Goodbye future?

Stephen Holmes
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Structural problems in conventional democracies are alienating citizens worldwide, writes Stephen Holmes. Political marketing, cross-party compromise and elite withdrawal threaten to rob democracy of its original role as instrument of justice.

Almost a quarter century has passed since the citizens of central and eastern Europe took to the streets to demand more democracy. Though the memory remains fresh in reunified Berlin, I wonder whether, elsewhere, 1989 and its aftermath are still debated with any real urgency. So much has happened in the last 23 years that, throughout the world, the democratic struggle of central and eastern Europeans seems somehow remote or visible only through a clutter of intervening traumas. I would therefore like to try to rethink some aspects of the disappointments of democracy after communism, in the context of what I think can only be called a global dissatisfaction with democracy today.

I want to do this because I believe that post-communist countries, even though they still bear the traces of their unique histories, have now joined the rest of the democratic world in this sense, that their problems with democracy resemble ours more and more. For one thing, all of us are living in the shadow of the Chinese miracle, which has dramatically dissociated economic prosperity from democratic governance at the very moment when western democracies seem less and less able to stave off their own economic decline.

I begin by following that most important principle of political theory: if you can’t make an argument, make a distinction. The distinction I have in mind is between two types of disappointment with democracy, first, disappointment with the specific form that democracy takes in a given country, and second, a more general dissatisfaction that seems to afflict all or most democracies in the world for more or less similar reasons. As an American observing the US electoral season, which we have now thankfully survived, I was naturally appalled by the way gerrymandered “safe seats” and the low-turnout primary system conspired to push the candidates of one of our two major national parties into ideological extremism and a refusal to seek any middle ground. Similarly, as a part-time resident of Italy, I am disturbed to see that multi-party competition cannot produce a government that behaves rationally; and, of course, I have been hearing more and more of my Italian friends and neighbours complain that voting means nothing because elected parliaments are reduced to ratifying decisions made by markets and the European
Central Bank or, even more provocatively, that all important decisions are being taken by a Herrenvolk from the North and its local technocratic appointees.

What I want to examine, however, are not these sources of dissatisfaction with specific democracies, but rather some general sources of dissatisfaction with democracy as such, and to ask what light such a discussion sheds on disappointments with democratization after communism.

**From transition to trauma**

Already in the 1990s, I think it is fair to say, most of us had stopped being euphoric. No sooner had Poland exited the communist bloc than Leszek Kolakowski published an article reminding us that euphoria never lasts very long. Anyone following the aftermath of the Arab Spring will appreciate what he had in mind; and democratic euphoria after 1989 was similarly short-lived. True, no one back then predicted that Hungary would lapse ominously back into single-party rule as it has today, with devastating personal consequences for many ordinary Hungarians. By the late 1990s, students of post-communism had started seeing themselves less as transitologists than as traumatologists. That was certainly true for Claus Offe, who wrote extensively about the peculiarly non-revolutionary nature of the post-communist transitions and especially about the fateful absence (with the possible exception of Poland) of an organized counter-elite that, having overthrown the old regime would therefore have had the public credibility and organizational experience to act as an agent of directional change, steering the process of post-communist development. The consequence of this lack was political drift ungoverned by any shared concept of public purpose. My point, in any case, is that already in the 1990s, students of post-communism were perfectly aware that when autocracy collapses, democracy does not arise automatically to take its place, like toast popping out of a toaster. As post-1989 euphoria wore off, the elementary lessons learned earlier by students of European decolonization reasserted themselves: the absence of obstacles is not the same as the presence of preconditions; less state does not mean more freedom; gaining influence over legislation is pointless if no one obeys the law; and, since democracy is a tiny spot in human history, it must have many complex preconditions.

So one interesting question is: What separates our understanding of democratization’s difficulties and dysfunctions today from our understanding of these difficulties and dysfunctions in the late 1990s, when the initial post-communist euphoria had worn off?

