Transcription

Democracy in Question? – Season 1, Episode 2

How viable is Western liberal democracy around the world?

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SR: Welcome to "Democracy in Question," the podcast that explores the dilemmas facing democracies around the world and asks how we can defend and deepen democratic institutions and practices. I'm Shalini Randeria, the Director of the Albert Hirschman Centre on Democracy at the Graduate Institute in Geneva, and Rector of the Institute of Human Sciences in Vienna.

[00:00:30] Waves of formal of democratization have swept the globe since the 1950s. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, authoritarian rule collapsed, not only in communist Eastern Europe, but dictatorships were dismantled across Latin America too. New constitutions established a variety of liberal democratic institutions that are, however, now under attack by populist and soft authoritarian governments all over the world. This prompts one to wonder how deeply these institutions have taken root in different social and political contexts. Can the ideals of free and fair elections, separation of powers, rule of law, equal protection of human rights be exported easily, especially when some of these are being actively undermined in the United Kingdom and the USA today? And can or even should Western models of democracy be transplanted to other regions of the world? I'm joined by Laurence Whitehead and Yanina Welp to answer these questions.

Laurence is an official fellow in politics at Nuffield College, University of Oxford. He has published widely on the theory and experience of democratization and is an expert on Latin American politics. Yanina is my colleague at the Albert Hirschman Centre on Democracy. They recently edited a book together titled, "The Politics of Recall Elections,"

that analyzes the variety of processes and purposes of recall by comparing the practices and outcomes of removing elected officials before the end of their term, which pose a challenge to our models of democratic representation. Thank you both for joining me today.

[00:02:30]
YW: Thank you.

LW: Thank you very much. Very nice to do this.

SR: Let me start with clearing some theoretical ground because while one can celebrate the spread of formal democratization over the past 30 years, there have also been setbacks. There is growing disenchantment with democracy for reasons that may differ in different parts of the world. But let me clear some theoretical ground and ask you, Laurence, if modernization theory was simply mistaken, in assuming that there would be a unilinear, unidirectional path to ever greater freedom with the successful transplantation of Western style, liberal democratic institutions everywhere.

[00:03:00]
LW: It would be wrong to say that modernization theory had no truth. But what would be more accurate would be to say it was much overstated and it glossed over many other considerations. In the very long run, the idea that people move into cities, they acquire higher levels of education, literacy is obviously a very important feature for modern kinds of

democracy, their living standards rise, and so forth. All of that would tend to be supportive of processes of democratization around the world. But it's a very long run, aggregate, rather abstract, set of factors.

[00:04:00] If you want to take the most perfect example of modernization in the world, Singapore, we know that all the modernization conditions can be met. And Singapore is actually something of a model autocracy. On the question of export of democracy, there are different ways of communicating democratic practices and institutions from one country to another. They can be imposed by force as we tried to do in Iraq. And you can see that that form of "export" doesn't tend to go very well. They can be encouraged by favorable conditions. That's what the European Union did that said, "*If you're a post-communist country, and you want to join the European Union and enjoy the benefits of full membership, you can do so, but here are the democratic reforms that you need to carry about in order to join us.*" So that's a conditionality route.

And what we see is that while you're trying to get the benefits, conditionality does work. But once you're inside as the Hungarians and the Poles are, you then rather resent having been forced to adopt internal reforms, not under your own ownership as it were, but simply to please an outside standard. And so, you get a backlash against it. I think a more powerful method, I'm going to use a slightly strange metaphor here, looking historically, is contagion, which, if you want a good example, it would be West German democracy doing very well after 1949. Being

there on display and available to the East Germans, they knew what was going on in West Germany, it was very important to them. The demonstration effects from West Germany were increasingly positive for them. And the supposed negative features of West Germany faded and they didn't believe them any longer.

