



Transcription

Democracy in Question? – Season 1, Episode 10

Democracy from below: What real utopias can we build on?

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Democracy in Question? is the podcast series of the Albert Hirschman Center on Democracy at the Graduate Institute, Geneva, the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna, and the Excellence Chair, University of Bremen (Research Group: Soft Authoritarianism).

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SR: Welcome to "Democracy in Question," the podcast series that explores the current challenges facing liberal democracies around the world. I'm Shalini Randeria, the director of the Albert Hirschman Centre on Democracy at the Graduate Institute in Geneva and the Rector of the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna. For the last episode of this season, I'm joined by Mary Kaldor. Mary is professor of Global Governance at the London School of Economics. Her scholarship is focused on democratization, civil society, war, and globalization. But she is also an activist at heart, she's a founding member of European Nuclear Disarmament, a founder of the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly, and a member of the International Independent Commission to investigate the Kosovo crisis to name but a few of the important citizens' initiatives in which Mary has been very active. Thank you so much for being here today, Mary.

MK: Thank you for inviting me.

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SR: Informed, active, and vigilant citizens who hold governments to account, that is crucial to the health of every democracy. And when these citizens come together in civil society associations or in social movements, they can have an incredibly powerful impact on political life, both within and also beyond the nation-state. So, in this final episode, we are looking at democracy from below and are asking, what is the role of civil society in keeping democracy alive and healthy? What real utopias can be built on today? Mary, your involvement in the peace movement in the 1980s is where I would like to start from.

You were an active member of the European Nuclear Disarmament Movement, along with E. P. Thompson and Robin Cook, which sought to end the division of Europe. It was also peace movement that helped deescalate a highly dangerous situation due to the American deployment then of crews and pushing missiles in five countries across Western Europe. How did this engagement of yours in Eastern Europe in the 1980s shape your understanding of civil society and how has the term changed its meaning in your own scholarship also since then?

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MK: I, as you said, was a peace activist. And we were a bit of the peace movement that believed that the best way to get rid of nuclear weapons was to end the Cold War and the best way to end the Cold War was to get democracy in Eastern Europe. And so, we decided to make links with human rights groups in Eastern Europe. Many of them had been imprisoned or they had been forced to become boilermakers or window cleaners as in Czechoslovakia, and they spent a lot of their time discussing philosophy. They had all these wonderful concepts, they talked about civil society.

I think Adam Michnik from Poland was, in my view, one of the first, although he claims he got it from a Czech dissident, but he wrote this famous article in 1987 called the "New Evolutionism" in which he said, we'll never defeat our governments through violence because they'll always be stronger in violence than us. And the only way to do it is through an evolutionary process in which we create more and more autonomy and more and more independent organizations like autonomous universities or autonomous trades unions.

I became very interested in the concept of civil society and started to study it and try to discover what historically it had meant. Of course, like all good concepts that originated with the Greeks, but it meant, and this is how it was interpreted in 17th century with Locke, John Locke and Hobbes, they meant a political community based on laws.

And that understanding only really changed in the 19th century with Hegel, because Hegel started talking about civil society as something separate from the state. You know, he always talked about values and there was the private values of the family and the universal values of the state, but these were kind of reconciled in this arena called civil society. And I think what Gramsci did, Antonio Gramsci, the Italian communist who was imprisoned by the Fascists, he started to use this term civil society. And what he meant was something different again, he sort of deconstructed civil society from its roots in the market. And what he was interested in was ideology and culture.

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SR: That's a lot of different understandings of the same term – did all of these have anything in common?

MK: They're all about societies based on consent, and civil society is really the arena where consent is constructed. And the reason for the different meanings is that that arena changes over time. So, in the 17th century, it was very much to do with the emergence of parliaments. and at that time, it was also linked to civil rights, to just people being safe.

