Learning democracy

Points of reference for a peaceful counteroffensive

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Learning democracy: Points of reference for a peaceful counteroffensive

Ernst Hirsch Ballin
Abstract

Until recently, the realization of democratic ideals appeared to be the future for developed and developing societies all over the world, but we are witness to an apparently far-reaching turn-around. This paper originated from a debate on the threats for constitutional democracies but approaches the same subject from a different angle: that of the possibility to strengthen this kind of statehood. The ideas that are developed in this paper are therefore not only a plea to defend the democratic institutions, but much more an appeal to deepen our understanding of the values that are at stake, transform the idea of what it means to live in a democratic society and to enhance the learning processes of democratic citizenship. This learning process must be rooted in a deeper understanding of the idea of democracy under the conditions of hyperconnected societies. Redefining the meaning of democracy goes in two directions: across borders and deep into the fabric of a democratic society. This understanding of democracy must go hand in hand with our understanding of the role of law and human rights, which are intrinsically connected values. What is at stake here is the dynamic force that drives the actualisation of human rights which guarantee human dignity. They can no longer be viewed only as protective competences (and duties) of government. They permeate societies and create space for interaction between governments, social relationships (in the broad sense) and individuals. Within that interaction, people can undertake their life projects both individually and collectively. Learning democracy prepares us for living together in freedom, broadens our view, and offers hope for a just and peaceful future.

Keywords

Democracy, learning, human dignity, democratic citizenship, human rights
Learning democracy:  
Points of reference for a peaceful counteroffensive*

by Ernst Hirsch Ballin**

1. Introduction

Until recently, the realization of democratic ideals appeared to be the future for developed and developing societies all over the world, but we are witness to an apparently far-reaching turn-around. This paper originated from a debate on the threats for constitutional democracies but approaches the same subject from a different angle: that of the possibility to strengthen this kind of statehood.

The rise of authoritarian systems and the successes of various populist movements in Europe, the United States and other countries in recent years provoked not only an avalanche of editorial and political comments, but also an extending stock of academic publications. Many of them focus on globalization, changed socio-economic conditions or the effects of new patterns of (electronic) communication. Other research points at long range ideological trends such as neo-liberalism, post-colonialism, and the until recently often unnoticed persistence of far-right and nationalist ideologies.1

In various ways, these trends coincide and result in threats to the ideals of a democratic state. We must recognize the strength of the currents: precarious living conditions for many, while the fact that traditional cultural and religious anchor points are washed away, explain much of this. Nevertheless, we must not give up the hope to stem the tide. Doing so, democracy cannot stay the same. Just fortifying the defense lines (like oversight by constitutional courts and international institutions) might be appropriate if the threats to democracy were mainly exogenous. But that is not the case. The threats are mainly endogenous, including the development of the global economy (which was warmly supported by the leadership of most western democracies). It is no exaggeration to say that the democratic form of life is at risk.

* This paper is based on the author’s Keynote Speech for the Biennial Colloquy on the State of Democracy “Democracy under attack, Loyola University Chicago John Felipe Rome Center, Rome (Italy) on April 11, 2018, and on the annual Comenius lecture 2018 “Mature democracy: on democracy, rule of law, and human rights”, delivered in Naarden (Netherlands) as translated by Balance Vertalingen, on March 17, 2018.
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Pluralism is giving way to hyperpluralism, in which unpredictable individualist ideas exist side-by-side with an incoherent variety of traditional or modern identity groups. This lack of coherence of the society is the backdrop of ephemerid single-issue movements which mobilize people, sometimes in a rally with media support. The democratic process can no longer build on stable support groups for political parties with ideological roots, like until recently the social democratic, Christian democratic and liberal currents in Western-European democracies. Their ideologically motivated leadership is gradually being replaced by political leaders whose discourse is void of long-term visions on the future of their country, Europe and the world. Instead they focus on the battle that has to be fought in the next election (or in a permanent election campaign) with leaders of other parties, preferably – in the dominating media logic – a single political enemy who has to be beaten. The favorite bipolar format of television debates reinforces and rewards this approach.

