DEM-DEC Research Update Editorial: Reflecting on 1989

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Latest Global Research Update Just Issued

The latest Global Research Update on the global platform Democratic Decay & Renewal (DEM-DEC), covering 1 August until 30 September 2019, is now available here. In each Update I write an editorial on key themes to help users to navigate the Update, and to provide some limited commentary, especially on very recent research.

1 Soul-Searching 30 Years After 1989

As 2019 draws to an end we find ourselves reflecting intensely on the legacy and meaning of 1989 as a pivotal year that seemed to usher in a new democratic era. The German Marshall Fund has produced a keystone report, *Reassessing 1989* (September 2019), examining a range of themes, including: liberal overreach and the misinterpretation of 1989; the end of techno-Utopianism; the thirtieth anniversary of Tiananmen Square; the "mixed fruits" of Poland's democratic transition; the headwinds buffeting the EU; authoritarian advances and the end of global democratic expansion; the rise of precarious work; and the myriad ways in which technology is shaping, and poised to shape, our world – not least artificial intelligence, quantum computing, biotechnology, and the infrastructure of the Internet itself.

Certainly, from our current standpoint the comparison between the hope of 1989 and the alarm of 2019 is striking. Cas Mudde's new book addresses the "renaissance" and normalisation of far-right politics, with (in his view) radical right leaders in three of the world's largest democracies: USA, Brazil, and India. Secretary General Thorbjørn Jagland opens the Council of Europe's new 2018 Report saying that the Council "remains vigilant and proactive to counter dangerous trends." With the ruling authoritarian PiS party leads in Poland's imminent election, prorogation and impeachment bring democratic crises to fever pitch in the UK and US, and Hong Kong convulses in city-wide protests, it is easy to be despondent. As Peter Pomerantsev puts it so eloquently in his new book, *This Is Not Propaganda*: "I feel that everything that I thought solid is now unsteady, liquid."

However, it is also a moment for renewed hope and for action. On 13-15 October I will attend Forum 2000's conference in October – the 23rd since it was set up after 1989 –devoted to the theme 'Recovering the Promise of 1989'. Democracy defenders from across the world will convene to "to analyze these challenges and search for ways to renew … and strengthen democracy" and discuss "our common global future in the next 30 years." Attendees will include Jan Zielonka, whose 2018 book on 'liberal Europe in retreat' (included in this Update) emphasises the need to ground liberal democracy in an equitable economy – which resonates with Tarun Khaitan's new article on preventing excessive material inequality from becoming political inequality, or even plutocracy.

2 Seeing Many Roads Forward

Many analysts featured in this Update, while anatomising the problems facing democracy, also chart a way forward. Taking a very broad lens (mirroring their previous book, *Why Nations Fail*), Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson in *The Narrow Corridor* (September 2019) take aim at what they see as a Western misconception of political liberty as "a durable construct, arrived at by a process of "enlightenment", building a new theory about liberty and how to achieve it. In *What Was Liberalism?* (September 2019), James Traub explores the centuries-long evolution of the liberal idea to address how it can rebuild its majoritarian foundations. A new collection (September 2019) edited by Tom Carothers and Andrew O'Donoghue for the Brookings Institution examines, not only democracy's

problems, but also the many ways that citizens and civil society bodies are countering polarizing forces, including reforms to political parties, institutions, and the media. As regards institutional reforms, David Farrell and Jane Suiter's short book *Reimagining Democracy* (September 2019), on Ireland's Citizens' Assembly, will be of interest to anyone who sees such bodies as a key innovation for cutting across deadlock or hyper-partisan political systems, marrying public, political and expert knowledge, and attenuating the impact of excessive lobbying by sectoral interests. Taking a more philosophical tack, Jakob Huber – in a recent article suggested for addition by a DEM-DEC user – examines hope as an integral feature of democratic politics.

3 Media Manipulation, Complicity and Reform

The role of the media is on my mind as I prepare to speak on the Forum 2000 panel, 'How Media Can Help Restore Public Trust in Democracy' on 14 October (organised in collaboration with Project Syndicate). This Update provides much food for thought in contemplating the ways in which the media can be used to distort the public sphere. Government manipulation is key in some accounts, including Pomerantsev's punchy new book on today's disinformation deluge, and Attila Bátorfy and Ágnes Urbán analysis of how the Hungarian government has used State advertising to build an uncritical media empire aligned with the government. However, media complicity is also evident. Amber Boydstun and Regina Lawrence discuss how, despite prior research suggesting the media would treat Donald Trump's presidential campaign with derision, a combination of his fame, wealth, and the high entertainment value, led the media to cover him heavily and assist his success. Ways forward can be found, too: Israel Butler argues in a recent book (suggested for addition by a DEM-DEC user), that one way of countering the siren song of authoritarian populists may be to teach committed democrats to communicate the value of liberal democracy effectively. Others seek more: Pomerantsev raises the potential of public input into the decision-making processes of tech giants who currently have inordinate and unchecked power over our information and in shaping our information environment.

