THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY IS NOT WHAT IT USED TO BE[1]

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Democracy has a future, but it is not what it used to be or seemed to be.

The distinguished Japanese American scholar, Francis Fukuyama, famously declared "the End of History" and, presumably, "the Assured Future of Democracy." He based his assertion on two indisputable factual observations: (1) the collapse of the Soviet and,

[1] When I say "democracy" in this talk, I am referring to "real-existing democracy" (RED), not the etymologically correct version of the concept, i.e. rule **by** or **of** the people. It is based on rule by politicians – some of whom are elected and others who are appointed by those who are elected – both of whom claim to rule **for** the people. Elsewhere, I have proposed calling this "politocracy," rather than democracy or polyarchy.

hence, the disappearance of its historic enemy, and (2) the spread of liberal democracy to 50 or more new sites across the world, hence, its reinforcement by regional neighbors. What he neglected to say was that the end of one history was the beginning of another and that this new history of democracy would not be as tranquil and assured as he assumed. I am convinced that it will be more contentious in nature and uncertain in outcome than the one that has just ended.

In retrospect, we now know that the 40 or so years after World War II were an exceptional period of stability for RED – due to the coincidence of the two Cs: (1) the threat posed by a potential **C**ommunist revolution, and (2) the resources provided by a continuously expanding **C**apitalism. Both, especially when combined, provided strong incentives for ruling elites to accept compromises in their institutions and policies. They provided a threat from below and a surplus from above that made it possible to strike a temporary, but close, symbiosis between democracy and capitalism. Political life

revolved around parties firmly anchored on a single Left-Right continuum rooted in class interests. They competed regularly, fairly and centripetally for the support of undecided and cross-pressured voters in the middle. Thanks to this dynamic, the political rights and social entitlements of citizens were extended, the behaviour of capitalists was increasingly regulated, and public institutions acquired a greater capacity to mitigate the effects of the business cycle by reducing risk or compensating losers. At the core of this symbiosis was a stable regime of competition that was uncertain in outcome, but limited in consequence. The winners were marginally empowered and predictably constrained in what they could do when they came to power; the losers could reliably aspire to win in the future and, therefore, afford to lose in the present.

This exceptional conjuncture no longer exists. The threat of an alternative type of regime has disappeared and the surplus provided by high and persistent economic growth has disappeared. The

incentives for reform are not there; neither are the resources to pay for them.

During those 40 years, we seem to have forgotten that Democracy & Capitalism are based on fundamentally different operative principles. Democracy promises and promotes equality; Capitalism depends on and rewards inequality. Equality motivates Democracy to change; Inequality drives Capitalism to accumulate. These two "drivers of our collective existence" were momentarily compatible, but they no longer are. Democracy may still depend on Capitalism, but Capitalism does not depend on Democracy. Indeed, in this new period of history, the persistence of Democracy may become increasingly obstructive of the performance of Capitalism. And we seem to be in the process of finding out why and how much.

The Left-Right continuum has collapsed and electoral competition has become increasingly centrifugal with traditional centrist parties losing ground to new fringe parties at both ends of

the former continuum. Their populist rhetoric has been successful in undermining the trustworthiness of established parties and politicians, but these new entrants into the political game have been incapable of offering a credible alternative set of institutions or policies. Political rights and entitlements have diminished and an increasing proportion of citizens have become marginalized – economically, socially and politically. With the decline in the capacity of political institutions to regulate the behaviour of capitalists, the performance of the economy has become more volatile, decreasing the potential for social protection or public compensation. If this were not enough, the effect of persistently lower rates of economic growth has been exacerbated by the liberalization and globalization of capital flows which has made it increasingly difficult to sustain, much less augment, the capacity of national states by extracting sufficient fiscal resources to respond to citizen demands. And, last but not least, the shift from industry to finance as the major source of capitalist accumulation has had a dramatic effect on nature of the work place and the role of

institutions representing conflicting class interests. The bottom line of this "near-perfect-storm" of coincident trends has been an increase in all forms of economic, social and political inequality to an extent not experienced in over a century.

