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THE PERPETUAL CRISES OF DEMOCRACY

Guillermo O'Donnell

Guillermo O'Donnell is Helen Kellogg Professor of Government and International Studies at the University of Notre Dame. On 12 July 2006, he received the first Lifetime Achievement Award of the International Political Science Association (IPSA) in recognition of his contributions to the advancement of political science. The award, which was presented in Fukuoka, Japan, at the triennial World Congress of Political Science, is accompanied by a \$5,000 prize funded by the Mattei Dogan Foundation. The text that follows is based on the transcription of O'Donnell's acceptance speech.

True to its international character, IPSA has convened us to discuss a theme of universal and most timely importance: Is democracy working? This choice of topic ought to be congratulated. It is a question, not a statement, and it makes us wonder if there is a crisis of democracy. If there is such a crisis, how is it manifesting itself in different countries and regions? Furthermore, we can and should ask about what sorts of capacities democracy can muster in order to meet and resolve crises, whatever manifestations they may assume.

These are huge questions, and my brief reflections will of necessity be general. To begin, let me ask: Are we facing a crisis of democracy as such, or of some democracies? If it is not a crisis of democracy *tout court*, or if it does not manifest itself similarly across countries, how may we distinguish different levels or kinds of crises? Furthermore, could it be that democracy itself is intrinsically characterized by a perpetual sense of crisis—or, more precisely, by perpetual tensions that are both worrisome and a testimony to its best qualities and, indeed, strongest capacities?

In a world haunted by war, domestic and international violence, social inequality, and environmental damage, deep concerns about what democracy is and can be are in order. But fortunately, deep concern is not despair. And without denying those justified concerns, I want to strike a note of cautious optimism.

In order to preface my account of this optimism, I shall make three points. **The first is that democracy, as Laurence Whitehead reminds us, is the quintessentially contested concept.**¹ Indeed, this is so much the case that the British social theorist W.B. Gallie, who originated the notion of an “essentially contested concept,” used “democracy” as his main example.² John Dunn’s recent book gives us a fascinating historical tour of the various meanings that the term “democracy” has carried over the years, and reminds us how relatively recent has been the widespread assignment of a positive connotation to the word.³

Valuable works such as these remind us that we scholars try to define and clarify concepts hoping at least to know on what we disagree, and we disagree quite a lot on the subject of democracy. Furthermore, we must take into account, as a constituent part of the phenomena we study, the multiple, varied meanings that different people attach to the word **democracy**. The resulting protean meanings of democracy are part of the symbolic world that it is our task to analyze, as it is this symbolic world which constitutes both the political and the social realms of human existence.

My second point is that the world now has more regimes that are formally democratic than ever before. And beyond that, there have never been so many rulers who *claim* that their regimes are democratic. Being democratic, or claiming to be, is like a currency: Credibly holding it adds political capital to those who claim it as their type of rule.

The phenomenon underlying this fact brings me to my third point. It is that across most of the globe today, the ultimate claim of a political regime to be legitimate—or at least acceptable—rests on the kind of popular consent that purportedly finds expression in the act of free voting. Not long ago, members of military juntas ruled while claiming that they were the only ones who properly understood the demands of national security. In other countries, self-appointed enlightened vanguards claimed a monopoly on power by virtue of having deciphered the meaning and direction of history. And in still other countries, patrimonial if not sultanistic monarchs ruled based on some combination of military conquest, tradition, and hierocratic sanction.

Yet, even in those times the head of one of those military juntas, Chilean dictator General **Augusto Pinochet, invented the beautiful oxymoron of “authoritarian democracy” to characterize his regime, while some communist states excelled at regularly manufacturing unanimous votes.** Today as never before, however, we see authoritarian rulers making sometimes amazing contortions to persuade the world (if not their own people) that their right to rule flows from the holding of free elections. The reality, of course, is that these regimes’ basic principle is “The opposition must never be allowed to win.” And unfortunately, those contortions sometimes receive help from the benevolent, oblivious glance that the great powers often cast on countries which control strategic geopolitical or economic resources.

In such cases, vice renders tribute to virtue by implicitly acknowledging that the principle of popular sovereignty, at least of the sovereignty exercised in the act of freely choosing who will govern for some time, has won the war of ideas nearly worldwide. This victory, I believe, points to that capacity of democracy which may be hard to capture empirically and difficult to predict in its concrete consequences, but which is almost always present and ultimately will prove to be democracy's most powerful resource.