The inner resistance against the distortions of the democratic process is quite feeble and helpless when the dominating short-term-oriented political campaigns avail themselves of powerful data-driven campaign instruments. Their messaging has in recent years even bluntly crossed the borders of factual reliability. But precisely that has become a starting point for people who want to fight back and announce the restoration of trustworthiness as the platform for countermovements.

The ideas that I develop in this paper are therefore not only a plea to defend the democratic institutions, but much more an appeal to deepen our understanding of the values that are at stake, transform the idea of what it means to live in a democratic society and to enhance the learning processes of democratic citizenship. In the final part of this paper, I elaborate on viewpoints for a peaceful counterattack, which cannot be imposed on a society but must tap into the diverse cultural and spiritual sources of citizenship.

2. Erosion of support for the democratic political form of life

Let us first embark on a cautious attempt to put ourselves in the shoes of the citizens of our constitutional democracy. If all we can talk about is their anger and disappointment, we remove all hope and expectation from the process of learning engendered by our co-existence in that democracy. Others, foreigners for example, are then blamed for disappointments, or even turned into scapegoats. Moreover, the “institutions” of the state and the elites that are supposed to control them, are held responsible for the feelings among large swaths of the population to have lost control and to be exposed to a take-over by strangers. The habitual response follows in an almost naïve manner the same narrative: the institutions need to be improved and need to reconnect to the citizens. But efforts for institutional reforms – Italy’s constitutional history of the past decades is full of it – had only a very limited, if not adverse effect.

When we would like to overcome feelings of dissatisfaction with democracy, it is not primarily about the institutions, but rather about feelings and attitudes among the citizens who view themselves as individuals, victims rather than actors in society. A
mature democracy requires its citizens and public administrators to possess political virtues, virtues that make it possible for them to work together on life projects. That is why in this paper, I choose to start out from a radically different place; rather than comment on disappointment in institutions, I ask what we need to liberate a democratic constitutional system from the sentiments of aversion and alienation. Can we the citizens of western democracies find better and more rigorous ways to learn to be, feel and act like fellow citizens of a democratic state?

Learning involves meaningful encounters with others. Many people here will be familiar with the work of the German sociologist Hartmut Rosa, who has written about social acceleration as a feature of modernity. Modern communication and transport technology also facilitate the acceleration of cross-border contact between people, aided by the removal of border controls and other barriers. Comenius, who criss-crossed Europe, was a harbinger of modern times. Social acceleration can also provoke feelings of unease and fear about loss of identity and control. When the pace of society accelerates too quickly, people need something to hold on to, to keep themselves from losing control of the steering wheel and going off the road. That is one of the main functions of a system of laws, and when that system is democratic, then there is the guarantee that it will sufficiently reflect the convictions of ordinary citizens. Democratic decision-making processes provide a framework, and therefore leeway, for controlled processes of change, including migration. Many people, among whom some jurists (but not my students, I hope), see the law as unbending, an obstacle to change, a normative dead end. But if that were its dominant feature, the law would turn against the social dynamic, and the social dynamic would turn against the law. It happens, of course. Examples include the political and legal orders of the Ancien Régime and of Czarist Russia. They provoked the French Revolution of 1789 and the Russian Revolutions of 1917. But if the law is open to change, without relinquishing its regulatory function, it does serve its purpose. In that case, it offers moorings and sets limits to prevent the social dynamic from turning against people who are more conservative or who want to proceed in a different direction. The law (in particular) allows change to take place without things getting out of hand.

A democracy must therefore always be underpinned by the principle that respect is due to all, without discrimination – even to those who are powerless or thought different or odd. That is the primary principle that drives the recognition and actualisation of human rights: that all people should be respected equally for who they are. Respect for human dignity is therefore enshrined in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and in Article 1 of the European Union’s Charter of Fundamental Rights, proclaimed in 2000 and effective as of 2007. It is a principle that has fundamental significance in legal, but also in educational, terms. That is because it says something about the way in which people should treat one another as they pursue their rights and freedoms within a system of laws. It says that we must respect the human dignity of another, even if the other is a stranger, or

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appears strange to us. The propensity to identify others in racial, ethnic or cultural groups and reclaim a privileged position for the own group is – as history has demonstrated in many cases – the greatest risk for a democracy, especially when this claim is presented as the result of the democratic process itself.

