and Russian interventions (be solved while retaining free speech and press? <sup>4</sup>

## **10. Planning without Perfect Information**

. A meta-question about likely results of the roundtable and its planning recommendations to set the world on a better track: When information is imperfect, how can this prudently inform successful planning? A specific sub-question: Are there further catastrophic failures of democracy (like 2008) that require new vigilance and methods of early detection?

3/14/18

---

<sup>4</sup> We do not yet know if Russian interference tilted the outcomes of Brexit and the recent French election. Or how much worse the problem may become.