

Diminishing *Demos*, Contorting *Kratia*

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“Democracy” is said to be derived from the Greek “*demokratia*”. It is a word that melds “*demos*” – meaning the people – with “*kratia*” – meaning power.

What constitutes “*demos*” is a populace lurching toward a selfish and exclusive mood, frustrated by widening economic disparity and an increasing tide of immigrants and refugees. And for “*kratia*” is an electorate defecting to self-righteous politics, clinging to power by fanning the flames of such negative sentiment. It can be said that democratic states including the U.S. and Europe are facing a complex crisis of diminishing *demos* coupled with contorting *kratia*.



Churchill’s “Iron Curtain” Anew

I once visited Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri. I wanted to see the place where former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill gave his speech in March 1946, announcing the onset of the Cold

War between the United States and the Soviet Union: “An iron curtain traversing the European Continent has descended from Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic”.

Although the sculpture of the renown prime minister and the museum founded in his honor are hard to forget, even more memorable was a sculpture standing 3.4 meters tall and 9.8 meters wide. It is Edwina Sandys’ work “Breakthrough”, fashioned from eight sections of the Berlin Wall which collapsed in November 1989, with hollowed-out forms of a man and a woman. Sandys, a granddaughter of Churchill, placed her commemorative monument to the end of the cold war in a place associated with him, wanting to convey to her grandfather the triumph of democracy and free economy.

In May 2019, Sandys visited Westminster College, and gave a speech in front of her sculpture. “History has a strange way of tricking you, lulling you into a false security just when you think something is finished with done and dusted. It has a habit of raising its ugly head again”. Sandys rued the return of the “chilliness” that was supposed to have abated. It may have been her attempt to warn of the descending of another iron curtain, on behalf of her grandfather.

A Revitalized “East” and a Dissipating “West”

Were he alive, what sort of warning would Churchill have for the world in the 21st century?

The cold war between the U.S. and the Soviet Union has been replaced by a new cold war between the U.S. and China, and the power struggle between two powers has been reshaped and taken a new form. “I will firmly stick to the path of China’s unique socialism. No force whatsoever can stand in the way of the forward march of the people of China”. Persisting with the Communist Party’s one faction dictatorial system and heterogeneous state capitalism, head of state Xi Jinping is forging ahead with his quest to make China a world-leading power.

Russia too has a new lease of life. Trampling on the rule of law and freedom of debate, President Vladimir Putin is challenging the existing international order, bluntly stating that “liberalism is obsolete”.

The resurgence of authoritarian states such as China and Russia is undoubtedly emitting a cold wave much like the former “East”.

Even more disconcerting is the subversion of democratic nations by populism. The U.S., considered the leader of the free world, has degenerated under the rule of President Donald Trump, leaning toward an U.S.-first inward economic and foreign policy and heavy-handed politics. Professor Barry Posen of MIT has described this as “Illiberal Hegemony”.

In Europe, there is rampant right-wing populism blaming the inflow of migrants and refugees and the bureaucratic politics of the EU, while left-wing populism sown amongst the vulnerable is reigning supreme in Central and South America. It is undeniably an alarming situation.

The concept of “Westlessness”; this was in fact the theme of the Munich Security Conference held in February 2020 in Germany, attended by more than 100 heads of state and ministers from around the world. Surely even Churchill did not envision the self-destruction of the “West” and a world where the very existence of democracy and free economy is in jeopardy.

The world is now in the grip of the COVID-19 pandemic. The epidemic that originated in China has rapidly spread around the world, causing a crisis of unprecedented scale. Despite the need for infection prevention measures to control the flow of people and goods and economic support measures to help individuals and businesses, democratic nations are slower at decision-making than their authoritarian counterparts and less able to enact a bold response. The COVID shock presents a new challenge for the “West”.

The Global Index of Democracy at its lowest

The coupling of ascending authoritarian states and deteriorating democratic states marks the unmistakable retreat of democratization and liberalization throughout the world. A British research organization, The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), found that the average global score of the 2019

Democracy Index for 167 countries and regions has fallen to 5.44, the lowest value ever recorded since these numerical values were first announced in 2006.

The same trend is borne out in a survey conducted on 195 countries by a U.S. human rights organization, Freedom House. As of 2018, the share of free countries declined to 44 percent while the share of partly free countries fell to 30 percent, both below their 2008 levels of 46 and 32 percent, respectively.

“The old demon is stirring back to life”. French President Emmanuel Macron senses an ill wind akin to that which provoked the two world wars, where people are beholden to an illiberal nationalism. In fact, director of a leading U.S. hedge fund, Bridgewater Associates, Ray Dalio and his colleagues issued a report in 2017 purporting that the populism index of developed countries had risen to levels of the 1930s. Not just authoritarian states but even democratic states are inexorably destined to repeat the same mistakes.

