



Transcription

Democracy in Question? – Season 1, Episode 1

A Trumpian Blip, or a Fundamental Flaw in American Democracy?

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Democracy in Question? is the podcast series of the Albert Hirschman Center on Democracy at the Graduate Institute, Geneva, the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna, and the Excellence Chair, University of Bremen (Research Group: Soft Authoritarianism).

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SR: Hello and welcome to "Democracy in Question," a new podcast series that reflects on the crises of representative democracy in these troubled times. I'm your host Shalini Randeria, I'm the director of the Albert Hirschman Centre on Democracy at the Graduate Institute in Geneva and director of the Institute of Human Sciences in Vienna.

As an academic, I have studied the ways in which the workings of law shapes our daily lives in a globalized world. I am interested in how citizens use both the streets and the courts to, not only protest and monitor the use and the abuse of power, but also to protect and to defend democracy.

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This series comes at a time when the liberal democratic order established after the Second World War is under unprecedented strain. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, there was a view that authoritarian rule was confined to the dustbin of history and Western-style liberal democracy would reign supreme the world over. But today, even in the cradle of modern democracies, in the U.S. and in Europe, that assumption looks flimsy. After 1945, the United States saw itself as the guarantor of western values, including democratic government. Its system of divided government was designed to protect against autocracy, ensure power sharing, checks and balances, while ensuring the rights of voters, initially though of course only those of propertied white men. But the ascendancy of Donald Trump to the presidency and his questioning of the very norms of democratic government has shaken the fundamentals

of Jeffersonian democracy and raised serious concerns about its survival. Does Trump represent a blip in America's long experience of representative government? Or does the current crisis of democracy in America highlight an underlying malaise?

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Helping me to answer this question is Timothy Snyder, he's the Richard C. Levin professor of history at Yale University and a public intellectual who is a permanent fellow at the Institute of Human Sciences in Vienna. Tim, it's great to have you here and I really look forward to our discussion. I'm going to start with a book you wrote two years ago, "The Road to Unfreedom," in which you coined an intriguing term for Trump's vision of populism and you called it *sadopolulism*. Could you explain how it works and what makes it so successful in the USA?

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TS: The basic assumption of a certain kind of western political thinking is that everybody wants pleasure. We're all pursuing happiness. And since we know that we're pursuing pleasure, all we have to do is rationally calculate what it will take to get us that pleasure. That is, I think, a spoken or unspoken assumption of a lot of what passes for political thinking in the west. But what if that's not true? What if it's also the case that people not only experience pain, but can be manipulated by pain? What if you can have a politics which is based not on people pursuing their rationally-understood best interest in being happy but a

politics which is based upon some people hurting other people, pleasure being taken from hurting other people?

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So, by "sadopopulism," I'm talking about a populism where people actually don't get anything except more pain. In populism, the assumption is, "*I, the leader, and you the people are against some elite,*" and the policy is, "I'm gonna transfer some of the wealth of that elite to you, the people." Then, the critique of populism is usually, "*The elite is mythical*" or "*the elite is an ethnic minority and they're being oppressed,*" those are the critiques of populism. But Mr. Trump is not a populist in that sense. Mr. Trump isn't transferring wealth from any kind of elite to the people. On the contrary, he's transferring wealth from the people to the already existing elite. He's not giving people greater chances to pursue happiness, he's actually doing the opposite: He's creating more pain in the system. And what he's very good at is persuading people that it's good, it's okay for them to hurt, so long as other people are hurting more.

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SR: You also coined, in that book, a really memorable phrase for me, and that is "the politics of eternity," to describe the current dismantling of democracy by strong men, not only in the U.S., but Russia, China, Hungary, Turkey. We could take many, many examples. Elected leaders who are all afraid of a change of government. So, eternity politics seems to function by manufacturing crises that can then be instrumentalized to

whip up emotions around it. Trump really seems to be a master of this game. Will it pay dividends for him this November?

TS: The term only works in antonymy with another term, in the book, which is "the politics of inevitability." By "*the politics of inevitability*" I meant what you described in your introduction so well, namely the assumption that there's no alternative, that a certain form of economics is always gonna bring a certain form of politics, liberal economics is gonna bring democratic politics, therefore, we don't have to do anything. Right? That was the dominant, I think it's fair to say, the dominant caste of mind in the U.S. after 1989 and until about 2010. Whereas the politics of eternity says, "*No, there's no progress, there's just a continuous cycle of threat. The good things are not in the future, the good things are in the past.*"

[00:06:30] And so, the politics of eternity is about a myth in which, we, the people were always on the right side but, every so often, we were attacked by outsiders. So, it becomes a story, as you say, of perennial crisis.

