

Tocqueville Today: Shaping the Future of Democracy Once More

When in 1831 the French aristocrat, politician, and philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville departed from France to the United States, liberal democracy was about to emerge as the new political order of the Western world. Still in its early stage, it was a difficult birth. Driven by the fantastic promises of equal opportunities, rights and political representation, the “liberal experiment” had to survive tumultuous revolutions in Europe and the United States until it finally manifested in political reality. Tocqueville’s work and foreseeing thoughts about “Democracy in America” became a crucial intellectual pillar for the fragile liberal project across the world, from their early stages until today.

190 years later, we again find ourselves in a time of fundamental changes. **Liberal democracy has delivered legal, political, and economic achievements which are unprecedented in Western political history. However, we also come to realize that this system has not been free of flaws and might be much more at danger than we anticipated.** After a wave of populism and anger has rolled over Western democracies in the last years, the values that underpin our societies are under attack, from within even more than from outside. In this time, we need new answers to the big questions about our political future. And which location could be more suited to find those answers than the exact same place where back in his time Alexis de Tocqueville wrote his guiding work on the future of democracy?

This autumn, the descendants of Alexis de Tocqueville invited a unique mixture of politicians, journalists, and academics from Europe and the United States to the Tocqueville castle in French Normandy to discuss the future of democracy in Europe and the US.

Populist Movements Shattering Democracies from Inside

Over the last years, liberal democracies have been struck by a globally uniform uprising of “populism”, which shares core ideologies, electorates as well as declared goals across the individual countries. Taking over governments of powerful states, these movements coined a global moment of fear, anger and rage while its members also share a feeling of being helpless, hurt, and victimized.

Looking at the case of the US, there is now an approximate understanding about how this could happen. First, there has been a massive scale of industrial offshoring at the expense of the American worker’s class. Companies outsourcing their manufacturing to China in combination with a widening wealth and opportunity gap has undoubtedly left big scars in the American job market as well as psyche. Looking farther back in history, the beginning of Trumpism might even be located at the end of the Cold War. After defining the meaning of the world into one big competition between two opposing systems and a clear common enemy, namely the Soviet Union, this paradigm has scattered and transitioned into a much more complicated world, without such a clear guideline to follow or a common enemy to fight. This perceived lack of orientation has made parts of the society more receptive for typical populist practices such as strengthening national or sub-national group-identities, promising to go back to the glorious old times, and creating outside-enemies to fear, such as refugees.

The presence and risks of these causes have been underestimated or neglected by the political establishment, until they came to the boil. Politicians like Trump then quickly capitalized on this anger, promising to become a patron of all those who share same opinions and feelings. However, in doing so, they did not dissolve the anger or its root causes, but rather multiplied it into a movement of rage which got increasingly detached from fact-based politics, posing a threat to democratic values and institutions.

Despite its massive threat and long existence, those who stand against populism have yet to find a good recipe against the phenomenon. Most attempts by the political establishment and media have failed, because they put the cart before the horse: It is crucial to separate justified root causes and dissatisfaction from the political movement on the surface which capitalizes on rage. Only fighting against the roaring dragon of populist leaders and their policies merely adds fuel to the fire. To be successful, **institutions,**

politicians, and the media have to regain credibility by taking concerns of the population serious, instead of leaving those as the exclusive domain of raging populists.

This is all the more urgent because the danger of populism is far from being over, as these movements will continue to shape the near political future. In the United States, Trump maintains significant control over the Republican party from the back, while in Germany the AfD entered Parliament for the second time winning 10% of the votes. The fight for democracy and liberal values is hence not to be fought in Afghanistan or elsewhere, but in the middle of the United States, European and other liberal societies.

Democracies in Times of Social Media – Both a Blessing and a Curse

Within the recent democratic turbulences, social media has certainly played a key role. Trump revolutionized the use of Twitter as his silver bullet to steer the public discourse, and social media platforms became crucial in the spread of conspiracy theories and radicalization. Beyond that, social media platforms even enabled and perpetuated atrocities, such as in Myanmar. However, to pass the buck to those technologies is neither a solution nor does it reflect the versatility of the topic.

To reach to a more balanced assessment, it might help to take a big step back. Today is not the first time that technological innovation revolutionizes the possibilities of social interaction and communication. In 1440, Johannes Guttenberg established letterpress printing in the Western hemisphere, which had vast social and political effects. Previously, the capacity to store, shape and spread information remained at the jurisdiction of the elites of society in monasteries and universities. Suddenly, the access to knowledge was democratized which allowed for the propagation of new ideas and gave decisive impetus to the reformation movement. However, hate speech, conspiracy theories and fake news were equally empowered, for instance through the spread of antisemitic pamphlets. Society needed time to readjust and had to wage a battle against radical ideologies, but not against printed books.