Mutual, equal respect takes effort. The human psyche retains traces of a strong, intrinsic propensity to trust only one’s own. Once upon a time, our distant ancestors lived in groups of 160 or 170 men, women and children. But as their capacity for abstract thinking grew, along with their ability to convey those thoughts in language, people learned to put their trust in norms, and ultimately in legal norms, that applied equally to themselves and to those alien to them. That made it possible for them to organise themselves into ever-larger communities (tribes, peoples, states).

So it is that humankind learned – and each separate individual must relearn – to co-exist with others under the operation of the law, which organises people’s lives and offers them protection. And thanks to the confidence that this gives them, they can achieve their life projects. Co-existence involves recurring processes of learning that open up new perspectives. The learning that comes from co-existence is an inculturation process that makes it possible to plan, develop, and change. But note: inculturation – in education and in other forms of learning – does not mean reproducing what already exists. The ideal in education cannot and must not be that we turn children or pupils into clones of their educators. A second point of note: inculturation also involves becoming familiar with the norms, including legal norms, that – when abstracted from specific cases – regulate our relationships with others. Once again, these norms are not meant to produce clones, but rather to give people the confidence to build new things, new enterprises, families, structures with one another. A reliable system of laws wants to facilitate the social dynamic.

Today, as the intensity and speed of people’s encounters and relationships continue to grow – whether they like it or not – learning must resonate with people and liberate them from the fear of the unknown. Hartmut Rosa calls that quality in human relationships ‘resonance’, which he later explored in a book that he co-authored with an educationalist. Teachers must attempt to evoke resonance – they should throw out a spark that kindles a fire.

I said earlier that social acceleration largely involves people entering into more relationships, whether they like it or not, and increasingly with people who do not move in the same circles of co-existence as themselves. This means that in times of migration, education, more than ever, must also educate in the ways of co-existence, including the ways of citizenship, an area of instruction that has had a rocky road in the Netherlands. The Education Council of the Netherlands made note of this in its comments on the Dutch government’s 2017 coalition agreement. In this document, it makes some interesting recommendations: to improve the provision of education to refugees and to avoid frustrating it by forcing refugee children to move house

needlessly. But what the Education Council overlooks is that migration requires a reciprocal capacity to learn. Otherwise it is doomed to fail. The cautious passages about citizenship education⁵ ignore that side of the story. A migrant enters a society that has its own traditions and values, but the migrant is himself not a tabula rasa that can be reset at the instruction of the authorities. Entering into new relationships always means opening yourself up to changes too, which may be expected reciprocally as far as such changes are compatible with the constitutional framework of fundamental rights and obligations of citizens. Acknowledging the obligation to respect every person’s human dignity leads to a politico-legal system that recognizes majority decision-making as a process, aiming at a mutually acceptable order of rights and obligations.

3. The present risks for our aspiration to enjoy freedom and justice under the protection of democratic governance

It is no easy matter to live and work according such ideals, as many courageous thinkers and leaders experienced in their own way. It takes determination and the ability to swim upstream. The acceleration of social and cultural change processes in the late 20th and early 21st centuries has been considerable, after all – so much so that it seems to be asking too much of a political and social order that is receptive to change. That is aggravated by the manifest indifference of the upper political and economic echelons towards the existential uncertainty that rapid change has caused many people to feel. They have not only lost the underpinnings provided by a familiar, stable living environment, but also the protection that was once afforded to them within the context of the welfare state. People living in former mining and industrial areas, who are watching their young people move away and their public services deteriorate, have been hit doubly by the changes. There is nothing positive about globalisation for them, and the attendant rise of the ideology of neoliberalism has deprived them of their material certainties. For some, even the certainties that they once derived from their faith and their church have eroded. The British developmental economist Guy Standing described these people as the ‘growing class of “precariat” workers’ (and retirees).⁶

