

Culture, Values, and Identities

Democracy Is Incomplete: Response to Crawford, Hechter, Zielonka, and Zipperstein

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We appreciate four reviews addressing our book, *Degenerations of Democracy*. Each points to ways democracy may be advanced and also raises questions about our argument. We respond to the latter and briefly build on the former. These are directions for further work, but none stands alone or offers the crucial path forward. This is not surprising, since no democracy in the past or today, even when celebrated as good, just, secure, and stable by a majority of its citizens, has fully realized its normative potential and utopian aspirations. There is always more to be achieved, and there is always potential for degeneration.

Four reviews addressing our book, *Degenerations of Democracy*, point clearly to ways democracy may be advanced. Each pushes further in a direction we anticipated but did not fully elaborate. Jan Zielonka emphasizes how much contemporary life and politics stretch beyond the nation-state. Steven Zipperstein argues for the potential of new technology to advance democracy. Beverly Crawford examines successes and challenges in organizing democracy at the local level. Michael Hechter asks what mechanisms—ideological as well as material—can motivate action for the public good and initiate potentially transformative social movements. These are directions for further work, but none stands alone or offers *the* crucial path forward.

We term “democracy” a “telic concept.” No democracy in the past or today, even when celebrated as good, just, secure, and stable by a majority of its citizens, has fully realized its normative potential and utopian aspirations. Democracy invariably stands in a contested relationship with any static view of existing conditions: as it aspires to reach beyond the confines of existing social and political reality, it is continually embattled by the changing character of that reality. Hence, democracy as both a moral vision and a political practice is inherently incomplete. What E. M. Forster once said of India is also true of democracy: “It is an appeal, not a promise.” We must unflinchingly strive to realize that promise, even as it continually eludes us. Such is democratic hope.

I

Jan Zielonka criticizes our book, and others examined here, for a narrow view that overemphasizes the role of the state. “None of these books questions the assumption that democracy is a matter for nation-states only” To be clear, we do question this (and so do Stein Ringen and Francis Fukuyama). All of us suggest that local, subnational democracy is crucial and should be a focus of collective attention and effort. But it is true that we do not develop the theme of how to advance democracy beyond the nation-state.

Zielonka proposes that the contemporary fate of democracy lies within nonstate networks, notably those of NGOs and cities. The title of his piece, “Democratic Nostalgia,” sends the message that those concerned with the relationship between democracy and the nation-state are stuck in the past. “Effective power,” Zielonka writes, “is increasingly in the hands of networks that benefited most from the digital revolution. Manuel Castells already wrote about this most eloquently three decades ago” (p. 1). Such networks have indeed become prominent, but we are skeptical that they wield the dominant power Zielonka suggests. Corporations seem powerful too, and it is not clear that networks of NGOs and cities are able to countermand markets and other large-scale systems of highly asymmetric social integration.

We are somewhat surprised by Zielonka’s assertion that it is our view that “the social democratic compromise with capitalism has benefited democracy immensely” (p. 3). We

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do think that there were democratic benefits in the postwar welfare states and regime of “organized capitalism.” We also think that the shift to neoliberal finance capitalism has been much more problematic for democracy. Overall, we think that the compromise with capitalism has constrained democracy and distorted our collective vision. Be that as it may, we do not think capitalism, in the foreseeable future, is easily avoidable. Therefore, we argue that the negative externalities that accompany capitalist transformations, which invariably strain the lives of nonelites more than those of elites, need to be continuously and aggressively addressed. For capitalism does not stand still. Furthermore, we argue that the task of monitoring and managing democratic compromises with capitalism cannot be exclusively entrusted to a group of experts appointed by the state. Wider participation must figure prominently in any political project geared to arresting and reversing democratic degenerations.

We have no quarrel with the idea that digital networks have an important role to play in the future of democracy (or, if not managed well, the potential to undermine it). But we are alarmed by the suggestion that struggling to renew democracy in nation-states is merely nostalgic. Even if we decide to ignore the state, states won’t ignore us. Digital connectivity is not only a resource for democratic activists but also for states interested in surveillance and control. Democracy today, as in the past, lives under the shadow of two leviathans, the capitalist market (as system and with specific powerful actors) and the nation-state. Democratic forces and networks seek leverage and influence but don’t have comparable power. To be sure, digital communication and networking may increase the capacities of the people and their champions to publicize and mobilize. But publicizing grievances is not the same as governing. Moreover, the emancipatory promise of digital communication and networking is compromised by commercialization on the one hand and surveillance on the other.