The second feature that was credited by Fukuyama with bringing about "the end of history" was the extension of liberal democracy to an unprecedented number of countries with previously autocratic regimes and to world regions which were formerly immune to this mode of political domination. This seemed to guarantee the efficacy of the so-called "neighborhood effect," i.e. that the more neighbouring countries practiced RED, not only would they be less likely to resort to violence in resolving their disputes, but also that they would be more likely to come to each other's assistance in sustaining this type of regime. What was not contemplated was the possibility of a perverse neighbourhood effect in which the travails and frustrations in one neo-democracy might become contagious and affect adjacent ones.

But what was completely unexpected has become the great political paradox of our times: precisely at the moment when so many aspiring **neo**-democracies emerged with the declared intention of imitating pre-existing ones, these **archeo**-democracies were entering into the compounded crisis we have described above. Their citizens have been questioning the very same "normal" institutions and practices that new democratizers have been trying so hard to imitate and have found them deficient – not to say, outright defective. The list of morbidity symptoms is well-known (if not well-understood): their citizens have become more likely to abstain from voting; less likely to join or even identify with political parties, trade unions or professional associations; more likely not to trust their elected officials or politicians in general; and much less likely to be satisfied with the way in which they are being governed and the benefits they receive from public agencies. Needless to say, it has not taken long for the citizens of most neo-democracies to have become equally or even more disillusioned with what they have so recently accomplished.

Which is not to say that democracy, even RED, is doomed. Robert Dahl is famous (among many other things) for the observation that 'real-existing' democracy (or what he called polyarchy) has radically transformed itself – re-designed itself, if you will – over the centuries. The same word, democracy, has prevailed while its rules and practices have changed beyond recognition. And Dahl does not even hesitate to label these changes as "revolutionary" – even if they came about without widespread violence or institutional discontinuity. Most of those who were responsible for these transformations did not think of themselves as revolutionaries, just as pragmatists responding to the opportunities or necessities of the moment.

Dahl identifies three such revolutions in the past:

The first was in **size.** Initially, it was believed that RED was only suitable for very small polities, i.e. Greek city-states or Swiss cantons. The American constitution re-designed the practice of democracy by

making extensive use of territorial representation and introducing federalism – thereby, irrevocably breaking the size barrier.

The second revolution was in **scale**. Early experiments with democracy were based on a limited conception of citizenship – severely restricting it to those who were male, free from slavery or servitude, mature in age, literate or well-educated, paid sufficient taxes and so forth. Over time – sometimes gradually, other times tumultuously -- these restrictions were re-designed until, today, the criteria have become almost standard and include all adult "nationals" regardless of gender or other social qualifications.

The third Dahlian revolution was in **scope**. REDs began with a very restricted range of government policies and state functions – mostly, external defense and internal order. Again, over time, they became responsible for governing a vast range of regulatory, distributive and re-distributive issues – so much so that a substantial proportion of gross domestic product is either consumed by them or passes through them.

I am convinced that we are (again) in the midst of a democratic revolution – in fact, in the midst of several democratic revolutions. Two of them seem to have exhausted their innovative potential and already become well-entrenched (and irrevocable) features of RED politics – at least, in Europe and North America. Two others are still very active in their capacity to generate new challenges and opportunities. They have still to work their way into the process of re-designing the rules and practices of contemporary REDs. And two others may just be emerging.

The first of these "post-Dahlian" revolutions concerns **the displacement of individuals by organizations as the effective citizens of REDs**. Beginning more or less in the latter third of the 19th Century, new forms of collective action emerged to represent the interests and passions of individual citizens. James Madison and Alexis de Tocqueville had earlier observed the importance of a multiplicity of "factions" or "associations" within the American polity, but neither could have possibly imagined the extent to which

these would become large, permanently organized and professionally run entities, continuously monitoring and intervening in the process of public decision-making. Moreover, whether or not these organizations of civil society are configured pluralistically or corporativistically, the interests and passions they represent cannot be reduced to a simple aggregation of the individuals who join or support them. They have massively introduced their own distinctive organizational interests and passions into the practice of REDs and become their most effective citizens.