Many factors could be mentioned in this regard, of which by far the most important is the rapid progress of globalization, to which I’ll return. But among those many intervening factors, I’d like to emphasize something that weighs very heavily on the mind of Americans, namely Bush’s “freedom agenda”. Recklessly generalizing from the historically unique cases of central and eastern European democratization, some neo-con members of the American national security establishment concluded absurdly that the entire world, with a little nudge from the Pentagon, was bound to imitate America’s political system and thereafter uncritically to support America’s national interests. I personally find it impossible to think about democracy today without considering the savagely abortive attempts at democracy promotion in two internally fragmented and long-suffering Muslim countries through military occupation. To my mind, the facile
optimism with which these attempts at democratization were undertaken to some extent disgraced the very idea of democracy-promotion. Of course, it would be easy to dismiss the American claim to have been promoting democracy in Iraq and Afghanistan as pure hypocrisy, as nothing more than a cover story. And there is a lot to that perspective. Unfortunately, it also has the unwelcome consequence of clearing the democratization project of any moral ambiguity. In any case, it is not the whole story.

America’s post-invasion policy in Iraq differed in an essential way from America’s post-invasion policy in Afghanistan. Because of the long struggle against the Soviets in the 1980s, the American CIA had a fairly good sense of Afghanistan’s political landscape, and that means a fairly intimate knowledge of the various warlords and clan leaders, none of whom had been democratically elected but who, nevertheless, wielded enormous political authority and commanded unbending loyalty from well-armed and battle-hardened followers. By contrast, American officials had little on-the-ground knowledge of Iraq, a country that had been a no-go zone for decades. As a result, the US-led occupying authority after 2003 was to some extent flying blind. And it was in this information vacuum that the American forces refused, for almost two years, to enter into any negotiations with unelected tribal sheikhs or religious leaders. This was a principled decision, based on the neo-con, anti-realist theory that the only legitimate authority is a democratically elected authority.

After a disastrous two years in which the political situation in the country careened violently out of control, the occupying forces changed their minds and began to strike bargains with unelected tribal and religious leaders. But the damage had been done, and Iraq, as any newspaper reader knows, has never fully recovered.

From an historical point of view, needless to say, the premise behind this policy was absurd. Most political authority throughout human history has been undemocratic. The inability to understand that basic anthropological and sociological truth provides an important clue to the way “democracy” can function as an ideology that severely distorts its adherents’ picture of really-existing political networks and dynamics.

The cage of bureaucracy

But let me turn to my basic theme, the sources of a still-limited but growing global dissatisfaction with democracy and the underlying continuity between this emerging worldwide democratic pessimism and the disappointments with democratization after communism. There are many ways to define democracy, but I will stick to a very simple approximation: Democracy is a system that allows citizens to control politicians. Alternatively, democracy is a system which aligns the preferences of politicians with the preferences of voters by placing politicians in office pro tempore and making the renewal of their mandate depend on periodic voter approval.

The most general source of dissatisfaction with democracy, in this sense, is that periodic competitive elections, in fact, do not allow citizens to control politicians and do not align the preferences of elected leaders with the preferences of the electorate. The question is: Why not?

There are several basic reasons. The first concerns the spiralling growth of the
administrative state. When Europeans today discuss the hollowing out of democratic institutions, they usually cite the power of the European Commission and the European Central Bank, where unelected bureaucrats make consequential decisions without consulting the sectors of society most directly affected. As a result, most European electorates are getting used to the idea that changing politicians does not mean changing policies. This dissociation of rotation in office from change in policies naturally decreases public interest in voting. [1] But the iron cage of bureaucracy in which democracy is held hostage extends well beyond the special case of the European Union in which national governments have relinquished some dimensions of sovereignty for the dreamt-of benefits of membership in a would-be world power.