Despite all the talk about “failing states” and “collapsing society,” nation-states possess and exercise immense power over their citizens and subjects. When governments are no longer responsive to the needs of the governed, and when they fail to advance the common good, the lives of citizens invariably change for the worse. In many countries that call themselves democratic, this is not an uncommon phenomenon. Authoritarian governments, both soft and hard, with and without a democratic face, have placed restrictions on digital communications. Contemporary China is a disturbing but not isolated case. In the battle for democracy, the state remains the site of the main event.

Digitally connected networks of NGOs and cities are important but cannot replace states in understanding today’s major challenges: Russia’s current war against Ukraine and the renewal of the Western alliance in response; Turkey’s efforts to build regional power and strengthen relations with Central Asia; or the chaotic global political economy of fossil fuels. These networks do play a big role in advocacy and mobilization around climate change. But can any effective response to climate change afford to ignore nation-states?

In this connection, Zielonka’s invocation of Albert Hirschman is curious. He presents “exit” and “voice” as a dichotomy with no reference to the third term in Hirschman’s classic analysis, “loyalty.” Certainly, versions of exit are prominent in contemporary migration patterns. We might also conceptualize corporate strategies to avoid taxation and regulation in this way. But surely there are also compelling examples of loyalty, as displayed in the heroic national resistance of Ukrainians against the Russian invasion but also more problematic campaigns against immigration and for protectionist nationalism.

Balancing different agendas is necessary. But we think that for the future of democracy, building and sustaining political community is crucial to any balance. Democracy depends on a demos. There is no democracy without citizens.

II

Steven Zipperstein rightly points to the importance of technology. This is, at most, a secondary theme in *Degenerations of Democracy*, so we welcome his effort to push the analysis. We are in agreement that technologies can support and help advance democracy. Zipperstein focuses on social media and artificial intelligence, but it is worthwhile to recall the importance of earlier technological innovations. The rise of the newspaper and print media more generally was of huge significance for democracy. Broadcasting was transformative. This lineage of technological innovation and democratic flourishing is the lens through which we recognize the transformative potential of new media. Realizing that potential will depend on regulation, wider and more egalitarian access, and creative use of technologies. Zipperstein offers good suggestions in each regard, often in line with but going further than those in our book. Though our views have much in common, it may be helpful to bring out three differences.

First, it’s important to repeat that the applications and effects of new technologies are wide-ranging. Thus, while advances in digital communications are technologies of democratic discourse, organization, and mobilization, they are at the same time technologies of surveillance, of the organization and reorganization of work and material production, of infrastructure and market flows, and of military confrontation. We do not claim to have produced a deep analysis of all these dimensions of technology. But we do argue that all have implications for democracy, including for the empowerment or disempowerment of citizens. They are deeply related to each other, so it is implausible to analyze social media or AI, say, as though one set of uses could be kept separate from others. Consider the power of social media in galvanizing protest—a power Zipperstein celebrates. But in addition to galvanizing protest, the same social media use facilitated surveillance and suppression, including the prosecution of organizers. More generally, the technologies that help protesters plan street actions help corporations plan global production and help militaries plan invasions.

Second, Zipperstein frequently and correctly asserts that various technologies can work for democracy and the public good. But they often do not. It is not enough to know, for example, that some scholars envision a future where smart cities serve the public good or blockchains make voting more secure. One key question is what encourages or blocks the good innovations. Another is what else can happen—and is at least as likely to happen. Obviously, better regulation can help and should be pursued. But better regulation alone is unlikely to be enough and, given the deeper issues of economic inequality, the enormous concentration of corporate power, and a biased legal framework, will be difficult to secure. For the public good to flourish depends on changing underlying conditions and changing how we think about “the good.” Is it a goal for public policy, or is it what is tracked by widely followed statistics? Is it simply the sum of private goods, or is it what is good for an interdependent public? Is it overwhelmingly economic growth, or is it also equal or at least more equitable distribution? Does it include solidarity? Do our statistics and conceptual assessments fully recognize the losses of “illth” alongside the gains of “wealth”? To confront the underlying obstacles to the public good, deep social change is needed; better regulations will not be enough.

Third, “overcoming the digital divide” and achieving greater openness of access are important, just as Zipperstein says. But the extent to which either will work for democracy is a more complex question than he suggests. Wider access to conspiracy theories, systematically disseminated falsehoods, and emotional manipulation of racial or anti-immigrant biases is not helpful. Greater access needs to be complemented by better content and effective critical capacities. One of the advantages of social media is the dramatic increase in the number of people who can not only receive but also send messages. This scale and diversity can enhance democratic participation. But it places new challenges before regulators. And these challenges are less likely to be productively addressed when regulation is distorted or blocked by powerful media companies pursuing what they take to be their economic interests. Moreover, ubiquitous participation in communication through social media has not come with any greater ability to answer messages in argument, nor has it provided the means to hold arguers to account for the positions they take.