And so public opinion, if you like, or contagion, led them to want to explore the possibility of becoming more like that. And I think that's a form of, I wouldn't call it export, but transmission, which can be more powerful. But in the end, all these methods of so-called export, rest on the consent of the society which is adopting these political reforms. They have to be internally generated. They have to be internally legitimate. They have to feel that this is in accordance with our context and traditions.

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SR: I'd like to pick on one point that you've just made, and which is, *context matters*, and ask whether the shift from authoritarian regimes in Latin America involve both a sharper discontinuity and a narrower range of options than were available in post-communist Central Europe. So, can you say something about the trajectories of democratization, the paths along which they followed, and why that may matter?

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LW: Latin America is a very large place, 20 different republics with very different historical roots. And in fact, political liberalism was being

attempted 200 years ago in Latin America as they broke away from the Spanish colonies, and it was being attempted in different formats in different countries. In Mexico, the first reaction was to try and build an empire. In Argentina, they went for liberal institutions of a sort of wholehearted imitation of best practice European ideas. And in Chile, a slightly odd mixture between the two. We can go on listing the differences between these countries, but the main point is, those 200 years of evolution, which is why the word *national trajectory* is very important. You need to draw on this stock of past experience, in order to convince people that what you're doing is in accordance with your own national heritage and your own understanding of what kind of a society you are. And that differs from country to country. In Latin America, quite often, the liberal aspects of liberal democratization clashed with the Catholic Church, which wanted to control education, and which believe there was one morally imperative right way of doing things. And there was a whole very long and protracted battle in nearly all Latin American countries between reducing the political power while still leaving the social power for the church.

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SR: Yanina, what about the history of populism in Latin America as a context in which to think about how democracy takes root or flourishes differently from Europe, for example? Because Europe is somehow surprised by the rise of populism in the last couple of decades, whereas I think Latin America has a history of both right and left-wing populism,

which we need to think of in the context of the ways in which it influences liberal democracy.

[00:09:00]

YW: Yeah, this is a very good question because what we can see through the analysis of populism is that there is not only one idea of democracy. Both populism and democracy claim to be the will of the people, to express the will of the people. And in Latin America, the tension—to say this in few words—is between the institutional performance and I think political science focuses mainly on institutional performance: if elections are free and fair, if there are checks and balances, if there is freedom of expression. But then the outcomes in terms of welfare are underestimated. And this is key when we are dealing with the idea of legitimacy because for many people, they can't feed the kids, they can't access good schools, etc., etc. So, at the end of the day, this is what also feeds populism. Take for instance Bolivia, where exclusion and marginalization were just the typical way of doing of a white elite for many years. And whenever Morales arrived to power, the system changed a lot in terms of provision, social provision, social welfare, but at the same time, there was a kind of tension and slowly more and more erosion of the institutions, the typical institution of liberal democracy.

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LW: Perhaps I could just add one point. I agree with Yanina, that there's the formal political science dimension. And then there's the

preoccupations that ordinary people have with their social well-being. There is a sort of intermediate realm, which is terribly important also for understanding populism. And one way of summing that up is by talking about the idea of *partitocrazia*. In other words, the parties just do what a competitive party system is supposed to do in an electoral system, but they are viewed by the voters as being self-serving, benefiting only the professional politicians, not responding to the needs of the voters. And the question of corruption is terribly important there. What fuels Latin American populism more than anything else is the belief that it doesn't matter what the democratic system throws up. Whoever it is, they will be lying to us and stealing from us.

SR: So, I think both of you make a very persuasive argument that context matters. There's the chronology of the way in which democracy when it's introduced in a society matters. So, I come from India, and thinking of the Indian experience, where democracy was introduced in 1947 after centuries of British colonial rule, but in a society that was partly feudal, partly capitalist, definitely not secular, and not particularly individualized. So, the society in which and the sequence through which democracy was introduced, did shape and color the experiences and institutions of Indian democracy.
[00:12:00] So, if I think of Central Europe, democracy was introduced simultaneously with capitalism in the 90s. In Latin America, capitalism predates democracy, does that make a difference? And if it does, what kind of difference does it make?