And in the 19th century, it was very much about the emerging bourgeoisie and, in the 20th century, when Gramsci was writing, it was really about the workers' movement. And I think what really changed was the importance of the transnational. The relationship between Western European peace activists and East European dissidents really depended on two things.

First, it depended on very practical links, not just our discussions, but we were able to help them with badges and also, we were able to help by bringing out in public what was happening to them and campaigning for the rights of people imprisoned and so on. But also, one shouldn't forget that the emergence of international human rights legislation to which their governments had subscribed, and in the case of Eastern Europe, it was the Helsinki agreement of 1975, which contained all these human rights provisions, provided a kind of legal platform for these civil society activists. So, what you see emerging is this kind of transnational sphere. The human rights legislation probably would have been ignored had it not been taken up by human rights groups all over the world who were trying to make it meaningful.

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SR: Thanks, Mary. That's a 400-year-old history of civil society in everything you ever wanted to know about the concept in like 10 minutes. Let me start with the question of the role that war plays in civil society because in your book, the *New Wars*, you identified the proliferation of these new types of warfare which have had disastrous consequences in Syria and elsewhere. One of the causes

that you identified or a key factor to be more precise was identity politics. So, let's look first at the question of what your new research on war zones and societies torn by conflict has taught you with respect to civil society in areas like in Iraq, in Afghanistan, where it would be so difficult today, in fact, even perilous to organize formally.

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MK: Let's go back a little bit, because I think that all of these wars, actually, these contemporary wars were a response to democratization. Of course, that's not true for Iraq and Afghanistan, which were a response to external intervention. But, I think what's interesting if you look at Ukraine, Syria, Bosnia is that these were all places where democratization movement was emerging and the wars were preceded by big democracy protests.

And the way to kind of divert the democracy movement is by turning it into an identity-based conflict.

And they get transformed by violence actually. It's extraordinary how in all of the places that I've visited, people would tell me, "Look, there wasn't any discrimination before the war or very little. Actually, it was the consequence of violence, not the cause of violence." Once you're being killed because you're a Croat or because you're a Serb, or because you're Shia or because you're Sunni, then suddenly those divisions become incredibly important. So, identity politics is actually manufactured through violence.

The use of culture wars of extreme racism, of extreme nationalism as a way of responding to civil society demands is absolutely widespread and very, very dangerous.

SR: And yet Mary, one of the arguments you have made recently is that even in these war and conflict-torn societies where NGOs or social movements in the conventional sense are hard to find, what you have always been able to find are what you call *islands of civiness*.

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MK: Yes, so, what happens to the protesters is that they become civil society. When the violence begins, they start to organize themselves. They organize themselves to be the first responders and provide humanitarian assistance to help people, to bring them to hospital, to keep the schools open. They organize themselves to try to stop the violence, to undertake mediation at local levels. They document war crimes.

And you can find them anywhere. I mean, you find in Iraq, there are doctors and nurses who absolutely refuse to base their healthcare on sectarianism. But we also find whole towns which have kept out of the war. When I wrote *New Wars*, I was hugely influenced by the experience of a town called Tuzla. Tuzla was the only town in Bosnia-Herzegovina that didn't elect a nationalist government and that had a social democrat government and they were determined to keep the war out and they pursued what they call was a multi-multi-multi-strategy: multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-linguistic strategy throughout the war welcoming

people from all ethnic groups. And they did succeed, they kept their economy going. They kept their public services going. And by the end of the war, actually, they were providing 30% of the tax revenue for the whole of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

And then finally, there are protest movements that are definitely civic. If you look at the protest movements in Iraq, in Sudan, they are explicit that their demands are anticorruption and anti-sectarianism. The slogan of the Iraqi protestors is, "In the name of religion, you are looting us." So, I suppose, what I'm trying to argue is that if we want to bring an end to these intractable wars, the most important way is to sort of strengthen and expand civic space.