In sum, we also see possibilities for new media and related technologies like AI to benefit democracy. We also see good reasons to think their positive potential will not be realized unless the laws and institutions on which democracy depends are explicitly defended, unless innovation is explicitly guided by the idea of the public good and there is an ongoing debate about priorities in pursuing it, and unless underlying inequalities of power (including power rooted in wealth) are mitigated.

III

We are largely in agreement with Beverly Crawford’s sympathetic summary of our work and that of others like Ringen. We do resist being identified with culture by contrast

to institutions. We think conditions for vital democracy come from all of the following: institutions (say, educational); social structure (webs of relations and levels of equality); and culture (ideas, understandings, tastes, identities, and sensibilities). Actual practices are also important. Legal and other conditions that make it harder or easier for citizens to vote have an effect that is not fully attributable to culture.

We also appreciate Crawford’s interesting analysis of Alpine County, California. With Ringen and Fukuyama, we advocate renewal of local, place-based democracy. This is not easy to accomplish. Crawford’s story brings out some of the major challenges. What if local participation in democratic decision-making is high for a local majority or elite but low among other residents? This is not just a matter of goodwill but of underlying inequalities. It includes questions of social structure—are there strong, cross-cutting relationships between different segments of the population (say, the well-off whites and mostly less well-off Washoe of Alpine County)? Greater inclusion depends on building common culture and also relationships and practices of solidarity.

Crawford’s account of Alpine County also brings out another important issue. What does it mean when citizens maintain amicable relations by avoiding controversial discussions? Democracy depends on facing such issues and facing the reality of disagreement, presenting and answering arguments. This is a theme often brought out clearly by the republican tradition, and sometimes avoided by majoritarian approaches to democracy. Imagining that “the people” must be similar and agree on most issues is at odds with the very reasons for wanting to live in a democratic republic. Crawford rightly emphasizes the need to attend to affective dimensions of democratic engagement, of agreeing to disagree and to work through disagreements, among the differentially positioned socioeconomic groups within a given community. Constructive democratic engagement involves more than partaking in a dispassionate problem-solving debate.

IV

Michael Hechter reconstructs the argument in our book under two headings: “Diagnosis” (of what’s wrong with democracy) and “Treatment.” The book easily lends itself to this format. We are glad he is largely in accord with our diagnosis. Hechter is also right when he says that our “treatment” involves renewing the demos, which he regards as an arduous task. He also regards our proposals as inadequate to the task. We don’t disagree; we know we only made a start in suggesting “what is to be done.”

In particular, Hechter thinks we rely too much on “the enormous reservoir of emancipatory energy that a direct-action politics is capable of releasing... as in the case of the recent George Floyd protests in the United States” (p. 3). He sees this as overestimating the efficacy of social movements. Hechter rightly points out that social movements have a very uneven record in attaining their objectives. Just to be clear, we don’t anticipate some big social movement

with the goal of fixing all of the current democratic system's failings. And even if there were such a movement, we don't have much faith it would work. Our call, rather, is to see movements as an inherent and invaluable part of democratic struggle and repair. The task of widening and deepening democracy in terms of inclusion and redressing the grievances of people without adequate institutional voice and representation cannot be carried out without recourse to social movement politics. We hope that there will be many movements pursuing different agendas with varying degrees of interconnection. Not all will achieve their specific short-term goals, but we think such engagement will in itself build solidarity among citizens and advance democracy in many other ways.

Hechter also urges attention to policy mechanisms that use incentives to promote prosocial behavior. We agree that policies can be improved by careful analysis of incentive structures. This would include reducing existing bad incentives as well as adding new good ones. For example, existing US tax policy and enforcement priorities are much too encouraging of tax avoidance by the wealthy and by large corporations. Indeed, the tax code is replete with problematic incentives affecting many areas of life, from environment to housing. And what is true of taxation is true of other areas of law and public policy. We should make as many improvements as possible and include clear analysis of incentives as we consider reforms. But the problems we face are basic enough that we think changing incentives for individual behavior may not be enough; more structural changes or changes in cultural understanding will also be important. Moreover, it is not always obvious what constitutes an improvement. And even where there is wide agreement, powerful interests may oppose prosocial policies or invest in disinformation campaigns to make people think that bad is good, big problems are small, or the interests of some people should count more than those of others. More basically, we think it is unlikely there will be enough good technical reforms without more basic change in institutions, social structures, and culture. Central to our program is an effort to renew attention to the idea of public good rather than simply aggregation of private goods, and reaching beyond economic goods.