LW: As with what I said about 200 years of Latin American history, it's important to have a longer view of East European history as well. And I would say that in both cases, you can see I call them trajectories, which are not the modernization theories, unilinear, straightforward march inevitably towards a given destination. They are highly, I say, oscillatory. There are setbacks. There are reversals. And then there are resurgences. And I think, both in Latin America and in Eastern Europe, what we saw were resurgences from liberal democratic traditions, and ideas, and practices, which were specific to those countries and regions, but which had deep roots there. And that resurged for different reasons in the two cases, but in both cases connected with the end of the Cold War.

SR: Usually, the language in which democracies are talked about is a language of building blocks. It's a language of consolidation, of solidity, of foundations, of democracy, etc. And what I hear you saying is: Maybe we could use a different language to talk about democracy and borrow, rather from the life sciences talk about the flourishing of democracy, it's transplantation, use organic analogies to think about how democracies develop, flourish, and may also degenerate.

LW: Well, I mean, listening to the beginning of this presentation, I noticed a whole number of metaphorical words crept in: waves, deepening, collapse. And that's not just your presentation. That's in the general discussion of the theme. Even the most scholarly and scientifically minded experts invoke really rather exotic analogies and similes from other fields. And they somehow think that that doesn't

affect the content of the analysis, which follows by challenging an unquestioned analogy or metaphor. You can put your finger on what is being smuggled in, in the language, which is unsatisfactory.

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In the particular case that I think you just mentioned, consolidation. In the 1990s, there was a very widespread idea that there would be the dismantling of authoritarian regimes. There would be the start of democratic experiments. And then it would take a little while and there were several conditions would have to be met. But then ideally and normally, in fact, those regimes would come consolidated. Now the metaphor consolidation is extremely physicalist, all the structures fall into place, they fit together, they support a durable edifice, and so on. You can see how the metaphor works. And yet it's not very compatible with what we've been discussing, namely, different trajectories, structures, if you like, put together sometimes on very tricky foundations, cobbling together aspects of the past which bricolage, rather than highly structured components and so forth. Instead of consolidation, a better headline term, I suggest, is *viability*. Is the democracy going to be viable, given the context, and the historical circumstances, and the geopolitical, and economic circumstances in which it's being attempted?
[00:16:00] And different kinds of contexts will result in different balances to produce a viable regime. And viable regimes are not eternal regimes. Once they're in place, and you used another word, which I think is very important, they have the potential to degenerate. And that, again, is an organic, rather than a physicalist way of thinking about things.

SR: When do we know that we've reached a point where things could degenerate and then die, rather than have the possibility to regenerate, to use another metaphor which you had, which was oscillation? So, when do we know if the pendulum can swing back or not?

[00:16:30]

LW: So, we've got lots of different metaphors here. And this is a way of posing questions, not a definitive answer to questions. I mean, a possible, I think, widespread way of thinking about the democracies that exist in the contemporary world is a little bit like seasonality. That there is a winter. Does the winter mean that all life is going to die and the sun is never going to return? Not necessarily, because in the whole ecology of the society many ingredients still exist, many components exist, that are waiting for favorable conditions to flourish again. And I think that that's quite a common situation. It's not guaranteed, just as it's not guaranteed that the summer will be a brightened flourishing summer every year. There is such a thing as climate change. There are such things as volcanic eruptions which deprive you of the summer, and so on. But the potential is there. At present, a lot of the literature is about the death of democracy. And I think that the death metaphor is an unfortunate catastrophist way of thinking about things where the balance of potential and the interaction between competing forces is much more subtle and potentially more hopeful.

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SR: Yanina, would you like to come into this? So, is this a midlife crisis that we are witnessing?