Accordingly, social media should neither be blamed across-the-board. These new technologies in themselves are neutral, and as a consequence of how they are used they can inflict harm, but also bring vast benefits to society. For instance, social media provided fantastic opportunities to start social movements or to find social contacts during the covid-induced period of social isolation.

The crucial question hence becomes: how to endorse the positive and curb the negative effects of social media? Social media is much faster and more complex than printed books and is hence more difficult to monitor. Nowadays, a lie can get halfway around the world before the truth gets its pants on. So far, the job to prevent this has mostly been left to the platforms themselves, yielding them extreme political power. Twitter's and Facebook's late decision to ban Trump had more political impact than all previous efforts of Congress. Clearly, this standard procedure for content monitoring needs to be reconsidered. However, even if this first problem was solved, deleting tweets does not dissolve radical ideologies. Ideas on the internet will always find other ways to spread if one way is blocked and there is no shortcut to forego the difficult but necessary process of looking at and addressing root causes of such ideologies.

Fighting for a Good Cause by Which Means?

While conservative and right-wing tendencies flare up, progressive social movements are on the rise, too. The protests after the murder of George Floyd represent a peak of civil rights movements in the United States, which then spread across the world, empowering various other civil rights movements. This has sent a powerful signal that the moral conscience of civil society is still alive and willing to tackle problems that otherwise would not be addressed. However, as one panel discussion elaborated, dynamics of group coercion and the tendency to punish scapegoats have also emerged within social movements. The driving force is at times no longer a pure and forward-looking enthusiasm for change, but also an implicit notion of guilt. Trying to find a culprit for the miserable state of the world that we find ourselves living in, movements sometimes drifted into creating a system of collective guilt, which is placed upon all members of society. People are for instance being told they are inherently guilty for

problems such as colonialism, climate change or racial injustice. However, this imposed guilt does not actually advance the cause that the movement started out fighting for in the first place, but instead results in people feeling obliged to pay lip service to statements or movements. To take these movements to the next level, the panel concluded they should move on from finding some group to blame the status quo upon and instead resort to a more inclusive approach towards reform.

Social movements have achieved outstanding social change in recent history, looking at gender equality as an example. It might indeed be impossible to fully avoid unwanted social dynamics within such huge movements, but it becomes certainly easier to address and cure them once one is aware that they exist.

Democracy in Times of Competing Powers and External Threats

Finally, democracy needs to reassure its standing not only internally but also externally. Much to the concern of military strategists, senior foreign affairs practitioners as well as business leaders present at the conference, China expands its regional influence at the expense of Western influence, in the Indo-Pacific but also in front of Europe's doorstep. Its land-based infrastructure system across the Eurasian continent will continue to increase Chinese economic leverage. At the same time, China is buying many German high-tech companies while also engaging in large-scale theft of intellectual property, in order to race ahead in the global effort to develop AI technology, which will reshape global economic and technological hierarchies. Germany's cutting-edge technological and engineering capacities now find themselves in the center of competition between the United States and China. Germany and other European states were therefore encouraged to resist Chinese influence more fiercely.

However, this is easier said than done. Western governments are facing immense difficulties trying to streamline private economic choices with their broader foreign policy goals. The rules of the liberal market trump, as companies intentionally move into China's market for lucrative profits, especially while emerging out of the pandemic. At the same time, the leading western companies like Google, Amazon, Facebook and others evade appropriate taxation from Western governments without repercussions. In China however, they are very sensible to Chinese pressure and adhere to local business standards and political rules. Lastly, economic logic even silences political morale. Western governments, institutions and companies are very reluctant to speak out against issues such as the Chinese campaign in Hong Kong, the detention camps in the North or the aggression towards Taiwan.

How Should the West Then Confront China?

Reconciling political interest with the logic of the free market emerges as a major challenge. First, **there needs to be more assertive and uniform European foreign policy.** Paralyzed by its institutional setup and national self-interests, the EU has been unable to speak with a strong voice internationally, which is a voice that is painfully missing in the global struggle for democracy and its values. To be ready to defend its core values with the same fierceness with which they are being undermined from outside, this needs to change. Secondly, **there needs to be an agreement about principles of coexistence with China. As much as there are Chinese threats to be taken seriously, the threat of escalating conflict or even a major war, which is neither economically nor strategically desirable, is often neglected.**

And a transatlantic dialogue is by all means the cornerstone and base for a lively and pluralistic democracy, capable of reflecting upon its internal and external challenges ahead.

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