

DEMOCRACY- LOVERS ALL?

THE AWAKENING

As a child in Denmark in the early 1980s, I would spend election nights with my family, glued, like so many others, to the television screen as the results ticked in. The media also had daily coverage of political repression outside our comfortable little country. However, my own awareness that **democracy is a hard-won right** was not awakened until the summer of 1988 when, aged 10, I found myself riveted by reports of the epic events unfolding in Poland, a Communist dictatorship since World War II.

A strike that began at the shipyard in Gdansk was spreading like wildfire. Surprisingly, the Polish establishment agreed to negotiate with the opposition movement, Solidarity, whose leader – an electrician by the name of Lech Wałęsa – was elected president in 1990. Within a year of Poland's first faltering steps down the path of political reform, other Communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe were in free fall. Today, many are Democratic members of the European Union, or EU.

These events truly opened my eyes, starting what will likely be a lifelong fascination with democracy, both as a political idea and as a form of government. Democracy

remains as relevant as ever, and hopes and developments around the world raise all sorts of questions about it: What is the essence of democracy? Where and when have democracies evolved? What helps and hinders democratic development? What impacts does democracy have? And what challenges does it face today?

FROM DEGENERATE TO DARLING

The word ‘democracy’ comes from the Ancient Greek *demos*, ‘people’, and *kratos*, ‘rule’. The origins of the word may be indisputable, but ‘rule by the people’ can mean very different things to different people. Most of us would cite freedom and equality as core element of democracy, but that brings us no closer to a definition, as the meaning of these concepts is also widely debated.

The British philosopher Walter Bryce Gallie was spot on back in 1956 when he referred to democracy as the finest example of a value-based concept with a fundamentally disputed meaning. In our day and age most people have a positive view of democracy, even though we cannot really agree on what it is.

Historically, ‘democracy’ has not always been a yes-word. In fact, not a single country we know of was governed by a democracy between the Roman Empire’s conquest of the Greek city-states in 146 BCE and the revolutions in colonial America and in France, in 1776 and 1789, respectively. Democracy was largely regarded as an inferior, unsuitable form of government, and political thinkers generally remained critical, even after seeing the

novel arrangements fall into place on both sides of the Atlantic.

In 1790 the father of Conservatism, an Irish-English politician named Edmund Burke, considered democracy “the most shameful thing in the world”. The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard was no great fan either. While the drafting of a Danish constitution was being discussed in 1848, he wrote in his journal that “Of all tyrannies, a people’s government is the most excruciating, the most devoid of spirit, absolutely the downfall of all that is great and lofty.”

It was only after Western democracies prevailed over Germany and her allies in *both* world wars that democracy came to be widely seen as a positive thing, and its most recent expansion took place after the Cold War ended. In 1989 the American political scientist Francis Fukuyama even said we had reached “the end of history” with liberal democracy: The only legitimate form of government was based on free and fair elections and respect for basic civil liberties.

In this light it is hardly surprising that for the vast majority of people, in Denmark and elsewhere, the word ‘democracy’ has positive connotations. This became clear in a global study conducted in 83 countries between 2017 and 2020. When asked whether it is good or bad to have a democratic political system, a majority of 57-98% responded it was ‘good’ or ‘very good’.

Only a small minority of respondents rated democracy as ‘very bad’ or ‘bad’. Countries with the lowest ratings

included Iraq, Colombia, Kenya and the Philippines, while some of the highest were found in Germany, the Nordics and Zimbabwe. The ratings were 91% for China, 69% for Russia, 76% for Brazil, 88% for Indonesia, 91% for the United Kingdom, and 81% for the United States.

PUTTING ON A PRETTY HAT

The linguistic downside of ‘democracy’ is less pleasant. Dictators of all kinds have appropriated the word, claiming to be ‘democratic’ rulers. Should we laugh or cry when we learn that the North Korean constitution refers to its form of rule as a ‘people’s democratic dictatorship’?

Over the years, many communist or fascist regimes have tried to put a pretty hat on over their helmet, calling themselves ‘people’s democracies’ or ‘guided democracies’. Even today, some despotic rulers counter criticism by invoking a particular brand of democracy that reflects their nation’s culture or serves some higher purpose.

Look at Mahathir Mohamad and Lee Kuan Yew, who for decades ruled their countries – Malaysia and Singapore – as prime ministers, but who were de facto dictators. Both claimed to have developed a special sort of democracy that placed more emphasis on ‘the collective’ than on individual rights, and was ‘more attuned’ to Asian values. **Such blatant, intentional abuse of the concept of democracy is utterly meaningless.**

There are many examples of misuse and abuse of this word in the public debate, where views and decisions are

often denounced as ‘undemocratic’ by those who disagree. One may be found in an issue of the *Danish Music Journal* from 1951, which called a duty on imported gramophone records “undemocratic”. More recently, Bill O’Reilly of *The O’Reilly Factor*, an American programme aired by Fox News Channel, used the same word to describe the unregulated conditions on the Internet.

In both cases controversial decisions – to introduce a duty, and not to introduce regulations – were clearly based on a democratic process, so the concept of ‘democracy’ was, most likely, inadvertently misconstrued. In general I suspect we should all use ‘undemocratic’ with greater care – unless we do not mind seeing its actual meaning watered down.

The watering can was out in Denmark in the spring of 2016 when Social Democratic leader Mette Frederiksen commented in a news broadcast on how certain imams counselled their congregations, calling it “undemocratic” that they condoned the physical punishment of children. However, despite good reasons to refuse corporal punishment, the fact that countries have not outlawed this practice, such as Denmark before 1997 and the US and many others today, does not make them undemocratic.

INHERENTLY IMPERFECT

The 2016 statement from Mette Frederiksen – Denmark’s prime minister after the 2019 election – shows that many of us equate democracy with the things we like. Hitting our children is usually not in this category. Be that as it