It comes as no surprise that radical socio-political movements in politics and trade unionism are concerned about the fate of people who have ended up in such circumstances. Both here and elsewhere, that has contributed to the political rise or comeback of radical left-wing politics, at the expense of the moderate left. But there are other movements that frame the threat to the precariat worker as a cultural conflict. In the present day and age, we are seeing movements gain momentum that are so frightened of the cultural changes wrought by migration and Europeanisation that they have barricaded themselves behind a mental wall – a sort of psychological Dutch

⁴ Het regeerakkoord. Vertrouwen in de toekomst en de adviezen van de Onderwijsraad, 2017, pp. 44-46
Water Line. They are calling on governments to close the borders to asylum seekers and, preferably, to end the free movement of persons within the European Union.

These movements have not come out of nowhere. To some extent, they are a new manifestation of the cultural conservatism that has existed in Europe for centuries, associated with such names as Edmund Burke and Gottfried Herder. That cultural conservative beliefs were also a breeding ground for fascism and national socialism does not mean we can identify them with such movements; they have their own history. The New Right of neoconservatism was, according to Zeev Sternhell, ‘able to play down economic problems and, by turning them into psychological questions, launch an unprecedented cultural war’. These movements turned against the primacy of the individual in political thought – and were not necessarily consistent about it. Instead, they bestowed that primacy on ‘the historical, ethnic, or linguistic group’.

Two steps are critical here: the identification of the state with a cultural and/or ethnic community (the ‘nation state’), and the claim that the nation’s cultural and/or ethnic identity must be defended against cultural intruders, or against domestic members of groups with a supposedly divergent identity. Divested of all the nuances that these authors were careful to include, we have here the Clash of Civilizations announced by Samuel Huntington,9 or the Culture Wars enunciated by Frank Furedi.10 The nationalist motif in these movements thus dovetails – despite all evidence to the contrary – with the denouncement of hardship: if the migrants had not come, or if the EU did not exist, ‘we’ would have been better off, is their representation.

Of course, there are glimmers of truth in these arguments. Open borders do have displacement effects and criminals do operate in ethnically structured gangs and networks (see various studies by Frank Bovenkerk11) that are involved in both petty and serious crime. The ambitions to build a diverse but in its principles coherent “mosaic” society, have often ended up in a next-to-next of groups separated by mental walls, notwithstanding the societal and cultural standing of personalities who made the connection.

Denying such setbacks and shortcomings only allows the problems to linger and increases aggravation. Apparently, a legitimation can be found here for endeavours to revalue the esteem for traditions that are “at home” in a given society, its ancient monuments and documents, and the habits and folklore that people have transmitted over centuries. With a view to preserving and improving social cohesion, however, I believe that there is quite a different pitfall: to represent an ethnically or culturally defined community as unique or superior to others ultimately discredits that very community. Think, for example, of the aversion to German culture in the Netherlands and elsewhere that followed upon the Nazi Occupation, and the backlash against

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Afrikaans in South Africa after the end of Apartheid. I would like to defend an enlightened sense of cultural identity against those who would abuse it.

The cultural sociologist Andreas Reckwitz has provided a penetrating analysis of the longing for identities.\textsuperscript{12} In opposition to the openness of liberal, cosmopolitan politics, populist parties have embraced a politics of exclusion. In opposition to the overemphasis on ‘singularity’, what makes individuals special, they offer the image of a socially and culturally homogenous people of ‘true Finns’ (by way of example, in other words, fill in a random people). Their message, as Reckwitz describes it, is that it is the ‘common folk’ who have worked hard and built the country whose culture and lifestyle are allegedly under threat by outsiders.\textsuperscript{13} He calls this concept of culture ‘cultural essentialism’. But criticising such movements does not mean that those that only prize the individual, and that see the state as a formal framework for an amalgamation of individuals, are ‘right’. That is why, to put it in domestic terms, I am pleading for us not to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