Trump is very good at talking up crisis. That is essentially his gift. And we should remember, he is a very talented performer. His gift is that he can persuade people that there's a crisis, that he's the only one, in his words, who can solve it. He has a problem though when there actually is a crisis which people actually experience as a crisis, which is not of his own making. That's where his magic I think finds its limit.

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SR: Commenting on a tweet of President Trump's that, "*This will be the most inaccurate and fraudulent election ever,*" you pointed out that his way of framing the issue of electoral democracy has several fascist features. Tell a big lie to draw attention away from basic realities, designate enemies, manufacture a crisis, as you just said, make an appeal to pride and humiliation, express hostility to voting, cast doubt on democratic procedures, and aim for personal power. So, thinking of this whole issue of fascism, and you are a historian of totalitarian regimes including fascism in Europe, I wanted to ask you what is at stake in using this term? Framing certainly matters but isn't there a huge difference between Trump and, say, a European fascist like Mussolini?

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TS: I think of fascism as a phenomenon which has to do with a certain type of leader and also with the sort of response that the leader evokes. And I think of fascism as a toolbox from which one can draw also. Trump clearly draws from a fascist toolbox, consciously, half consciously, unconsciously. One can debate how much it matters that his father was in the Ku Klux Klan, we can debate how much it matters that he comes from the kind of family he does, you know, we can debate whether he knew that "America first" could be used as a fascist slogan when he chose it for his presidential campaign slogan. Who knows? But he certainly uses the tricks. For example, the rhetorical tricks, the us and them, the quick slogans, the rallies.

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So, let me try to put it carefully. I think it's impossible to talk sensibly about Mr. Trump without invoking the history of fascism. That said, when I have been pressed to talk about this, I've tried to use phrases like, "Not even a fascist," which is to say I think he does some of the things that a fascist does. And I think those things are enough to bring down a republic. But I don't think he does all the things that a fascist does, and we've already talked about one, which is redistribution.

And the second difference is war.

[00:09:30] So, Mussolini of course fought wars in Ethiopia. He joined in Hitler's wars in Europe, tens of thousands of Italian soldiers, as nobody remembers, who died around Stalingrad. Trump does not like war. He's physically afraid of war. He doesn't even like the notion of physical violence. So, in that sense, he's a very different kind of character. He's quite cowardly in a physical sense. And that I believe does set him off. So he's actually less of a militarist than I think the previous American presidents have been. So, he has a lot of devices of fascism, he doesn't have the ambition to control the world, and he doesn't have the tools of redistribution and of military expansion.

SR: How about Trump's enablers? Is the Republican Party not equally to blame for the systematic undermining of democracy through, for example, voter suppression? Right? Like 17 million voters who have been taken off, deleted from voting lists over the last years. But also for caving

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in to a president who openly supports white supremacists, humiliates women?

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TS: Yes and yes. I mean one wants to say both things. So, Donald Trump does have an unusual skill set which allowed him to break through the fundamental hypocrisy of the Republican Party. And I think hypocrisy is an important category here because it's hard to do modern politics without hypocrisy. So, what Trump did was he basically called the republicans out on all their hypocrisy. He said, "*You don't really care about black people and immigrants. You're just pretending. You don't really care about opportunity for all, you're just pretending. What we really care about is bullying people, that's what we really care about.*"

So, had Trump chosen not to run, another Republican president would probably not be doing all the things which he has done.

[00:11:30] I don't think, in 2020 for example, we would be worried about a coup d'etat if, let's say, Marco Rubio were President right now or Ted Cruz. I'm sure a number of terrible things would've happened in the intervening four years but I don't think, I just can't imagine Marco Rubio or Ted Cruz calling for armed violence instead of an election, which is what Mr. Trump is doing. So I want to say, "*Yes, Mr. Trump is unusual,*" but I also want to say, "*yes, the Republican Party has been preparing the way for this by becoming the voter-suppression party.*" They've become a party which is about a minority bullying a majority, that is what they're all about.

[00:12:00] And so, if that's what you are, if you prefer not to compete on policy but instead to concentrate on keeping people away from the ballot box, then, eventually, you probably will produce someone like this who brings it all out into the open and says, "*Hey, of course America is not really a democracy,*" which is what Trump is doing now. "*Of course the votes aren't really what counts. What really matters is just power at the end of the day.*"

And then, once they see that, so many of them like it. Right? Senator Mitt Romney will have his name in the history books because he was courageous enough to cast one vote, one vote, for impeachment.

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SR: If we think of the structural foundations of U.S. democracy, would you say these are the unaddressed original sins of American democracy? Fatal flaws, racism, economic class divisions, which have never been properly addressed, and that economic inequality has allowed freedom to the rich alone while providing only an illusion of freedom to the poor?