The second "post-Dahlian" revolution has to do with **the professionalization of the role of politician**. Earlier liberal democratic theory presumed that elected representatives and rulers were amateurs -- persons who might have been somewhat more affected by "civic" motives – but who were otherwise no different from ordinary citizens. They would (reluctantly) agree to serve in public office for a prescribed period of time and then return to their normal private lives and occupations. While it is difficult to place a

date on it, at some time during the Twentieth Century (perhaps, beginning with the advent of Socialist and Social Democratic parties whose leaders did not have the private wealth that the leaders of Conservative and Liberal parties did) more and more politicians began to live, not **for** politics, but **from** politics. They not only entered the role with the expectation of making it their life's work, but they also began to surround themselves with other professionals – campaign consultants, fund-raisers, public relations specialists, media experts, and – to use the latest term -- "spin-doctors." Whether as cause or effect, this change in personnel has been accompanied by an astronomical increase in the cost of getting elected and of remaining in the public eye if one is so unfortunate as to become un-elected.

In my view, these two revolutions seem to have run their course, but still pose serious normative challenges. There are signs of a reaction against them settling in among mass publics. The usual permanent organizational representatives of class, sectoral and

professional interests – especially, one has to admit, trade unions – have declined in membership and even in some cases in number and political influence. New social movements have emerged that proclaim less bureaucratic structures and a greater role for individual members –some even have enhanced mechanisms for practicing internal democracy. Candidates for elected public office now frequently proclaim that they are not professionals and pretend as much as is possible to be "ordinary citizens." Movements have emerged in some countries, especially the USA, to limit the number of terms in office that a politician can serve. Whether these trends will be sufficient to stop or even invert these two "post-Dahlian" revolutions is dubious (to me), but they do signal an awareness of their existence and of their (negative) impact upon the quality of REDs.

And, now, let us turn to a diagnosis of the two more recent – indeed, contemporary and simultaneous – revolutions going on within REDs.

The first regards (again) the scope of decision-making in democracies and, again, I can borrow a concept from Robert Dahl. Over the past thirty or more years – indeed, much longer in the case of the United States – REDs have ceded authority to what Dahl has called "**guardian institutions**."[i] The expression is taken from Plato and refers to specialized agencies of the state – usually regulatory bodies – that have been assigned responsibility for making policy in areas which politicians have decided are too controversial or complex to be left to the vicissitudes of electoral competition or inter-party legislative struggle. The *locus classicus* in the contemporary period is the central bank, but earlier examples would be the general staffs of the military, anti-trust agencies, civil service commissions or even constitutional courts. In each case, it is feared that the intrusion of "politics" would prevent the institution from producing some generally desired public good. Only experts acting on the basis of (allegedly) neutral and scientific knowledge can be entrusted with such a responsibility. A more cynical view would stress that these are often policy areas where the party in power has

reason to fear that, if they have to hand over office in the future to their opponents, the latter will use these institutions to punish the former or to reward themselves.

The net effect of guardianship upon REDs is rather obvious – although usually well-concealed behind a rhetorical "veil of ignorance," interwoven with claims to "Pareto-Optimality" or scientific certainty, namely, that contemporary REDs have been increasingly deprived of discretionary action over issues that have a major impact upon the lives of their citizens. "Democracies without choice" is the expression that has emerged, especially in neo-REDs, to describe and to decry this situation. Even more potentially alienating is the fact that some of these guardians are not even national, but operate at the regional or global level – *vide* the 'conditionality' imposed by the IMF or the EU. Putting it in the terms proposed by Peter Mair, REDs have been prevented from acting **responsively** to the preferences of their citizens by acting **responsibly** to the imperatives of their material environment,

especially to those embedded with an increasingly globalized capitalist economy.