While it is true that communitarianism has often served as the social theory of intolerant, exclusionary movements, there is also something known as ‘liberal communitarianism’. The sociologist Amitai Etzioni has been associated with this movement for many decades; he is about to publish a new book in which he contrasts this distinctive perspective both with populism and its associated idealisation of closed, immigrant-free communities, and with neoliberal individualisation. Thinking in terms of communities and their cultural identities does not necessarily involve the rejection of and hostility towards migrants, for example, and their cultural identity, when people understand that cultures have always evolved in interaction with their cultural environs, both inside and outside ‘national’ borders. That is why François Jullien asserts that ‘there is no such thing as cultural identity’.\textsuperscript{14} What he means, for example, is that French (and European) culture can be traced back to many sources that are not mutually exclusive in their variety and interplay. Conceived in this manner, we can acknowledge and highlight the value of sources of identity in the history of a country and a people, their religions and cultures, their institutions and holy scriptures. Taken as a whole, they can forge shared convictions that urge people to wage battle on behalf of noble causes, for example, to bring an end to oppression. Such sources have nurtured movements like Solidarność in Poland, which fought against communist repression. Whenever a power monopoly with ideological underpinnings establishes itself (such as totalitarianism in the 20th century), the strongest opposition comes from a humane, often religious or nationally motivated movement. Does that movement then assume power itself, or does it lose its relevance after achieving victory? History is not consistent on that score. An individualistic liberalism that uses ideological nihilism to negate all religious movements will be seen as a new threat to freedom in countries that have struggled out of the grasp of the communist regime. Contrary to what people – often on both sides – think, the desire to cherish communities that draw strength from such apolitical sources as religion,


\textsuperscript{13}Ibid. pp. 414-417.

\textsuperscript{14}F. Jullien, \textit{Il n’y a pas d’identité culturelle}. Éditions L’Herne 2016.
culture and national history need not be pitted against the values of constitutional democracy with its individual rights and freedoms.

4. A peaceful counterattack

Let us therefore consider the features of constitutional democracy. A radical-individualist interpretation would lose itself in an ideological vacuum. The German constitutionalist Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde referred to this in his renowned ‘Dilemma’ (which is, strictly spoken, not a dilemma, but rather a paradoxical observation): the liberal, secularised state lives by prerequisites that it cannot guarantee itself. What did Böckenförde mean by this? Surely he wasn’t longing for the sort of political theology proposed by Carl Schmitt? But if not, what did he mean then? In my view, he clarified his meaning in the following line of reasoning. He was not prescribing a particular state ideology, let alone advocating its enforcement. There is, Böckenförde wrote, no way to return across the threshold of 1789 without destroying the liberal order. But, he asserted, the secularised state also depends on the inner mainsprings and binding ethos arising from the religious faith of its citizens. That is not a return to the Christian state; rather, it means that Christians must value the secularity of the state as something that allows them to preserve and exercise their freedom.

This reference to the backbone of religious faith should be interpreted plurally. What Böckenförde wrote about how Christians should view the secular state also holds for other religions and ideologies. Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na‘īm has written in a very similar manner about Islam. The political community of a constitutional democracy must engage with other communities, and with their identities, but it should not be at their mercy. (That is different to what Schmitt wanted: that the order imposed by the state should be decisive.) A constitutional democracy cannot shape its own ideological movement but must depend on the support of (a plurality of) such movements. They may include movements of religious citizens, as I referred to them in an article some years ago. Freedom of religion for religious citizens is a positive factor in a liberal society. At the same time, this implies that the invocation of that freedom by fundamentalists must be rejected. They are out to abuse that freedom, abuse it in order to deny others the same right. Such ‘faith communities’ are as dangerous as anti-democratic political parties.

This takes me back to the citizen, who made a brief appearance when I addressed the task of citizenship education. Many years ago, a colleague at the Council of State (our vice-president at that time, Herman Tjeenk Willink) told me that citizenship should be regarded as a public office, in fact the most important public office of the state. Compared with the customary doctrine of public office, that was a provocative

15 E.-W. Böckenförde, Recht, Staat, Freiheit. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2006, pp. 112-114
statement. This statement started me thinking. And indeed, I now believe – as I said in my own book\textsuperscript{18} – that citizenship means personhood within a democratic political system. But people are more than voters and potential elected officials. All the other roles that they play, in all sorts of communities, are made possible because their civil rights and freedoms are protected. That is why Martin Luther King battled for the civil rights of African-Americans.