For example, the number of government employees in the United States (state and local as well as federal) is somewhere around 20 million. So what percentage of these government officials, people who make decisions that affect the lives of citizens in serious ways, are elected? The answer is: a tiny percentage. We get the same answer, moreover, if we ask how many of these public servants are influenced by or accountable to elected politicians. So the *pro tempore* system applies to only a small fraction of officialdom. It is unrealistic, therefore, to use the charming phrase of the American Founders, “a government wholly elective,” to apply to the US government today. It is also worth mentioning in this context that permanent unelected bureaucracies have an enormous tactical and cognitive advantage in any struggle with temporarily elected politicians, even though the latter are nominally superior to the former. The FBI, for example, although situated formally within the executive branch and therefore legally under the command of the President, has no trouble keeping secrets from the White House and acting to undermine Presidential policies and decisions. Obama may be Commander-in-Chief but he is to a great extent boxed-in and held hostage by the permanent national-security bureaucracies, including the CIA as well as the FBI, and especially by the Pentagon with its deep connections to the multi-billion dollar American arms industry.

This general problem with democracy has been exacerbated under the conditions of post-communism. In one of his many essays about the transition to democracy, Claus Offe wrote that when the communist system collapsed, *Herrschaft* or public authority disappeared and only *Macht* or organized private interests remained. But this is not quite true. It is more accurate to say that the vanishing of the Communist Party machine left behind various “orphans” or highly developed fragments of a highly developed state. These bureaucratic corporations survived as subsidiaries spun off from their parent organization. The political landscape of post-communism, therefore, was not entirely but only partially reduced to private actors vying for power and wealth. This landscape was also littered with newly autonomous and mutually squabbling remnants of a defunct system of *Herrschaft*. The Soviet space program is a well-known example of such an orphaned agency that survived the disappearance of the CPSU and manage to drum up new sources of funding and support. Other Russian examples include Gazprom, the former Soviet Ministry of Gas. Oleg Gordievsky, a one-time KGB agent, makes a similar point about his former employer: “The KGB without the Communist Party is a gang of gangsters.” [2] Populated by concrete individuals, such orphaned institutions developed strong corporate interests of their own, interests that do not necessarily jibe with those of the Kremlin.

Even more extraordinary is the radical privatization of Soviet psychiatry for utterly
personal ends. In today’s Russia, if you covet your elderly sister’s apartment, for instance, you can make a “sensitive payment” to the same psychiatric institute that once tortured political dissidents and the now for-profit psychiatrists will seize your sister physically, lock her in a facility, and pump her full of drugs until she signs any document you put in front of her. [3] Like many of its other forms, this cruel privatization of the shattered detritus of the Soviet collapse is wholly spontaneous and serves no possible purpose of the central government, even if it leaves that government unfazed.

My point here is that post-communism presents a special and exacerbated version of the resistance of the state bureaucracy to control by elected politicians. In Russia especially, but not only there, the chronic fragmentation of the Russian civil service poses an insurmountable obstacle to democratic consolidation. The situation is less drastic in other post-communist countries. But the difficulties faced by elected civilians trying to control an internally fragmented state bureaucracy are widespread throughout the post-communist world.

Democracy versus vote-casting

A second general reason for dissatisfaction with democracy is that the preferences of voters, expressed on election day, are unstable and ephemeral. Having defined democracy as a system in which elites struggle for power by competing periodically for votes, Joseph Schumpeter also exposed the weakness of this system. You cannot fool all of the people all of the time, he wrote, but you can fool enough people for long enough to do irreversible damage. [4] We might acknowledge the truth of this observation but retain our faith in democracy by insisting, against Schumpeter, that democracy must extend beyond electoralism to include the incessant questioning and examining of government by citizens between elections. The press, the opposition party, the court, NGOs and so forth are not condemned to be slaves on every day besides election day, [5] but can protest, monitor, complain, and investigate every non-election day of the year.

But such a theoretically savvy amendment does little to diminish the fatal role being played in contemporary democracies by political marketing, or the application of advertising techniques to electoral campaigns. Sub-rational appeals (what Madison would have described as “the vicious arts by which elections are too often carried” [6]) are crafted to put the critical faculties of voters to sleep and thereby to increase the volume of sales on election day, that is, the number of votes for the candidate or party being puffed. One consequence is that voters are increasingly selecting politicians whose skills at campaigning are excellent, even if their talent for governing is modest. Rachel Boynton’s 2005 documentary, Our Brand is Crisis, shows very clearly how America promotes democracy in post-authoritarian regimes (precisely by exporting the vicious arts by which elections are too often carried). Although the film concerns Bolivia, its lessons are easily applicable to post-communist central and eastern Europe.