Which brings me to the second contemporary revolution within REDs – or, better, with particular intensity among European REDs: **multi-level government**. During the post-World War II period, initially in large measure due to a shared desire to avoid any possible repetition of that experience, European polities began experimenting with the scale or, better, level of aggregation at which collectively binding decisions would be made. The most visible manifestation of this is, of course, the EEC, EC and now European Union (EU), but paralleling this macro-experiment, there emerged a widespread meso-level one, namely, the devolution of various political responsibilities to sub-national units – *provinces, regioni, Länder*, or *estados autonómicos*. As a result, virtually all Europeans find themselves surrounded by a very complex set of authorities, each with vaguely defined or concurrently exercised policy *compétences*. The oft-repeated assurance that only national states can be

democratic is no longer true in Europe, even though in practice it is often difficult to separate the various levels and determine which rulers should be held accountable for making which specific policies. European politicians have become quite adept at "passing on the buck," especially at blaming the European Union (or the Euro) for unpopular decisions. New political parties and movements have even emerged blaming the EU for policies over which it has little or no control – for example, over the influx of migrants from non-EU countries.

Multi-level government could, of course, be converted into something much more familiar, namely, a federal state, but resistance to this is likely to remain quite strong for the foreseeable future – *viz.* the rejection of the EU's draft Constitutional Treaty by referendums in France and the Netherlands and of the Lisbon re-draft by the Irish citizenry. Which means that the confusion over which policy *compétences* and the ambiguity over which political institutions are appropriate for each of these multiple levels will

persist. When it comes to the design question, there seems to be a general awareness that the rules and practices of real-existing democracy at each of these levels cannot, even should not, be identical. This would demand a literal re-invention of democracy, a task that has not yet been accomplished by politicians at any level (and that continues to bedevil academics in many different disciplines and at many different sites).

And, if this were not enough, there may be two more revolutions "in the making." The first goes under the name of **governance –** allegedly, **good governance**. It is too soon to judge whether the extraordinarily rapid and broad diffusion of this concept among practitioners and scholars is merely a reflection of fashionable discourse (and a mutual desire to avoid mentioning (bad) **government**), or whether it actually signifies (and moreover contributes to) a profound modification in how decisions are being made in REDs. If the latter, this would have (at least) seven major implications: (1) "stakeholders" determined by functional effect

would replace citizens grouped in territorial constituencies as the principal participants in decision-making; (2) political parties would have no recognized (and certainly no privileged) access to governance arrangements, having been deliberately displaced by individual or collective stakeholders ; (3) consensus formation among representatives with unequal functional capacities would replace various forms of voting by individuals or deputies with equal political rights as the usual decision-making mechanism; (4) executive or administrative authorities would normally take over the role of "chartering" such arrangements – delegating their scope and determining their composition – rather than the competitively and popularly elected representatives of the legislature; (5) the 'liberal' distinction between public and private actors would be deliberately blurred in terms of responsibility for making but also for implementing publicly binding decisions; (6) the substantive compromises that underlie the process of consensus formation would have to be reached confidentially through opaque combinations of negotiation and deliberation between stakeholders

– and only subsequently be legitimated publicly in terms of their (presumably beneficial) functional impact; (7) Elections would increasingly become "civic rituals" with less and less impact upon the substance of public policy and, presumably, less and less popular participation. Needless to say, all of these implications pose serious challenges to the legitimating principles of contemporary REDs.

Finally, we have to contemplate and comment upon the very recent emergence of yet another potentially democratic revolution: the massive introduction of new, electronically based, information and communication technologies (ICTs) into political life. Innumerable observers, theorists and pundits have declared that ICTs are one – if not **the** revolutionary instrument – that will substantially and irrevocably alter the practice of RED.