Citizenship education does not mean learning a state ideology. Citizens can differ considerably in their religious and ideological convictions, their culture, and in many other respects. In a national context, democracy is a polity in which people can undertake their life projects; in the European context, democracy is a polity of polities, a ‘demoicracy’. The multitude of their sources creates the ideological arena for which there is space in a constitutional democracy. The secular nature of that space does not mean that it is an empty shell. In a liberal state, it is a civic virtue to respect that political order.

Aristotle and, in his wake, Thomas Aquinas recognized that public officials must exhibit the same virtues as citizens to perform their roles properly.\textsuperscript{19} In a mature democracy, citizens accept responsibility for the state. That is what we may expect from citizens, since a state under the rule of law protects their personal rights and the freedom of all kinds of smaller communities. Such non-political communities may unite, connect and dissolve themselves. Taken together, they represent a ‘democratic society’, a key concept in the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

5. The values – human dignity

This learning process must be rooted in a deeper understanding of the idea of democracy under the conditions of hyperconnected societies. The theories of democracy on which we usually rely, were based on the notion of the state defined by a territory, a population and a legal system. These defining characteristics have certainly not lost all significance, but each of them are more and more subject to profound changes: territory as a result of the intensity of trans border relations, especially the de-localizing effects of the internet; population as a result of migration and the ensuing hybridization of nationality; the legal system as a result of the growing importance of layered legal orders, including normative interference across borders. The responses to these changes are very much different: on the one hand resistance against changes and clinging to what we used to have, on the other hand transitions and creative adaptivity. In advanced sociological theory, especially a book published by Gunter Weidenhaus, the underlying transitions have been explored as changes in the space-time dimensions of societies. The degree to which people are connected with others who do not belong to a physically determined area is different, but all over the world networks replace concentric circles.\textsuperscript{20}


\textsuperscript{19} Aristotle, \textit{Politics}, 1277b8-32; Thomas Aquinas, \textit{In Politicorum}, Liber III, Lectio III.

This has important consequences for the way in which we understand our lives. The linear deployment of a biography gives way to a life in episodes. Migration is as much the result as the cause from this profound change. Moreover, the transformation of the state and of the space-time dimensions of societies modify our understanding of citizenship. Citizenship cannot simply be attributed to a fixed population, but exists across borders, sometimes as multiple citizenship, but also in a negative way, when citizenship is denied to people in the country where they are at home, e.g. the Rohingya in Myanmar.

Citizenship also acquires dimensions that are not related to a single state, like European citizenship, or dimensions that go beyond nationality, e.g. the voting rights for non-nationals in municipal elections. These variations are part of the transformations of democracies. Here we encounter once more different attitudes: denial of these dimensions is part of the xenophobic and nationalist narratives, whereas the recognition of it opens the door for more inclusiveness and dynamic social cohesion. The latter approach is morally and practically better, more open to the future, and elicits more creative renewal, but is not easier.

That means that citizenship must be a crucial issue in a peaceful counter-attack in defense of democracy. Learning to deal with the complexity of redefined citizenship and the inherent, to some extent unavoidable setbacks and disappointments must be a part of democratic renewal. Such learning processes are situated in engaging environments: schools, of course, and universities. The Erasmus Program of the European Union is an example of border crossing learning processes of European citizenship. It strongly facilitates that students go for a semester to a university in one of the other EU Member States. According to a Wikipedia entry, “[t]he political scientist Stefan Wolff, for example, has argued: ‘Give it 15, 20 or 25 years, and Europe will be run by leaders with a completely different socialization from those of today’, referring to the so-called ‘Erasmus generation’. “22 The success of the Erasmus Program can also be inferred from a rumour reported last year by Reuters: in the thirty years of the program, it has fostered cross-border romances that may have borne a million children.23 But learning outside educational institutions is important as well. Cities are the places were migrants arrive and settle.24 Their diversity is gaining a constitutional dimension: mayors and other participants in urban governance can deal with complex social and economic challenges in a way that falls beyond the reach of

