

REITH LECTURES 1999: Runaway World

Anthony Giddens

Lecture 5: Democracy

TRANSMISSION: 5 May 1999

Recorded at The Royal Institution of Great Britain, London for BBC Radio 4

On November 9th, 1989, I was in Berlin - in what was then West Germany. At the meeting I had come to take part in, some of those present were from East Berlin. One such person, who was away that afternoon, later came back in a state of some excitement. He had been in the East, and was told that the Berlin Wall was on the point of being opened.

A small group of us got down there very quickly. Ladders were being put against it and we started to climb up. But we were pushed back by television crews who had just arrived on the scene. They had to go up first, they said, so that they could film us scaling the ladders and arriving at the top. They even persuaded some people to go back down and climb up twice, to make sure they had good TV footage.

Thus is history made in the closing years of the 20th Century. Television not only gets there first, it stages the spectacle. In a way, as I shall go on to argue, the TV crews had the right to push themselves to the front. For television had an important role in making the opening of the wall happen, as it did more generally in the transformations of 1989 in Eastern Europe. The driving force of the 1989 revolutions was democracy or self-rule. And the spread of democracy in the recent period has been strongly influenced by the advance of global communications.

Democracy is perhaps the most powerful energising idea of the 20th Century. There are few states in the world today that don't call themselves democratic. The Soviet Union and its East European dependencies called themselves 'people's democracies', as communist China continues to do. Virtually the only countries that are explicitly non-democratic are the last remaining semi-feudal states like Saudi Arabia - and even these are hardly untouched by democratic currents.

What is democracy? The issue is a contentious one, and many different interpretations have been offered. I shall mean by it the following. Democracy is a system involving effective competition between political parties for positions of power. In a democracy, there are regular and fair elections, in which all members of the population may take part. These rights of democratic participation go along with civil liberties - freedom of expression and discussion, together with the freedom to form and join political groups or associations.

Democracy isn't an all or nothing thing. There can be different forms, as well as different levels, of democratisation. Democracy in Britain and the United States, for instance, isn't all of a piece. A British traveller in the US once enquired of an American companion: 'how can you bear to be governed by people you wouldn't

dream of inviting to dinner?' to which the American replied, 'how can you bear to be governed by people who wouldn't dream of inviting you to dinner? More or less everyone is a democrat now, but it certainly wasn't always so. Democratic ideas were fiercely resisted by established elites and ruling groups in the 19th Century, and often treated with derision. Democracy was the inspiring ideal of the American and French revolutions, but for a long while its hold was limited. Only a minority of the population had the vote. Even some of the most fervent advocates of democratic government, such as the philosopher John Stuart Mill, argued that limitations should be imposed on it. Mill recommended that some of the electorate should have more votes than others, so that in his words, the 'wiser and talented' have more influence than the 'ignorant and less able'.

Democracy in the West only became fully developed in the current century. Before the First World War, women had the right to vote in only four countries - Finland, Norway, Australia and New Zealand. They didn't get the vote in Switzerland until as late as 1974. Moreover, some countries that became fully democratic later experienced relapses. Germany, Italy, Austria, Spain and Portugal all had periods of authoritarian rule or military dictatorship during the period from the 1930's to the 1970's. Outside Europe, North America and Australasia, there have only been a small number of long-standing democracies, such as Costa Rica in Latin America. Over the past few decades, however, much of this has changed, and in a remarkable way. Since the mid-1970s, the number of democratic governments in the world has more than doubled. Democracy has spread to over thirty more countries, while all the existing democratic states have kept democratic institutions in place. These changes began in Mediterranean Europe, with the overthrow of the military regimes in Greece, Spain and Portugal. The second group of countries where democracy spread - this time mainly in the early 1980s, was in South and Central America. Some twelve countries established or re-established democratic government, including Brazil, Peru and Argentina.

The story continues across all continents. The transition to democracy post 1989 in Eastern Europe, and parts of the ex Soviet Union, was followed in a number of countries in Africa. In Asia, with some problems and reversals, democratisation has been going on over the whole period since the early 1970s - in South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Thailand and Mongolia. India has remained a democratic state since its independence in 1947.