Now, there is nothing new about changes in the "**technology of democracy**." The specific arrangements that have translated its consistent principles into everyday practices of voting, representing, negotiating, deciding, implementing and complying have changed

greatly and frequently – but never (to my knowledge) have these technologies been described as "revolutionary." At its founding, citizens walked to a central place, assembled there for a lengthy period to listen to the rhetoric of fellow citizens, tried to reach a consensus and/or they occasionally voted by voice or chose randomly by small wooden balls in order to decide upon their leaders or courses of action. In the ensuing years, the means whereby citizens were brought together and allowed to express their choices have changed so radically that it is highly unlikely that an ancient Greek citizen transported to the present would recognize as democratic any of the technologies that are routinely used to nominate candidates, campaign for election, vote for competing tickets, tally up the winners and announce the results to the general public. Probably, the most mystifying aspect of all these technological revolutions to him would be the extent to which so many of them involve the act of political representation, i.e. of selecting and then delegating to some person or organization the right to act in lieu of the individual citizen.

If I understand Dahl's rather idiosyncratic definition of a "revolution" in the practice of democracy, the application of ICT would not have to be dramatic or violent. It would not even have to be imposed by self-consciously radical actors – as has usually been the case with political revolutions. He is quite clear that the three he identified (and, I would add, the four others I have appended) were not considered as particularly radical by their contemporaries, but rather as necessary adaptations that were consistent with previous practices. Nor would ICT necessarily have to have an observable beneficial effect upon the quality of RED. It could well be revolutionary, but in a destructive anti-democratic direction.

Our initial expectation should be the null hypothesis, i.e. that ICT will **not** fundamentally alter the practices of 'real-existing' democracy. Electronic Democracy, in other words, will still remain the usual Liberal, Representative, Constitutional, Capitalist Democracy that I have been calling 'Real-Existing Democracy'. At almost every occasion in the past when something new was injected

into the technology of election, representation or public decision-making, e.g. mass circulation newspapers, radio and, then, television broadcasting, mass opinion surveys, fax machines, voting machines, national party conventions, proportional representation, public-funding for parties, nomination by primaries, closed-list ballots, voting by mail, permanent voter registration, legislative hearings, advisory councils, *e così via* – some pundit would emerge to declare that RED would never again be the same. And they were (by-and-large) wrong, at least with regard to its fundamental practices. These new technologies were eventually domesticated and absorbed into the usual ways of conducting political business.

The last four "revolutions" – two actual and two potential – are fundamentally (ontologically, if you will) different from the preceding ones. The former occurred sequentially, with an interval separating them. Indeed, it could be argued that the earlier revolution led to the subsequent one and so forth. Today's "revolutions" are happening simultaneously in time and overlapping each other in

content. They interact in ways that produce "emergent properties" – political outcomes and public reactions – that no one could have imagined. And, which existing rules and practices cannot control. Elsewhere, I have argued that it is precisely the **complexity** that this generates that poses the most significant challenge to those who choose to analyse contemporary politics – especially to those who would do so comparatively.

Conclusion

If **H**istory (NB the capital H) has any lesson to contribute, democracy (or, better, its 'real-existing' version) will survive. It has repeatedly demonstrated its extraordinary capacity to survive and uniquely managed to do so by using pre-established institutions to change their rules and practices peacefully and consensually. They have not always done so in a linear fashion and there have been some embarrassing lapses, e.g. the 1930s, but this time the challenge of moving to some different type of democracy (perhaps, a post-liberal one) will be especially great.

The task would seem to be especially daunting when compared to the past. So far, there is neither an obvious **agent** to promote the necessary reforms; nor is there a credible alternative **ideology** to justify them; nor is there an obvious **method** for doing so. The working class has been replaced by a fragmented and anomic public; neo-liberalism has entrenched itself behind the plausible slogan of TINA – "There Is No Alternative;" and the mechanism of revolution or even its spectre is no longer credible. Who will promote the necessary changes? Why will they promote it? And, how will they accomplish it? I am confident that it can and eventually will be done, but with what detours and delays I have no idea.