state governments. Citizenship in an urban context is not primarily visible with the passport someone is carrying, but in a variety of active roles beyond family and workplace. The legally established municipal voting rights for long-time resident non-nationals and, within the European Union, any European Citizen, are another sign that in an urban context, learning democracy is at least partly detached from the traditional confinements of statehood. Alongside urban communities, 21st century citizens participate in a wide range of non-statal communities with a religious, cultural, social or economic identifier. “Voting rights” for municipal councils are here supplemented by memberships in all kinds of association, citizens’ rights by civil rights. Apparently such communities are the places of civil enculturation – the focal points of civilization in its original meaning.

Redefining the meaning of democracy thus goes in two directions: across borders and deep into the fabric of what I have called, in the wording of the European Convention of Human Rights, a democratic society. This understanding of democracy must go hand in hand with our understanding of the role of law and human rights, which are intrinsically connected values. Human rights are not a correction on human nature, but a truthful expression of the interpersonal human condition. Against the view that human rights are just a bundle of rights that curb the role of the state, I would argue that they guarantee a dignified life in freedom. Their foundation is human dignity, their arena society. The contemporary meaning of human rights, as defined in the Vienna Declaration is the protection of the life projects of all. The high degree of legal recognition of human rights makes it an appropriate backbone of democratic revival.

6. Democratic citizenship

The force of a counter-attack against the threats that we are discussing here, will be tested in its trustworthiness vis-à-vis the dehumanizing aspects of present-day politics. I am thinking here of the manipulation of voters’ views in election processes, and also of the democratic “justifications” of state-sponsored violence. Fear of terrorist attacks and so-called mass migration has created a political context for harsh measures against migrants, e.g. the actions against migrants’ transport vessels in the Mediterranean in cooperation with Libyan powers which flagrantly abuse detained migrants. The rudeness of such political schemes demonstrates that too many politicians, coming from decent origins, try to accommodate xenophobic and other angry veins in the course of “political realities”. A group of scholars has convincingly argued that Italy recently infringed upon the prohibition of refoulement with its

27 Cf. Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union: “The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.”
actions against rescue ships. While giving into fears of migrants, they also overlook the strong forces in societies that contribute to mutual adaptation processes. Moreover, they undermine the credibility of the allegiance to fundamental rights and freedoms, which we need so dearly when we wish to overcome group thinking. As I said before, the biggest risk for a democracy is its abuse by a (relative or absolute) majority.

Learning democracy is at its best at local schools and in interpersonal experience. That is something that we must do, ourselves.

Inward looking, monocultural adaptation is something of the past, while the future depends on our ability to understand the other, maybe the stranger, the refugee from Africa, the other Europeans. Learning democracy comes with learning citizenship. Within a fluid pattern of communities, a citizen operates and enjoys his freedoms, such as the right to vote, and the space for life projects that he can embark upon with others. The process of discovery that this entails is a quest that has been undertaken by many great minds before us. Their journeys of discovery took them to many different places, both mentally and physically. The 13th century theologian and philosopher Thomas Aquinas, the 16th century protestant theologian and education theorist Comenius, and, more recently, Hannah Arendt and Amitai Etzioni are all people who did not live out their lives in one place in just one country. They spent time learning about and probing the convictions of many different people in many different places.

Social and political orders that protect from fear, repression and want make that possible. These are the essential democratic ideals. They do not come about by themselves; they must be dearly won, time and again, from the forces that conspire to subjugate people and reduce them to their economic value. What is at stake here is the dynamic force that drives the actualisation of human rights which guarantee human dignity. They can no longer be viewed only as protective competences (and duties) of government. They permeate societies and create space for interaction between governments, social relationships (in the broad sense) and individuals.

Within that interaction, people can undertake their life projects both individually and collectively. Learning democracy prepares us for living together in freedom, broadens our view, and offers hope for a just and peaceful future.

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