4 Lobbying and Influence: 'Soft Power' v 'Shadow Power'?

The core role of the media in a healthy liberal democracy is clear, as an intermediary between government and public, and in maintaining a public sphere in which those holding public power can be scrutinised and challenged. Other forms of influence by unelected actors are more contested and can be hard to pin down. Corporate and celebrity influence are two areas of focus in this Update. In *Kochland*, business journalist Christopher Leonard lays bare the influence and "dark money" wielded by Koch Industries – one of the world's largest privately-owned corporations – to shape policy on everything from climate science to healthcare, distorting the formal democratic processes for policy formation (NB: Leonard does not engage in far-right tropes of negative Jewish influence on politics). While, for some, Koch Industries is simply the flip-side of liberal billionaires' activities, perhaps we can make a fundamental distinction here between overt influence ('soft power') and covert influence ('shadow power'). That does not mean, of course, that 'soft power' is always positive: for instance, the authors of an interesting article on 'Celebrity, Democracy, and Epistemic Power' – part of a thought-provoking collection in *Perspectives on Politics* – decry the "unchecked uses" of social and political power by celebrities, arguing that these threaten the very legitimacy of our democracies.

5 Parliaments Under Fire?

The role of 'shadow power' has also been a central theme as parliaments have come under intense pressure in various states in recent week. In the UK, the decision to prorogue Parliament, to prevent it sitting and 'thwarting' a no-deal Brexit, has shone a spotlight not only on PM Boris Johnson but also on the perceived excessive influence of his senior adviser Dominic Cummings. In Poland, the decision on 11 September to suspend parliament until after the 13 October elections has concentrated our gaze once

again on the dominant role of 'puppet master' Jarosław Kaczyński, who is neither president nor prime minister, but rather head of the ruling Law and Justice party. In a more overt power clash, as this Update was being finalised on 30 September 2019, President Vizcarra in Peru dissolved Congress, which responded by declaring his presidency suspended, appointing an interim president. A new project (added to the DEM-DEC Resources Database) examining why authoritarian leaders shut down legislatures, called Parliaments Under Fire and led by Ben Noble at University College London, may prove illuminating even in democratic contexts. Less dramatically (but of no less acute importance), Patrick Vickery in the *Texas Law Review* argues in 'Trumping Congress' that the executive should have "exclusive power over dictating and managing the country's diplomatic agenda".

6 The Evolution of International Intervention

If a meta-theme of this Update might be the role of unelected actors, many items point to the complex and contested role of external international actors in addressing democratic decay and democratic crisis. In the EU context, a range of analyses point to the rapidly mutating thought, policy and law responses to ongoing rule-of-law (the preferred term) crises, especially in Poland and Hungary. Courts feature heavily. Marek Safjan, a judge of the EU's Court of Justice (from Poland), argues in the *European Judicial Review* (*Europejski Przegląd Sądowy*) that "exceptional measures" are needed to address a systemic crisis. In a new research paper (September 2019) András Jakab, focused on the role of constitutional law in countering erosion of democracy and the rule of law, includes EU law in his analysis, reflecting the deep imbrication of national and supranational responses in the European literature – as do new papers and forthcoming articles by Armin von Bogdandy, Dimitry Kochenov and Maciej Bernatt, and Petra Bárd & Anna Śledzińska-Simon. Parliament matters, too, as Duncan McDonnell and Annika Werner discuss in their landmark new book on the radical right in the European Parliament. Beyond the EU, the Council of Europe's 2018 Report further emphasises the multiplicity of defensive actors working across the European public space.

Beyond Europe itself, and underscoring the long pedigree of this line of thinking, Tom Long and Max Paul Friedman recount the "forgotten failure" of Uruguay's proposed 'Larreta Doctrine' in the 1940s, which focused on the interconnectedness between democracy and human rights, and the need for regional mechanisms to safeguard these values. A fitting companion piece is a new edited collection on *The International Rule of Law: Rise or Decline?* (August 2019), examining whether we can continue to frame and organise international relations as based on a universal understanding of values.

(For more discussion of EU issues, see the Article 7 section on DEM-DEC).

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