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SR: Let me move to another aspect of your experiences in Eastern Europe, which I think need now to be put into a slightly different context because the recent rapid rise of right-wing and soft authoritarian governments in Poland and Hungary, etc., has resulted in reversals of the liberal values and also on attacks on democratic institutions and on rule of law.

MK: You know, a key element of the story, is the role of neoliberalism. My generation who were the post-68 movements, of course, we were left, but we actually took the welfare gains of the post-war period for granted. Our primary focus was on the problems of authoritarianism, human rights, gender, peace, rather than economic and social justice. We thought those battles had been won. And the reaction against the state was a reaction from both left and right.

We wanted more democratization; the right wanted more markets. Both of them won the argument.

So, along with democratization became this new market fundamentalism that we've experienced in the '90s and the early 2000s. Not only did neoliberalism lead to new extreme forms of inequality, but at the same time, there was this kind of contracting out culture of government that led to crony capitalism, that led to oligarchy. Privatization was such a key part of this market fundamentalism. And I think that along with the reaction to democratization helps to explain the rise of these right-wing authoritarian governments.

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SR: So what kind of response do you think can civil society social movements have to this kind of soft authoritarianism?

MK: We have seen in the United States a revival of civil society. We have seen, you know, the Biden victory is a huge victory. I think even though the Trump phenomenon still remains, it has been a victory for civility. And the question is, can we do the same thing across Europe? Can we make common cause with the Hungarians, the Poles who are doing amazing things and who are winning the towns, Budapest and Warsaw, and same in Turkey actually, in Istanbul.

And that's where I'm a little bit hopeful. COVID has sort of drawn attention to reality, drawn attention to everyday life, which has nothing to do with identity. I mean, we see the new heroes are healthcare workers, many of whom are Black

and Asian and Muslim or whatever. But also, it's drawn people's attention to the huge problems of neoliberalism, and we've got this new European recovery fund, suddenly the IMF is lending to everybody. It's suddenly the end of austerity. And the other things that really matter in the world, the climate crisis and so on. All of these suddenly have a possibility of being solved and I think it's through solving what Biden calls the four crises that will increasingly marginalize identity politics. That's where I'm hopeful. But there's a huge job. It's not something that will happen without civil society pressure.

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SR: The anxieties about the feeling of the loss of national autonomy and control in the face of neoliberal economic globalization, that is what the Brexit campaign capitalized on and successfully so. You advocated that the British Labour Party should show the real route to take back control, through building a participatory power-sharing approach to local planning, the running of public companies and services, democratic decision-making at the workplace, and at the level of towns. This is the level that you have been emphasizing throughout our discussion. And yet the Labour Party lost the election to a really populist campaign by Johnson. A campaign full of disinformation and false promises.

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MK: Actually, when I talked about take back control, I wasn't only talking about the towns. I also thought taking back control was being active at a European level. I mean, what we've discovered in the first few weeks after Brexit actually has happened is that we have no sovereignty whatsoever. That in the deal with

the European Union, in theory, we have free trade, but in practice, there's so much red tape because we're now national and not European. That businesses are finding it impossible to export to Europe. Fishing has been decimated. Artists can't travel freely to Europe as they used to in the past.

So, actually, our freedom has been hugely limited as a result of Brexit and the argument that we were making throughout was that actually, the way to take back control is being able to influence things to European level. And in fact, in the past, Britain was hugely influential over half the regulations coming out of the EU were proposed by Britain. We spent a lot of time talking to local groups in pro-Brexit areas and what you realize is that huge political frustration. Yes, of course, they were economically frustrated, but they felt nobody was listening. They felt they had no opportunities to put their views and Brexit suddenly seemed like a fantastic opportunity to show people how angry they were.

And it's partly the consequence of neoliberalism which has involved the hollowing out of the state and we're realizing that you actually need public authority at all levels in order to solve contemporary problems.

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SR: So the question is how should progressive social movements now mobilize and grapple with these shifts when they are faced by elected soft authoritarian leaders?