Of course, some states making the transition to democracy fall short of full democratisation, or appear to have stalled along the way. Russia is only one of many examples. Others are simply putting back what existed before. Argentina, and some other Latin American countries, have had democratic government previously, as have the Czech Republic, or Poland in Eastern Europe. Since democratic governments have in Eastern Europe often been overthrown, we can't be sure how permanent any of these democratic transitions will be. Yet democracy has made nearly as much advance during the past thirty years as it did over more than a whole century before that. Why? One possible answer is offered by those who take a triumphalist view of the Western combination of democracy and free markets. This is that other systems have been tried and have failed. Democracy has come out top because it is best. It simply took most countries outside the Western ambit some while to recognise this.

I wouldn't dispute part of the argument. Democracy is best. But as an account of the recent waves of democratisation, it is hardly adequate. It doesn't explain why such changes should happen at this juncture in history.

To get a better explanation, we need to resolve what I shall call the paradox of democracy. The paradox of democracy is this. On the one hand, democracy is spreading over the world, as I have just described. Yet in the mature democracies, which the rest of the world is supposed to be copying, there is widespread disillusionment with democratic processes. In most Western countries, levels of trust in politicians have dropped over past years. Fewer people turn out to vote than used to, particularly in the US. More and more people say that they are uninterested in parliamentary politics, especially among the younger generation. Why are citizens in democratic countries apparently becoming disillusioned with democratic government, at the same time as it is spreading around the rest of the world?

The changes I have been analysing throughout these lectures explain why. For increasing numbers across the world, life is no longer lived as fate - as relatively fixed and determined - authoritarian government becomes out of line with other life experiences, including the flexibility and dynamism necessary to compete in the global electronic economy. Political power based upon authoritarian command can no longer draw upon reserves of traditional deference, or respect.

In a world based upon active communication, hard power - power that comes only from the top down - loses its edge. The economic conditions that the Soviet Union couldn't handle - the need for decentralisation and flexibility - were mirrored in politics. Information monopoly, upon which the political system was based, has no future in an intrinsically open framework of global communications.

In the East European events of 1989, large numbers of people took to the streets. But - unlike almost any other revolution in history - there was remarkably little violence. What seemed a system of implacable power - Communist totalitarianism - faded away as though it had hardly existed. Few thought apartheid in South Africa could disappear without being forcibly overthrown. But it did. The only episodes of violence that occurred in 1989 were involved in the seizure of television stations. Those who invaded them got their priorities right. The communications revolution has produced more active, reflexive citizenries than existed before. It is these very developments that are at the same time producing disaffection in the long-established democracies. In a detraditionalising world, politicians can't rely upon the old forms of pomp and circumstance to justify what they do. Orthodox parliamentary politics becomes remote from the flood of change sweeping through people's lives.

Where does this leave democracy itself? Should we accept that democratic institutions are becoming marginal just at the point where democracy seems on a roll? Some very interesting findings are revealed in the opinion polls carried out in different Western countries about trust in government. People have indeed lost a good deal of the trust they used to have in politicians and orthodox democratic procedures. They haven't lost their faith, however, in democratic processes. In a recent survey in the US and the major West European countries, well over 90% of the population said they approved of democratic government. Moreover, contrary to what many assume, most people aren't becoming uninterested in politics as such. The findings actually

show the reverse. People are more interested in politics than they used to be. This includes the younger generation. Younger people are not, as has so often been said a generation X, disaffected and alienated.

What they are, or many of them are, is more cynical about the claims politicians make and concerned about questions that they feel politicians have little to say about. Many regard politics as a corrupt business, in which political leaders are self-interested, rather than having the good of their citizens at heart. Younger people see issues such as ecological questions, human rights, family policy and sexual freedom as most important. On an economic level, they don't believe that politicians are able to deal with the forces moving the world. As everyone understands, many of these go beyond the level of the nation state. It isn't surprising that activists should choose to put their energies into special interest groups, since these promise what orthodox politics seems unable to deliver.