A War of Ideas, Won

Yet before dealing with the preceding assertion I should clarify what I mean by saying that a country has a democratic regime, or is a political democracy. There are two basic components. The first is elections that are reasonably fair, so that the opposition has a reasonable chance of winning. These elections should also be decisive, in the sense that whoever wins may occupy the offices for which they have competed, and endure in their tenure as constitutionally prescribed. Second, a democratic regime includes a set of rights, or political freedoms, such as freedom of expression, of association, of movement, and access to nonmonopolized information. The reasonable effectiveness of these rights is a necessary condition for the holding of fair and decisive elections, and that effectiveness must exist before, during, and after the vote. These are the basic defining characteristics of political democracy. They match those which Robert A. Dahl spelled out in his description of "polyarchy," with the exception of the "decisiveness" requirement that in some of my writings I have proposed adding.⁴

Now I need to offer two caveats. One is that the meaning of democracy extends beyond the basic conditions outlined above. Democracy is ultimately based not on voters, but on *citizens*. In addition to its political dimension, citizenship includes civil, social, and cultural dimensions, with certain rights properly attaching to each. A fuller, better democracy is one that enacts and supports a wide gamut of all those rights. It is also one that resolves, through legally and constitutionally prescribed means, the conflicts and tradeoffs that unavoidably arise among those rights.

The second caveat relates to my speaking of "reasonably" fair and decisive elections, and of a "reasonable" degree of effectiveness of the rights of political citizenship. These admittedly vague terms point to the fact that, as I have argued in recent writings, there is not, and there will never be, a clear-cut and theoretically grounded dividing line that can tell us once and for all when those conditions have or have not been met.⁵

Some elections are fairer than others, but there is no such thing as a fully fair one. The usual advantages of incumbency, the overrepresentation of some regions and constituencies, the hard power of money, and

the more or less overt use of government resources on behalf of certain parties all can tilt the playing field. Yet in a regime that meets the characteristics which I have specified, the opposition still has a reasonable chance of overcoming such drawbacks and winning, even if its struggle sometimes is an uphill one.

Some countries have come a long way toward fairer elections, even though everywhere the power of money—and the deeply corrupting influence of the search for it by candidates and parties—casts a shadow of doubt over the fullness of those achievements. The countries that have moved toward greater electoral fairness have democratic regimes of better quality than other countries that have not made such a shift. Not accidentally, the former are also countries, most of them in the highly developed world, where the other dimensions of citizenship—civil, social, and cultural—are more broadly and effectively, if far from fully, enacted. In this sense, these countries not only have a democratic regime but, in their enactment of various dimensions of citizenship, have achieved a higher-quality kind of democracy.

An admittedly rough typology would classify these regimes as belonging to a top layer in terms of democratic quality. Although lately the quality of some of these democracies has visibly deteriorated, they are mostly populated by what Pippa Norris and her coauthors term “critical” citizens.⁶

Some of the new and not-so-new democracies of the global East and South (including much of Latin America) fall into a second and lower-performing layer of democratic regimes. In these countries, elections are generally less fair and political freedoms less secure. The dimensions of citizenship that extend beyond the purely political are less fully developed and less widely diffused. These are democracies of relatively low quality, hindered by the malign effects of pervasive poverty, deep inequality, state deficiencies, and quite widespread corruption.

This second layer of democracies faces more serious problems than does the upper layer. In addition, more of them today than was the case just a decade ago face the threat of slow or even sudden death. Most of their people are “skeptical” citizens who report feeling low levels of trust in or regard for such core democratic institutions as legislatures, political parties, and judiciaries. For example, the Latinobarómetro opinion-survey data from 2003 show that the average share of Latin American respondents who expressed trust in or approval of their respective national legislatures was just 23 percent. Judiciaries scored slightly better with 26 percent, while political parties scored abysmally with a trust or approval rating of only 14 percent.⁷

This set of countries can be distinguished in turn, albeit in some cases somewhat hazily, from a third set wherein elections, even if held, are not reasonably fair and many political freedoms are seriously curtailed. These are democracies *pour la galerie*, especially the international

galerie. They are the “electoral authoritarianisms” that have recently been drawing much attention in the scholarly literature.⁸

Below the electoral-authoritarian regimes lurks a fourth set whose numbers have been shrinking as authoritarian rulers learn the advantages of fake elections. I refer of course to those few countries that still dispense altogether with attempts at minimally credible electoral legitimization.

To be sure, this broad and highly simplified overview is worrisome, and the trends look unpromising. Yet beneath this concern dwells in all democracies (even of the more established sort) the sometimes hard to see but nonetheless widespread feeling or even demand that, precisely because they *are* democracies, they *can* and *should* improve.

Human Dignity and the Democratic Horizon

Democracy always projects a horizon of both hope and dissatisfaction. Because it is grounded on the various dimensions of citizenship, and on the notion of intrinsic human dignity that those dimensions entail, democracy always *posits an open horizon*. It looks toward a better future, expected and demanded by human beings who recognize themselves as carriers of inalienable rights that the political realm should respect and foster. This projection toward an unending and undefined, always risky yet promising future, runs counter to all kinds of authoritarian rule. It also runs counter to conservative or ethnocentric claims that we have reached some “end of history.” This is the great capacity of democracy to which I alluded in the first part of my talk.

Is democracy in crisis? The answer is yes in the rich countries, where it suffers from a mixture of unavoidable and self-imposed difficulties. It is even more emphatically yes in the lower-quality democracies, where the presence of important authoritarian actors and the disaffection of large parts of the populace may signal not merely manageable ills but in some cases serious risks of termination of the democratic regime. Still, we must consider that democracy is and always will be in some kind of crisis: It is constantly redirecting its citizens’ gaze from a more or less unsatisfactory present toward a future of still unfulfilled possibilities.