Power corrupts

A third source of democratic discontent involves the weakness of retrospective voting as a method for aligning the interests of elected politicians with the interests and values of the electorate. Madison formulated the democratic hope with marvellous clarity, arguing that periodic voting binds representatives to their constituents by promoting in public
officials a habitual recollection of their dependency on the people. The prospect of having to face the voters at set intervals, in theory, encourages politicians to anticipate the moment when their power is to cease and when the exercise thereof is to be reviewed. [7] So why do periodic elections fail to align the interests of politicians with the interests of voters? An extreme post-communist example can be quarried from the Russian experience, where periodic elections devolve no power into the hands of voters because Vladimir Putin and his team hand-pick the candidates who are to run against him, making sure than no one with even a vague chance of garnering public support will appear on the ballot. But the problem is a general one and extends far beyond the extreme case of Russia’s vybori bez vybora (elections without a choice).

Well before the advent of modern democracy, John Locke observed that even politicians raised to high office by periodic elections “come to have a distinct interest from the rest of the community, contrary to the end of society and government.” [8] When we get to the very top of democratic governments, to Presidents and Prime Ministers, we are talking about people who never stop for traffic and seldom even touch doorknobs. How can such elevated people empathize with the plight of ordinary voters? The gap is even greater in the new democracies where most citizens live in economically straitened circumstances. Power corrupts because its possession affects not only the opportunities but also the motivations of elected politicians. Accession to power virtually guarantees that the dominant or driving motives of office-holders, even if facing re-election, will deviate substantially from the leading motives of the rest of society. The prospect of a future election is a powerful restraint, but not powerful enough, on its own, to discipline the corrupt new motivations produced by the enjoyment and exercise of power.

Unaccountability and the electoral bargain

A fourth reason why periodic elections do not suffice as a mechanism for citizen control of politicians is much easier to state. Information is held asymmetrically. Politicians can keep voters in the dark, can withhold information that citizens need to know in order to evaluate the performance of their politicians. To underline its relevance to the post-communist experience, we can call it the Gyurcsány principle, after the former Hungarian Prime Minister who was surreptitiously recorded as saying what all elected politicians tacitly believe, that getting re-elected requires incumbents to lie to their electorate. Democratically elected governments can escape fact-based performance evaluations by the public if they simply manage to keep discrediting information secret until after the next election.

Fifth, electoral accountability is a feeble method for aligning the interests of rulers with the interests of the ruled. This would still be true even if the public (counterfactually) was well-informed in real time about all of the government’s actions. The reason is fairly well known and can most easily be explained by contrasting the anaemic responsiveness of politicians to voters with their heartfelt responsiveness to campaign contributors. Able to open or close at will the faucet of election funding for permanently campaigning members of Congress, a skillful lobbyist has a relatively easy time evaluating the promise-keeping of the elected officials he has suborned. He wants a yes or no vote on a specific bill and can verify easily whether such a vote is cast. The voter is in a much less advantageous position, having to evaluate the performance of his or her Congressman or Senator over a number of years on a wide range of unrelated issues and controversies. A
single vote delivered on a single day every few years in an extremely crude tool for producing accountability for such a complex tangle of decisions. Capture of the legislative process by organized private interests is a pervasive feature of democratic politics everywhere today - without exception, which means in post-communist democracies as well.

As I mentioned above, temporarily elected officials are held hostage by permanent bureaucracies (such as the Pentagon) able to stall and “wait out” and undermine the plans of their nominal superiors. But, and here I come to a sixth reason for widespread dissatisfaction with democracy today, elected politicians can also be boxed-in and held hostage by powerful actors in the private economy, especially large investment banks such as Goldman Sachs. In Europe today, after the electorate votes, the markets get to “vote”. Indeed, market responses to policy choices occur almost instantly. Governments are required to react to these market responses with equal alacrity. There is no way that the slow-moving electorate can intervene effectively in this rapid-fire back-and-forth. The scourge of capital flight reveals the relevance of this problem to post-communist economies as well.

