Conference Report

Democracy at Risk: Exit and Voice

(9th and 10th November 2017, IWM, Vienna)

Once again, democracy is at the centre of our collective political anxieties. Unlike in the past, however, it is neither the compatibility of newly independent countries in Africa and Asia with democratic governance, nor the efficacy of democratisation in post-communist societies in Eastern Europe, that keep us occupied. What is at stake at the current moment is how well-established democracies seem to be regressing in both the global North and South. The common thread linking the contemporary transformations occurring across countries such as the US, UK, Hungary, Poland, Turkey and India seems to be a departure from previously held values of liberalism and/or the rise to power of majoritarian and nationalist forces to the detriment of pluralist constitutional checks and balances.

This has indeed summoned the spectre of 'democracy at risk' – the theme of the 2017 IWM conference organised by and at the IWM, Vienna, in cooperation with the Graduate Institute, Geneva, and supported by the Swiss State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI). The conference aimed to examine this contemporary predicament from an inter-disciplinary perspective, while also drawing upon the theoretical framework offered by Albert Hirschman's treatise on 'Exit, Voice, and Loyalty.' Over two days (9th -10th November) a group of scholars at various stages of their academic careers and representing a wide range of disciplinary and theoretical orientations were brought together by their shared concerns around the vicissitudes of contemporary democracy. In most panels, Permanent and Visiting Fellows at the IWM commented on papers by faculty from the Graduate Institute.

Although the presentations approached democracy from multiple geographical, disciplinary and theoretical vantage points, three large themes emerged during the conference: populism, participation, and trust. **Populism**, particularly the

kind that accompanies the sort of right wing, majoritarian, and nationalist surges that have been on display in recent times across Eastern Europe, as well as in French and German general elections, was identified as one of the fundamental challenges of contemporary democratic politics. Populism was addressed in the form of its instrumentalization of implicit tendencies within democracy – popular sovereignty for instance – that leave space for right wing forces to arise, but also in terms of its capacity for political innovation – for example, shifting the meaning of categories like 'mainstream', as well as instituting new discourses such as 'philosemitism.' The theme of **participation** was explored through the workings of 'civil society' both as part of protest politics as well as community level involvement in urban planning, but also through the more conventional understanding of citizens' participation in elections. The analysis of self-consciously 'participatory' development programmes brought to the table a different lens to make sense of the term, namely that of anthropology of development, while the prospect of a 'non-participatory future' in which automation has dismantled industrial sources of employment further complicated it. The theme of **trust** criss-crossed multiple panels in the conference, but was foregrounded most prominently in discussions around the potential of democratic transition in the Middle East in the beguiling aftermath of the Arab Spring as well as in enquiring into the possibilities of democratic governance at the supra-national level.

The keynote lecture was delivered by Prof David Sylvan, Professor of International Relations and Political Science at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, where he is also the Research Director. Prof Sylvan's keynote explored questions of democratic accountability and foreign policy, a theme that is pursued more broadly in his on-going research project on Lasswell's 'garrison state' in modern times. He demonstrated how established Western democracies since the second world war have developed a 'democratic black hole': vast areas of the state's functioning brought under the umbrella of 'national security', which escape the accountability of democratic governance and public scrutiny by the media and citizens. This

'garrison state', Sylvan argued, is thus colonizing ever more sites of democratic life.

The conference featured five panels over the course of two days. The first panel consisted of three papers focused on perhaps the most pressing issue of the moment: populism and its implications for democracy. Claus Offe's (Hertie School of Governance/IWM) paper sketched the fundamental features of populism in capitalist democracies in the 21st century: the politics of protest and anger, vertical communication, and lack of respect for legality were some of the most important ones. It also laid out some of the challenges posed by populism to the project of European integration. Anton Shekhovtsov's (IWM) paper analysed the shifting 'mainstream' in European politics, where the 'centre' seems to be moving ever more to the right, as witnessed in Austria and France. Drawing on Hirschman, the paper conceptualised the decline of trust within these polities, and the resulting drop in voter turnout, as a form of 'exit.' The third paper of the panel by G. Daniel Cohen (Rice University/IWM) examined the drastic reversal that seems to have taken place within populist politics in Europe since the beginning of the 21st century, with respect to attitudes towards its Jewish populations. Far-right rhetoric in the 21st century has shifted from the long-standing 'antisemitism' of the 20th century to a form of 'philo-semitism', in which Jews are presented variously as 'fellow citizens,' symbols of Judeo-Christian values (in contrast to Islamic ones), part of the image of the 'muscular' nation state of Israel, and so on, as xenophobia and anti-Islamic rhetoric have become the primary components of far-right political mobilisation.