This is because democracy is more than a valuable kind of political arrangement. It is also the often notorious sign of a lack. It is *the perpetual absence of something more*, of an always pending agenda that calls for the redress of social ills and further advances in the manifold matters which, at a certain time and for a certain people, most concern human welfare and dignity. This is why the meanings of democracy are so protean, and always essentially contested. It is also why the theoretical and empirical analyses that we frame as social scientists should take into account these constantly varying and contested meanings.

Furthermore, this is the reason why the world exhibits, beneath the shared overarching institutional setting of executives, legislatures, and

judiciaries, several *varieties* of democracy, some based on individualistic conceptions and others on more collective or communal ones. This is also why democracies function and sometimes flourish in contexts infused by different cultural and religious traditions.

None of these varieties has an intrinsic claim to be better than others.

Yet even the flawed, lower-quality democracies of which I have spoken can justly claim that they are better than any sort of authoritarianism.

To begin with, they are democracies, at least in the political sense, and therefore endow their citizens with a basic set of political freedoms.

They are better also because, by and large, the countries with democratic regimes perform better than countries ruled by authoritarians, especially in crucial matters concerning civil and human rights.



The genie of democracy, which first got out of the bottle in ancient Athens, was proscribed for more than twenty centuries before reemerging with the American and French revolutions. This reemergence brought to the fore the republican and liberal components that—together with the legacies of classical democracy—form the complex mixture of ideas that characterize contemporary democracy.

Since the great democratic revolutions of the late eighteenth century, no political magician, and there have been and are many, has been able to put the genie back into the bottle. Democracy is now the specter that haunts not just Europe but the whole world, erupting unexpectedly in countries that seem to be gripped tightly in the authoritarian fist, and forcing dictators to pay tribute to it by faking free elections. The democratic genie also shows up in the dissatisfaction of many who already live in democratized countries. This is because the genie expresses a universal human demand for freedom, recognition, and respect, as well as, in what is increasingly recognized as a corollary of those values, a demand for the right to take part freely in choosing those who govern.

In many parts of the world, to be sure, we see the genie persecuted and disfigured. We also see that genie denied by the increasing violence and threats of violence that plague the international scene. And yet, even though in each case we cannot predict how potent the genie will turn out to be against the manifold forces against it, we know that the spirit of democracy is with us, that it is spreading throughout the world, and that on repeated occasions it has shown how powerfully it can give expression to demands for freedom and for the recognition of human dignity. This is the great capacity of democracy; it is a normative aspect but it has strong practical consequences that only a crude empiricism would ignore.

Many democracies are in crisis, though the crises vary as to depth and specific characteristics. Still, there is in these crises something that belongs to what is best and most distinctive about democracy. For the crises underline democracy's intrinsic mix of hope and dissatisfaction, its highlighting of a lack that will never be filled. As long as the genie

is out there, and we political scientists nourish and support it, vice will have to continue paying tribute to virtue, **and in doing so vice will continue signaling the inherent illegitimacy of authoritarian rule.**

Those of us who have suffered violence and humiliation at the hands of a brutally repressive state know from experience that continuing to hope even in the face of apparently overwhelming odds—and what is more, making the achievement of democracy the reference point for hope—can be an immense if sometimes unexpected force. **The capacity for hope is the great capacity of democracy, one which under the right circumstances can and should nourish other, more specific capacities that may promote improvements in democratic quality. At least this is what I tell myself when my assessment of the crisis facing this or that democracy brings me gloomy moments. It is also the note of optimism that I am allowing myself to share with you.**

I am persuaded that political science, including the border-spanning form so well embodied by the International Political Science Association, has the great responsibility of being a space of research, reflection, and discussion encompassing not only the careful empirical study of democracies, but also the elaboration and reassertion in various historical contexts of the values that underlie not merely a democracy of voters, but one of *citizens*. It is in this spirit, and with this conviction, that I am glad and honored to accept the prize that you have so generously bestowed upon me.

NOTES

1. Laurence Whitehead, *Democratization: Theory and Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
2. W.B. Gallie, *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964), 157–91.
3. John Dunn, *Setting the People Free: The Story of Democracy* (London: Atlantic, 2005).
4. Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971). As to my proposed addition of “decisiveness” see especially Guillermo O’Donnell, “Democracy, Law, and Comparative Politics,” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 36 (Spring 2001): 5–36.
5. O’Donnell, “Democracy, Law, and Comparative Politics.”
6. Pippa Norris, ed., *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Governance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
7. I should add that the trust and approval figures given are aggregates lumping together those who said that they harbored “a lot” of trust or approval with those who merely expressed “some” trust or approval. Regionwide, the number of people in the “a lot” category was less than a third of the number who grouped themselves into the “some” category (see www.latinobarometro.org).
8. See Andreas Schedler, ed., *Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2006).