How can democracy and active government be sustained when they seem to have lost their purchase on events? I think there are answers. What is needed in the democratic countries is a deepening of democracy itself. I shall call this democratising democracy. But democracy today must also become transnational. We need to democratise above the level of the nation. A globalising era demands global responses, and this applies to politics just as much as any other area.

A deepening of democracy is required, because the old mechanisms of government don't work in a society where citizens live in the same information environment as those in power over them. Western democratic governments, of course, have never been as secretive as communist states or other types of authoritarian government. Yet secretive in some contexts they certainly have been. Think, for example, of how much was concealed by the US and British governments in the cold war period about nuclear testing and weapons development. Western democratic systems have also involved old-boy networks, political patronage and back stage deals. They frequently make use of traditional symbolism, and traditional forms of power, that are less than wholly democratic. The House of Lords in the UK is only one of the most obvious of such examples. As traditions lose their grip, what once seemed venerable, and worthy of respect, almost overnight can come to appear quaint, or even ridiculous.

It was not by accident there have been so many corruption scandals in politics around the world in the past few years. From Japan to Germany, France and the US to the UK, corruption cases have made the news. I doubt that corruption is more common in democratic countries than it used to be. Rather, in an open information society it is more visible, and the boundaries of what counts as corruption have shifted. In Britain, for example, the old boy network in the past was simply the way in which things were done, even when left of centre parties were in power. Such networks have hardly disappeared, but much of what used to happen through them, and be widely accepted, is now defined as illegitimate.

The democratising of democracy will take different forms in different countries, depending on their background. But there isn't any country so advanced that it is exempt. Democratising democracy means having an effective devolution of power, where - as in Britain - power is still strongly concentrated at the national level. It means having effective anti-corruption measures at all levels.

It often implies constitutional reform, and the promotion of greater transparency in political affairs. We should also be prepared to experiment with alternative democratic procedures, especially when these might help bring political decision-making close to the everyday concerns of citizens. Peoples' juries, for example, or electronic referenda, won't replace representative democracy, but they can be a useful complement to it.

Political parties will have to get more used to collaborating with single issue groups, such as ecological pressure groups, than they have in the past. Some people see contemporary societies as fragmented and disorganised, but in fact the opposite is true. People are getting more involved in groups and associations than they used to. In Britain, 20 times more people belong to voluntary or self-help groups than are members of political parties, and much the same is true of other countries. Single issue groups are often at the forefront in raising problems and questions that may go ignored in orthodox political circles until too late. Thus well before the BSE crisis in the UK groups and movements had been warning about the dangers of contamination in the food chain.

The democratising of democracy also depends upon the fostering of a strong civic culture. This is absolutely central. Markets cannot produce such a culture. Nor can a pluralism of special interest groups. We shouldn't think of there being only two sectors of society, the state and the marketplace - or the public and the private. In between is the area of civil society, including the family and other non-economic institutions. Building a democracy of the emotions, of which I spoke last time, is one part of a progressive civic culture. Civil society is the arena in which democratic attitudes, including tolerance, have to be developed. The civic sphere can be fostered by government, but is in its turn its cultural basis.

The democratising of democracy isn't relevant only to the mature democracies. It can help build democratic institutions where they are weak and undernourished. In Russia, for instance, where gangster capitalism is rife, and strong authoritarian overtones persist from the past, a more open and democratic society can't be built in only a top down manner. It has to be constructed bottom up, through a revival of civic culture. Replacing state control with markets, even if they were more stable than they are, wouldn't achieve this end. A well-functioning democracy has been aptly compared to a three-legged stool. Government, the economy and civil society need to be in balance. If one dominates over the others, unfortunate consequences follow. In the former Soviet Union, the state dominated most areas of life. Hence, there wasn't an energetic economy and civil society was all but killed off.