The second panel comprised of two papers addressing the theme of 'civil society' from different angles. Prof Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou (Graduate Institute), sketching the complex and daunting process of political transition that unfolded in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab Spring, presented the 'travails' of civil society as a collective agent engaged in bringing about democracy in the Middle East. Although the product of decades of political work towards a post-authoritarian society on the part of multiple actors including civil society organisations, the Arab Spring demonstrated the enormous, and hard to surmount, obstacles in the way of achieving democracy. Prof Isabelle Milbert's

(Graduate Institute) paper on the 2017 French elections, on the other hand, analysed the "quiet revolution" in which the pre-existing cleavages in the arena of French party politics were drastically altered, resulting in the emergence of a new 'centrist' political formation that secured both presidential and parliamentary power in the end. Drawing from Hirschman's schema of 'exit, voice, and loyalty,' Milbert's paper focused on the twin factors of voting behaviour as well as intra-party belonging to make sense of this shift in French politics.

The third panel, comprising three papers, dealt with the themes of law, memory, and trust within democracies. Ken'ichi Mishima's (IWM) theoretically rich presentation using Eisenstadt's idea of multiple modernities brought out the necessity of overcoming 'forgetfulness' in modern democracies. Mishima argued that the contemporary moment demands a re-examination of forgotten 'dark' chapters in the histories of modern democratic states in order to re-construct the normative basis of global liberal democracy. Premising their paper on a more explicit discussion of trust, Neus Torbisco Casals (Graduate Institute) and Nico Krisch (Graduate Institute) examined the salience, or lack thereof, of this key factor, when it comes to the question of global democratic governance. The final paper of the panel by Grégoire Mallard (Graduate Institute) explored the implications of a rather innovative policy prescription to address the democratic deficit in Europe: synchronizing national electoral cycles in Europe. The paper argued that the prospective benefits of such an innovation would include increasing the political agency of the citizens at the European level, helping the EU preserve the integrity of the electoral process, as well as improving the efficiency of decision making processes within EU institutions.

The fourth panel was focused on the 'economic life' of democratic societies. Filipe Calvao's (Graduate Institute) paper posed the following crucial question: what could happen to democracies in a future in which 'automation' replaces most forms of labour? The paper problematized contemporary ideas of 'social security,' and the 'social contract' in the context of such an impending future, and invited participants to rethink democratic life in it. In the second presentation, Giacomo Luciani (Graduate Institute) explored the prospect of democratic

transition in the specific context of the Arab world and the role of the bourgeoisie in affecting it. His paper showed how globalisation, and its attendant inflow of oil revenue, enabled 'rentier states' to effectively neuter the 'voice' of the domestic bourgeoisie in the potential democratisation of the region.

The fifth and final panel dealt with the themes of 'urban' and 'local' democracy. Departing from the previous qualitatively oriented papers, Ravinder Bhavnani (Graduate Institute) presented an early-stage quantitative project on how urban topographies – squares and streets in particular – influence the dynamics of protests in major African cities. Bhavnani's project aims to develop a computational model to assess how urban design facilitates or restrains aspects of protests including mobilization and propensity for violence. In the final presentation of the conference, Christine Lutringer (Graduate Institute) examined the unfolding of the 2014-2034 Mumbai Development Plan. Drawing on ethnographic research, especially with respect to the urban poor and their relationship to the idea of 'participatory' planning, Lutringer demonstrated the disproportionate participation of the urban middle class in the planning process to the exclusion of the urban poor. She delineated the limitations of such 'expert' driven 'participatory' initiatives.

The discussions underscored the fact that democracy, especially in the wake of the current challenges thrown up in different parts of the world, is far from a foregone conclusion. It has no necessary historical teleology. Democracy requires our constant and collective attention and effort – scholarly and political – to keep its transformative potentials alive.

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