A seventh source of dissatisfaction with democracy derives from one of democracy’s essential preconditions. Adam Przeworski famously defined democracy as a system in which parties lose elections. But for incumbents to step down voluntarily after they lose an election it is obviously necessary that they do not expect to lose too much. This observation was illustrated dramatically in 2010-2011 when Ivory Coast strongman Laurent Gbagbo refused to leave office after his rival, Alassane Ouattara, won a disputed election, thereby plunging the country into a bloody four-month standoff. In line with this principle, Obama’s Department of Justice refused to prosecute criminally any of the war crimes committed during the Bush administration. Democracy will not work, he seems to have reasoned, unless electorally ousted incumbents can be guaranteed a soft landing. The problem with this “inter-temporal bargain” between rival parties alternating in power is that it drains meaning from democratic elections. L’alternance may be the essence of democracy; but reducing the stakes in the rotation of office-holders may also produce profound dissatisfaction among voters longing for “change”. The problem is exacerbated because voters are usually urged to show up at the polls after being bombarded with competitive overpromising by candidates pleading for support.

How has this problem surfaced in post-communist countries? After the fall of communism, the abuse of the many by the few did not cease; but the manner and style of the abuse radically changed. The central forum for abuse was no longer the KGB but rather the Privatization Agency. This process was hard to monitor from a democratic perspective because liberalism, although it has a strong conception of individual rights, has a feeble conception of the public patrimony. Moreover, the looted assets were soon being re-described as private property, the essential building blocks of a modern capitalist order. This shrewd rechristening was a form of liberal sacralization, protecting stolen property from majoritarian oversight. Wealth-distribution process after communism was never disciplined by democratic methods or according to any comprehensible norms of justice. This initial and consequential injustice, systematically insulated from electoral correction, has fathered a lingering sense of dissatisfaction in the new democracies.
The emancipation of the few

To understand why citizens today, throughout the world, cannot easily control politicians by democratic means, we need to look at the way in which various extra-electoral forms of dependency of politicians on citizens have recently been eroded. To oversimplify, we can say that the citizen-voter has leverage over ruling groups only when he or she is also a citizen-soldier, a citizen-worker, and a citizen-consumer. The few are willing to share power and wealth with the many only when the many voluntarily cooperate with the few in their war-making and profit-making. When volunteer armies with high-tech weapons replace citizen levies, one of the main motives for elite interest in public welfare is substantially weakened. The flooding of the labour market by a low-cost Chinese workforce has also reduced the interest of the American and European capitalist class in the health and education of American and European workers. Taken together, the disappearance of the citizen-soldier and the diminished status and clout of the citizen-worker have considerably reduced the leverage which the citizen-voter can bring to bear on society’s top decision-makers. This erosion has become a total destruction in the case of Russia, where the hydrocarbon bonanza (sold to foreigners) has liberated the ruling elite from citizen-consumers as well.

But we inhabitants of “well-established democracies” have no reason to feel complacent when observing Russia’s system of spoliation and neglect. The movement for the liberation of the rich is a worldwide phenomenon from which no country is totally immune. The high-stakes (mostly American) gamblers in investment banking who almost destroyed the world economy seem to have emancipated themselves from their fellow citizens as completely as Russia’s hydrocarbon princes. The idea that periodic elections can make them accountable and responsive to the needs of the public therefore seems chimerical, as does the hope that the post-war social contract, now in tatters, can be restored. Some commentators say that politicians have ceased to pay attention to the poor, and even to visit their neighbourhoods, because the poor have stopped voting. But the causality runs more powerfully in the other direction. The poor have stopped voting because they do not possess enough extra-electoral leverage over their rulers to make voting feel worthwhile.