We can't leave the media out of this equation. The media, particularly television, have a double relation to democracy. On the one hand, as I have stressed, the emergence of a global information society, is a powerful democratising force. Yet television, and the other media, tend to destroy the very public space of dialogue they open up, through a relentless trivialising, and personalising, of political issues. Moreover, the growth of giant multinational media corporations means that unelected business tycoons can hold enormous power.

Countering such power can't be a matter of national policy alone. Crucially, the democratising of democracy can't stop at the level of the nation state. As practised up

to now, democratic politics has presumed a national community that is self-governing and able to shape most of the policies that concern it. It has presumed the sovereign nation. But under the impact of globalisation, sovereignty has become fuzzy. Nations and nation-states remain powerful, but there are large democratic deficits opening up - as the political scientist, David Held points out - between them and the global forces that affect the lives of their citizens. Environmental risks, fluctuations in the global economy, or global technological change, do not respect the borders of nations. They escape democratic process - one of the main reasons, as I said earlier, for the declining appeal of democracy where it is best established.

Talk of democracy above the level of the nation might seem quite unrealistic. Such ideas, after all, were widely spoken of a hundred years ago. Instead of an era of global harmony, there arrived two world wars, more than a hundred million people have been killed in warfare during this century.

Are circumstances different now? Obviously no one can say for sure, but I believe they are. I have given the reasons why in earlier lectures. The world is much more interdependent than it was a century ago, and the nature of world society has changed. As a reverse side of the coin, the shared problems we face today - such as global ecological risks - are also much greater.

How might democracy be fostered above the level of the nation-state? I would look to the transnational organisations as much as to the international ones. The United Nations, as its very name indicates, is an association of nation states. For the moment at least, it rarely challenges the sovereignty of nations, and indeed its charter asserts that it should not do so. The European Union is different. I would see it as forging a way that could, and very likely will, be followed in other regions too. What is important about the EU isn't that it is located in Europe, but that it is pioneering a form of transnational governance. Contrary to what some of its supporters, and its critics say, it is not a federal state or a super nation-state. But nor is it merely an association of nations. The countries that have entered the EU have voluntarily given up some of their sovereignty in order to do so.

Now the European Union isn't itself particularly democratic. It has famously been said of the EU that if it applied to join itself, it wouldn't get in. The EU doesn't meet the democratic criteria it demands of its members. Yet there is nothing in principle that prevents its further democratisation and we should press hard for such change. The existence of the EU drives home a cardinal principle of democracy, when seen against the background of the global order. This is that the transnational system can actively contribute democracy within states, as well as between them. The European courts, for example, have made a range of decisions, including measures protecting individual rights that hold within the member countries. As we look round the globe, at the end of the 20th Century, we can see cause for optimism and pessimism in about equal measure. The expansion of democracy is a case in point.

On the face of it, democracy seems a fragile flower. In spite of its spread, oppressive regimes abound, while human rights are routinely flouted in states around the world. In Kosovo, that unfolding tragedy, hundreds of thousands have been forced from their homes, and all pretence of the rule of law abandoned. I would like to quote some words here, from a reporter on the spot: 'nearly half a million refugees' he says, are in

Macedonia now. How they are to be fed, nobody knows ... Come over into Macedonia and help us!" This was published in the Toronto Daily Star. The reporter was Ernest Hemingway, the date - October 20, 1922. One might be forgiven for thinking that some problems are simply intractable, without hope of resolution. Democracy might appear to flourish only in especially fertile soil, which has been cultivated in the long term. In societies, or regions, that have little history of democratic government, democracy seems to have shallow roots and is easily swept away.

Yet perhaps all this is changing. Rather than thinking of democracy as a fragile flower, easily trampled underfoot, perhaps we should see it more as a sturdy plant, able to grow even on quite barren ground. If my argument is correct, the expansion of democracy is bound up with structural changes in world society. Nothing comes without struggle. But the furthering of democracy at all levels is worth fighting for and it can be achieved. Our runaway world doesn't need less, but more government - and this, only democratic institutions can provide.