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TS: Let me start at a different place. I think the problem with the American idea of freedom is that it's too thin. The idea of freedom that people advance is something like, "*The market should be free,*" and, "*I should be free to have the emotions that I'm currently experiencing.*" That to me is a very thin, an unsustainable idea of freedom. And an inherently conflictual one because, of course, the market may generate

freedom in certain spheres of life but it's not a god that comes and gives everyone freedom. And the freedom to just feel and to have emotions is such a very small part of human life, especially when it means, "*I have the freedom to simply react negatively to everyone else's emotions all the time.*"

And this connects historically to your question in the following way: If we say, as I strongly believe, "*Freedom doesn't really matter, freedom is going to be empty if you don't have health,*" you know, if we say, "*a right to health is a prerequisite to other rights,*" then the response is, "*well, you can't do that because that will get in the way of the freedom of the market.*" Right? So, this very thin idea, this dogma "market, market, market" gets in the way.

And then, the next move is to say, "*Well, we can't do that because all those black people and all those immigrants will just take advantage.*" Right? And then, the next move is to say, "*And by the way, you white people, you're so robust and you're so tough and you're on the frontier and you're hardy, and you don't even need health insurance. You're gonna be fine.*"

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And so, all of those moves come from the particular history of the United States. I mean not even speaking about the constitutional structure, which we can do, the history of the United States is that we were set up, as Europeans, conquering a frontier. After what the Americans call the

French and Indian War, what everyone else calls the Seven Years' War, after the French are driven out of North America effectively, the colonists can then free themselves from the British, which they do after 1776. [00:15:00] Then we begin, as a people who are conquering, that's of course not what it says in our elementary school textbooks, but that's the story. The French are out of the way, the British are out of the way, and we can move from the East Coast outwards.

And so, there is this history of conquest and there is this history of prosperity by way of colonization, which goes on for a very long time and, in the big part of the country, it's aided by slavery. And so, from that, we get these ideas of the hardy individual who's going beyond the state and from that we also get this enduring legacy of racism.

[00:15:30] And so, those powerful ideas, which don't come from nowhere, right, it's not just false consciousness, it's not just propaganda, they come from our history. Those ideas get in the way of a modern idea of freedom, which would be something besides taking things because we feel like it. For me, that's the big challenge for America. It's not about being less free, it's actually about being more free.

SR: I think that's a very, very good point, that it's not about false consciousness, there is a historical depth to this idea, or this particular idea of freedom.

[00:16:00] But I want to come to a very different set of issues. You probably don't feel good about having always been right on the Russian connection these days. More and more of your depressing diagnosis, your pessimistic prognosis also, especially about the role of Russian interference in the U.S. elections, is being revealed to be true as more and more evidence comes to light. And I think it would be good to have some of your thoughts on how the Russian connection really plays out in U.S. politics, has played out, will play out in this election.

TS: Well, first of all, thank you for saying that because there's nothing which is more punishing than being right. If you're wrong, everybody forgives you, but if you're right about something, no one really forgives you.

In 2016, when I was jumping up and down about Russia, the reason I was doing that was because I was aware of what happened in Georgia, in Estonia, in Ukraine. [00:17:00] And I could see the same people, institutions, and patterns appear in the United States. I thought, "*Hey, this is happening,*" and everyone in the U.S. was like, "*No, if it doesn't start in America, it's not real,*" and, "*if there's no American government official who's gonna tell us it's happening,*" this is what the journalist said, "*then it's not real.*" In 2020, people are more on the case.

The three things that I would point to are when we think of Russia as an influence and as a kind of future for America would be, first: Oligarchy. So, that oligarchy is a thing, [00:17:30] that oligarchy is a type,

oligarchy can lead your country to a certain place. Russia is a kind of ideal type, really, it's a kind of template or model where the polity and the economy are basically the same thing, wealth is in the hands of ridiculously small number of people, you produce the politics of eternity extremely skillfully through mass media. And the point is Trump likes that, Trump admires that, Trump would like the United States to be much more like that.

The second thing with Russia is the absence of hypocrisy, Right? [00:18:00] Which means like the absence of respect for norms because norms always involve a certain amount of hypocrisy. I mean there are people who truly believe in the norms, there are people who follow the norms out of habit, and then there are people who they go along, you know, because they're hypocrites. And so, what Putin does is he's not a hypocrite. Right? He just says this, he just says that. He says the things that people are thinking. Trump does that too. And of course that business of saying what's really on your mind is fatal for the law.