The waning “guardrails” of tolerance and self-restraint

The contortion of “*kratia*” (power) is not the only issue at hand. In fact, the disconnection of *demos* (people) is yet more alarming.

“The tragic paradox of the electoral route to authoritarianism is that the ‘assassins of democracy’ use the very institutions of democracy – gradually, subtly, and even legally – to kill it.” This warning was issued in “How Democracies Die” by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, both professors at Harvard University. It is most apparent that demagogic populists tout their legitimacy on the grounds of boosting the will of the people, enforcing politics that trample laws, rules, and human rights.

Levitsky also underlines the power of “tolerance” and “self-restraint” rooted in the populace, and purports that these function as the “soft guardrails” of democracy and forming two bulwarks against divisive politics are beginning to crumble.

This view echoes one held by Japanese historian Asakawa Kan'ichi, the first Japanese professor at Yale University and who persistently sounded the alarm about his motherland lurching towards the outbreak of war with America. Asakawa attributed the failure of Japan, the U.S. and Europe to avert the Second World War to the populace losing their sense of responsibility, moral sense, and spirit of tolerance, which weakened the foundations of democracy.

Masses Galvanized by Discontent over Disparity and Immigrants

Why have the masses of today failed to sustain standards of tolerance and self-restraint? There seem to be four main reasons behind this.

First is the issue of widening economic disparity. A report by an international NGO Oxfam reveals that as of 2019, the world's 2,153 billionaires have more wealth than the 4.6 billion people in the bottom half. According to Swiss financial giant Credit Suisse, the top 1% of the world's high-income earners hold 45% of the entire world's assets, while the bottom 50% of the world's low- and middle-income earners hold less than 1%.

The advance of globalization and emergence of IT have catalyzed the polarization of winners and losers, haves and have-nots. With the overlap of political inaction and the damage wrought by financial crises, the worries of those left behind have only deepened.

The second issue is racial tensions. The influx of immigrants and refugees to the U.S. and Europe confers benefit in the form of a larger pool of laborers and entrepreneurs. Yet it also induces economic and cultural antipathy among whites toward non-whites, and undeniably fanning the flames of discrimination and prejudice.

"Racism and hatred are poison. These poisons exist in our society". German Chancellor Angela Merkel displayed serious concerns over the growing tide of xenophobic, ultraconservative ideology and prevalence of hate crimes.

The ire of youngsters reflected in “OK, Boomer”

The third issue is the domination of politics by the elite. A survey of the populace in 27 countries by an international polling firm IPSOS found that as many as 66 percent of respondents felt that the current politics ignores ordinary people like themselves.

A minority of billionaires, mega corporations, and pressure groups use their massive donations to influence policymakers, manipulating lawmaking and governance at will. The voices of the majority of the people remain completely unheard and are simply forgotten. Populations around the world resent this inherent contradiction in politics.

The fourth issue is that of intergenerational conflict. “OK Boomer”; this epithet is currently in vogue among the youth of America. It is apparently used by millennials (those born between 1981-1996) and post-millennials (born after 1997) to say “we have had enough” to the middle and old age strata that make up the baby boomer generation (born between 1946-1964).

They have grown tired of the middle-aged and older generation who see fit to preach to the “youth of today”, despite having left unattended an unequal economy and political dysfunction while expecting the next generation to pick up the tab. This is a notion that is surely shared by Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg, who has publicly rebuked the inaction of adults in overlooking the advance of global warming.

The “four fragmentations” of economy, race, politics, and generations have reached a critical point, prompting extreme assertions by the lower-to-middle income classes, white people, non-elites, and youth who are brimming with dissatisfaction and anger. It is hard to avoid a sense that this is where the real disease of democracy is nesting.

Steady Effort to Harden the Bedrock of Democracy

Can the world rectify the loosening of democracy? It will be difficult to disentangle the sentiment of the masses who did not reap the benefits of globalization and emerging IT technologies and who have

been put out to pasture by the politics of today. However, a fundamental resolution to the issue will surely not be found by imploringly looking to right-wing populism hostile towards trade and migration, or to left-wing populism that attacks the wealthy strata and mega corporations. Implementing a steady and solid growth strategy, revamping the distribution of income, extending the security net, and reforming political funding are urgent tasks if we are to stave off the erosion of the foundations of democracy.

Carl Gershman, president of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), offered the following from his Washington Office: “Democracy is a grass-roots system underpinned by the masses. It is also a system that progresses through learning. It is precisely for this reason that a broad cross-section of the public needs to learn about the benefits, flaws, and fragility of democracy”.

We must continue to tenaciously advocate the sanctity of democracy to those who are prone to forgetting the nightmare of totalitarianism and to those who cannot overcome the lure of authoritarianism. It is precisely now, when the true value of democratic nations is in dispute due to the COVID Shock, that we must not let our guard down. I would like to think that our continuing to be a “good *demos*” is the utmost path that leads to a “healthy *kratia*”.

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