Not least, Hechter urges us to pay more attention to the literature on how to advance group solidarity. We should, and we will. But we do note that this literature focuses on solidarity in the relationships among individuals in relatively small groups. Hechter's own book *Principles of Group Solidarity* does try to connect such analyses to larger-scale phenomena like class or nation and offers helpful guidance. It is particularly strong on incentives and formal controls. Our call for rebuilding intermediate associations and cross-cutting ties can benefit from the perspective Hechter encourages. However, we also emphasize the importance of cultivating a democratic-egalitarian milieu that can foster solidarity among strangers and encourage us to imagine a "collective we" that is not exclusionary.

V

Democracy as a "political form" of popular governance, like M. M. Bakhtin's notion of the polyphonic novel as a "literary form," is *unfinalizable*. Democracy is not perfectible, and that is one of its virtues. This virtue is born of necessity. Just as the unfinalizability of the novel genre is necessitated by the heteroglossia of the figurative language it uses, the unfinalizability of democracy is necessitated by the constantly transforming nature of the socioeconomic formations in which it is embedded.

There are two distinct ways in which the telic character of democracy, its unfinalizability, becomes evident (or is disclosed to us). First, just as the author does not fully control the play and force of semiosis in their novel, democracy does not fully control its trajectory and destiny. Democracy must continually negotiate the changing socioeconomic formations in which it is embedded. As Calhoun argued in chapter 3, today's most dominant formation is capitalism. And capitalism is a dynamic force. It is ever-changing. While a democratic state can, to some extent, monitor and steer the economy, it cannot control the inner dynamics of capitalism. Hence, the history of modern democracy is a history of compromises with capitalism and the capitalist mode of social reproduction. These compromises do not yield normatively ideal or practically optimal policies or solutions. They often distort and weaken democracy's fundamental values: liberty, equality, and solidarity. But it is not always a loss. While capitalist transformations can impair our commitment to a democratic way of life, they can also strengthen some democratic values, institutions, and practices. As discussed above, the current state of capitalism, accompanied by a particular mode of political economy known as neoliberalism, is deeply entangled with and enchanted by the so-called technological sublime. Democracy—or, to be more precise, democratic states—in Euro-America may have embraced neoliberal policies and, in some important ways, discouraged democratic deliberation. But these states anticipated neither the dramatic turns of the free-market global economy nor the pivotal role technology would play—especially the revolutionary character of information and communication technologies. Since the inception of modern democracy after the great revolutions 250 years ago, democracy has been trying to catch up with the ongoing social transformations wrought by capitalism. We have dwelled extensively on this phenomenon in our discussion of Karl Polanyi's double movement.

Second, ideologically and institutionally, democracy cannot disentangle itself from its "republican" origins and traditions. The classical republican tradition acknowledged, in no uncertain terms, the existence of two distinct economic classes—the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots, the elites and the masses—and the unavoidable conflict of interests and values between them. Mixed and balanced government—and the liberal institutions and ideologies that went with it—was the republican solution for managing that conflict. Rather than viewing the conflict as a necessary evil to be managed, republican ideology, especially as articulated by Machiavelli, began to appreciate

how it could be used to strengthen the republican polity. As republican theorists have repeatedly noted, *time* is the real enemy of the stability and durability of the republican form of government that duly acknowledges the constitutive role of *demoi*. The point is that conflict between the classes, aside from being unavoidable, is continually changing. Hence, a republican polity must learn to manage not only conflict but the changing physiognomy of that conflict.

As heir to the republican tradition, modern democracy is confronted with the same problem. It must manage the conflict between the elites and the masses while contending with the changing shape of that conflict. To be sure, any sharp distinction between elites and masses in a highly complex and stratified modern democratic society is an oversimplification. Nevertheless, the political rhetoric of populists (on the left and on the right) has continually demonstrated the persuasive force of the division between “us” and “them.” In our book, we have repeatedly invoked the need to recall, revive, and refashion ideological and institutional elements of the republican tradition. Our endorsement of and enthusiasm for what we have variously termed social movement politics, the politics of social mobilization, and direct action politics might well be aligned with the republican tradition rather than opposed to it. Liberal democracy, with its commitments to the rule of law, equality before the law, the separation of powers, and the sanctity of human rights—in short, the so-called liberal package—aspire to eliminate the need for social movements, social mobilization, and direct action. But many liberals continue to adhere to an idealized democratic vision even as the capitalist mode of reproduction generates ever increasing socioeconomic inequality. In many ways, modern social movement politics resonate with different historical versions of the social democratic project. There is no reason why republican institutions, values, and practices should exclude these social movements, mobilizations, and actions.

By foregrounding the importance of social movement politics, our book is an attempt to fuse what is valuable in

the republican tradition with a social democratic project. We are arguing that the social and political energy generated by the demos must be channeled through republican institutions that are constantly adapting to the shifting realities of the capitalist mode of reproduction. That is what makes our version of democracy a telic project.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

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