MK: The response has to be the kind of response which actually we are already seeing. you know, there are campaigns going on about climate change, about social justice, about racial justice. They have to hold governments and parties to account. I think we have a huge problem with progressive parties that they find themselves in an incredible dilemma. On the one hand, they want to capture what they see as the middle ground, and they have to sound very respectable and very conservative. On the other hand, they also need to mobilize a new generation of activists who really think that the only way we can get out of the current mess is through dramatic action on climate change, on social justice, on health.

But, you know, I think we're in a really interesting moment because I think that Biden was a centrist. He did take a centrist route, but because he was opposing Trump, it also involved massive mobilization. And now, I think he is going to be forced to act in radical ways and that's going to make a tremendous difference, but I think there needs to be persistent pressure at the same time.

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SR: So, one of the arguments you have been making consistently over the last decade has been in relation to the democratic deficit, which you think should be addressed through a combination of political engagement at the European level and policies that would enable a meaningful devolution to regional and local levels. What chance do you see that we can deepen democracy at the EU level, because some activists have made the argument that the example of

Greece would show us that EU institutions have as little legitimacy as do many national institutions.

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MK: The problem with the European Union is that there was never...or rather there wasn't until recently, and this is what I really think is changing, a European public sphere. The European debate was always a debate about, should we be in or out? It wasn't a debate about what kind of Europe do we want? And I think Greece was very much a victim of that. I think the European Union was dominated by the technocrats in the commission who were extremely neoliberal.

And I think that's actually beginning to change. First of all, at the parliamentary level, what we saw in the last elections was a real debate between left and right and greens in a way that we've never seen that before. The interesting thing is that as a consequence of Brexit, none of these authoritarian regimes actually want to leave the European Union. They just want a European Union composed of authoritarian states that they can get money from, and they have a vision of Europe of the Nations. And there is an alternative progressive vision which began to emerge in the European Parliament.

But the other aspect, which is changing I think, is the way social movements act. At LSE, we did a study in the early 2010s of politics in Europe. This was the time of Occupy, the time of the Indignados in Spain. And what we found was that they were campaigning for social justice. They were campaigning for “real

democracy” as they called it, but they were completely uninterested in Europe. They were totally preoccupied with national and local issues. And if you asked people about Europe, most of the young would just take it for granted.

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They'd say we're the Erasmus generation, the EasyJet generation, it's unthinkable, and the older generation would be more ambiguous. Of course, in places like Greece there was a lot of negative feeling about European Union. We've been doing a similar study over the last two years, and everyone talks about Europe. Everyone says they realize they need European policies, and you know, our focus actually has been on Eastern Europe and Southern Europe. So, I think that is now a kind of public debate beginning, about the future of Europe.

Now I think what we need is not only layers of democracy, but different forms of democracy. The European Parliament represents classic representative democracy. But what we also see is a degree of horizontal deliberative democracy that is actually quite important in influencing the European Union.

On issues like climate change, human rights, even peace, I think the European Union is much more progressive than national governments, and this has been a consequence of civil society activism of a belief in the commission that you relate to NGOs and social movements.

SR: Thank you very much, Mary, for this fascinating discussion ranging from the early Greeks to the contemporary fate of the EU. Thank you very much for being with me today.

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MK: And thank you for having me.

SR: Liberal democracy is perhaps the most daring modern utopia of how a good society ought to be structured and run even if really existing liberal democracies fall far short of that ideal. And as we learned today, civil society is the terrain on which these relationships between states and society are forged, reconfigured, contested and it is thus pivotal to the liberal democratic project and practice as well as its future.

Mary Kaldor has brought home to us today if we don't engage in holding power-holders accountable, and we do not mobilize locally and trust nationally for the public good, liberal democracy is in peril. This wraps up the 10th and final episode of the first season of "Democracy in Question." It's been a great pleasure to bring you these conversations that explore some of the dangers and dilemma facing democracies today.