[00:18:30] Because the law is all about, as a character in "The Man Without Qualities" says, I mean, "*The law is all about not doing the thing that you want to do.*" Right? And so, this like guttural masculinity which says, "*Hey, let's just say the things we wanna say,*" you know, that is fatal for the law. And that's the second thing which comes out of Russia, that and this cosmic ability to lie. Right? To lie so much that you make it clear to everyone that you're not lying really anymore, you're like a walking fable. You're just producing this alternative reality. Putin's more

coherent but Trump is also good, he has the same kind of self-discipline, "*You never tell the truth.*"

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The third thing is the internet and social media, that you can use social media as a substitute for reality. You can use it to get people all worked up about issues which might exist in the real world but aren't nearly so important. That happened in 2016 and it's happening now. I mean right now Americans are beating each other up and even shooting each other largely not because of what's actually happening on American streets but because the way it's portrayed on social media. And just like in 2016, so in 2020, the Russians are involved in that. And of course it goes without saying that what the Russians would like to see, in 2020, is both Trump winning and the whole system being destroyed. Just like they wanted to see in 2016 was Trump winning and the system being discredited, now it's Trump winning and a regime change in the U.S. Which those two things are, by the way, I think synonymous at this point because Trump has given up winning in a conventional way. He's basically admitted he can't win the election.

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SR: Tim, I'd like to try and end on an optimistic note. What are the countervailing forces that you see which could protect and defend democracy in the U.S? So, besides casting a ballot, which is going to be really crucial in whatever form people do at this time, what options do ordinary citizens have for political action? We've seen the global

resonance of Black Lives Matter, it's had enormous support resonance all over the world. And interestingly for me, unexpected support, suddenly, among white middle-class Americans as well. So, could you say something about what optimistic tendencies we can see in the midst of both the pandemic and Trump's dismantling of democracy?

TR: Going back to the very beginning of the conversation, the American system is flawed partly because it's so old. You know, the constitution is so old. But, at the same time, we have seen how there are moments where the notion of what our constitution means spreads out, whether that's a new deal or whether that's a civil-rights movement. I, by no means, think that's impossible. I think the system, for all of its flaws, it also has the capacity for being repaired, partly because it does enjoy this, at least symbolically, it enjoys this broad respect in the population. It's pretty much the only thing. So, I think it can be pushed in the right direction if the right people control all the institutions. That's a proviso, it's an important one.

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The second thing is Americans are capable of mobilization, more capable now than they were four years ago. If you think of Bush v Gore which is the last time the person who lost won, Bush, in that election, actually lost Florida and so, therefore, should've lost the general election but the Supreme Court ordered the voting to be halted, and so, the wrong person won the election. But Americans were not...I mean we were very trusting

in the whole thing, you know, we just kind of sat back and watched CNN and watched it happen. That's not gonna happen this time.

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Americans have had three years of Mr. Trump, people are much more aware of the risks. And Black Lives Matter is important for a lot of reasons but one of the reasons it's important is that it shows that Americans are capable of mobilizing, even during a pandemic and even, as you suggest, on an issue which is not obviously resonant across the country. But it turned out to be surprisingly resonant across the country. It's now become the mainstream and the opposition to it has become the minority, which is very interesting.

Americans are gonna have to show a certain endurance, in November and in December, no matter what happens.

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I mean, even if every single American voted for the Biden/Harris ticket, Mr. Trump would still contest the election. For that matter, even if every single American voted for Mr. Trump, he would still contest the election and claim that there were five million more people who weren't counted. So it's going to be contested, which means that people have to have a certain amount of patience. We can't just think, "*Aha, November 3rd, we get our candy. Right?*" No, on November 3rd, we're not going to get our candy, the ballots are still going to be counted. The process has been deliberately sabotaged to be slow, therefore people have to be persistent

and they have to be prepared to protest and they have to have the slogans like "*Count my vote*" or "*each vote counts*," or whatever it is. People have to go to the effort to vote, and it is, unfortunately, an effort and it's disproportionately an effort. And if you're in cities, it's harder than elsewhere. In precincts that are black-majority, it's much harder than in precincts that are white-majority, that's the way it is.

And also, and I can just say is like moral guidance, you know, I can't make it happen but the institutions of the federal government and of local governments and state governments, the judges and the police officers are also going to have to be patient and they're going to have to follow the rules rather than imagining that they know themselves personally what the right outcome is. I think it's going to be a mess and a kind of mess that Americans haven't seen before but I also think that it can turn out the right way.

And then, I really will hit the optimistic note at the end. I think there is a lot of improvement that can be made extremely quickly in the United States if the right people control the institutions. The ideas are there and actually the majority, the popular majority for the good ideas is also there. So, this could all turn out well.

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SR: Thank you so much, Tim, for providing so many fascinating insights into, not only the history of American democracy, but also what ails it today and what could heal it tomorrow. Imperfect as American

democracy may actually have been in practice, its very fate hangs in balance in this election. And listening to you, I was thinking Barack Obama was certainly right when he recently pointed out that American democracy could wither away. But I think he was wrong in using the image of withering away because I think it's only partly right: democracy needs nurture, it needs parties, institutions, and it needs a very reactive citizenry. But what we are seeing is not a plant which is dying for lack of nurture only, at the moment, it's a democracy which is being actively dismantled, both by President Trump but also his Republican Party enablers. Thank you very much.

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