Democratic mechanisms of public accountability, in other words, have been fatally weakened by the decomposition of connective tissue between the rulers and the ruled. This is a massive and global process and cannot be reversed by a few legal or organizational fixes. In a way, liberal democracy arose in the struggle of the many against oppression and exploitation by the few. Once the few abandon oppression and exploitation and withdraw into bubbles of super-prosperity to conceal and enjoy their stolen wealth, the old democratic methods used to defeat oppressors and exploiters may prove to be entirely or mostly useless.

Goodbye future?

Globalization weakens democracy not only by making it more difficult for states to tax the rich. It also fosters waves of immigration which democracy is ill-suited to confront. When elections do not allow citizens to control politicians, as Ivan Krastev has argued, voters stop voting their rational interests and start voting their irrational passions. In both the US and Europe, one of the most powerful passions driving irrational voting behaviour is
the futile wish to freeze current-day demography and prevent any further weakening of
the relative position of the traditional majority. In the American south, during the recent
presidential election, many virulent anti-Obama voters apparently feared that they would
end up like a lump of white sugar dissolved in a black cup of coffee. They saw and
continue to see Obama as a symbol of the demographic trend that will soon make the
United States into a white-minority nation. And in a way, Obama has embraced this view
of his Presidency, explicitly conveying the message that America will remain America
even though it is now a mixed-race nation. Yet to hold the opposite view, that America
cannot be America if it becomes a mixed-race nation, is only a formula for violence,
because America already is and will remain a mixed-race nation.

Obama’s attempt to reconcile demography and democracy, now endorsed by a slim
majority of voters, has some important lessons for Europe, where rightwing parties have
proved skilful at poaching leftwing voters by appealing to nativist resentment against
immigrants. Since immigrant communities in Europe are not going to leave, needless to
say, European politicians need to find a way to integrate them into European societies.
Unfortunately, democracy is not much help in this process, because democracy always
represents the demography of the past generation. That becomes an especially acute
problem in the face of rapid waves of immigration and a high birthrate among recent
immigrants. Democratic pessimism will undoubtedly continue to grow in Europe so long
as candidates for office continue to pander successfully to the anxieties of ethnic
majorities. Indeed, the obvious tension between democracy and democracy, fuelling
dissillusion with democratic methods of peaceful conflict resolution, may be impossible to
resolve. But the Obama precedent is surely one to which a new generation of European
leaders should look for guidance.

To avoid ending on an entirely pessimistic note, let me say something about another
possible function of democracy, a function that can be fulfilled even if and when
democracy does not allow citizens to control politicians. I was reminded of this function
by a sign I saw displayed on 5 March 2012 in Moscow’s Pushkin Square, after Putin was
re-elected to the Presidency. It read: “Goodbye Future!” I interpreted this to mean not
only that Russia has no credible succession formula, no institutional means of replacing
Putin, but also that genuinely democratic (not rigged) elections serve to create a sense of
future possibilities even in the absence of an ideology of History with a capital “H”, and
even in the absence of sustained economic development. In a democracy, we are often or
even usually disappointed with the incumbents, but we can always look forward to the
next election in which a different governing team will win and perhaps do much better.
This hope may eventually prove ill-founded, but in the interim it prevents the present
from being overcast or even poisoned by endless gloom, and may even suffuse some
sectors of society with buoyancy and exuberance. This ability of democracy to fill society
with a sense of future possibility is one of its most precious side-effects. Perhaps this is
what still makes us democrats, despite all the deep and deepening reasons we, along with
our post-communist neighbours, have for being dissatisfied with contemporary
democracy as a system allegedly designed to subject high-living rulers to some measure
of control by the ruled.

Based on a speech given at the Hertie School conference in honour of Claus Offe, 22
March 2012.
Footnotes

1. For the post-communist experience with foreign (and therefore by definition undemocratic) control of economic policy, see Stephen Holmes, "A European Doppelstaat?" in East European Politics and Society, 2003, 107-118.


6. Federalist #10.

7. James Madison, Federalist # 57.


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