YW: I think one example could help to see exactly the limits of these metaphors. But also, as I said before, how the idea of liberal democracy based on institutional performance is incomplete. And I think it is the Chilean case, because Chile was offered as a model of consolidated democracy, good performance, institutional performance, and so on. And then in the last decade, many people were not able to explain why people were so disappointed and unsatisfied, and so on. And I think it's this social dimension which was in place. And if you were looking at how the institutions in Chile were evolving, in this kind of clean, nice way—with many problems. But the focus was on institutional performance and on the economy. And the other side was left aside. And I think it's interesting to see how this case now will evolve in the future because it's a critical chapter somehow, now. You know, there are many elements to expect a good solution, a democratic one, but there's also a danger of the emergence of an authoritarian option. Soft authoritarian I will say, I don't think the democratic system is in danger in Chile at the moment.

LW: But it needs reinvention.

YW: Absolutely.

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LW: The word regeneration applies here, but it wasn't capable of continuing in an unmodified form. And that's what the events of the last few years have shown. And I think this fits the kind of oscillatory model that I've been putting forward. This isn't the first time the Chilean democracy has needed to be readjusted. I can think of about three or four episodes over the last 200 years, which fit that. And right now, the proposal which is on the table is for a Constitutional Assembly to rewrite the Constitution of 1980, which was not a legitimate democratic Constitution. Contrary, in fact, to a lot of the rhetoric of the political science community, that constitution, even with the reforms that were introduced to it had an original sin, which was that it was imposed by Pinochet, without debate and democratic legitimation. And it served interests, very partial interests. And those features of it now mean that it does not command the support and acceptance of a large proportion of the population of Chile.

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SR: You have a book, as I mentioned earlier, on practices of recall, which as I understood is for you, not an unalloyed good, but it could help in certain contexts to rejuvenate democracy, deepen it. In others, it could be threatening to the life of democracies. So, could you say something about not just recall, but also other Latin American experiments, which are linked to European ones, but not in the one-way model that the West usually sees itself as exporting to the rest of the world?

LW: Where does democratic innovation come from? Does it always come from the Founding Fathers of the United States or can it come from a multiplicity of different sources? I think it's very clear that it's not there's one right answer that everybody else must imitate. Rather, there are common problems, which have to be addressed, drawing on multiple experiences, sometimes from quite peripheral and low-status locations. To take a very simple example, in the case of Latin America, on the whole, they abolished slavery before the United States did. So, there should have been learning processes in both directions. I mean, in fact, many of the practices that the European democracies adopted after the 1st World War had already been tried out in Latin America beforehand.

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So, in general, rather than saying, "*Democratic innovation is the possession of the West and everybody else needs to learn from us*," we should be saying, "*We're all in this together.*" There's no one right answer that fits everywhere and that there are, nevertheless, interesting and important innovatory processes, which you can learn from. Yanina and I have been working on various kinds of direct democracy, basically ways of supplementing standard models of representative democracy, which have been failing, party systems which no longer attract the loyalty and allegiance of the citizens and so forth. So that would include, for example, forms of direct democracy, like citizen participation in budgeting. It would include petitioning. It would include referendums, as well as recall votes. There's a tremendous range of different possibilities. And all of those possibilities have the potential adopted in the right way

and designed, learning from mistakes of the past to make things better, but they also have the potential, if badly done to destabilize and to confuse people, so that they don't understand what political system really is and how it works.

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SR: In Brexit, we've seen an instrument of a direct democracy gone wrong, I think. But Yanina, you may want to come in with some Latin American examples.

YW: Yeah, well, the Brexit example is always a good one because it shows how it shouldn't work, you know, because if the mechanism of citizen participation are designed or at least in theory, to reinforce people's voice and power, the Brexit is a top-down mechanism with one shot, no other alternative, it's really an example of very bad working. But yeah, let's go to Latin America because as you said, the point is how institutions travel. And I think the most known institution is participatory budgeting, which was created originally in Brazil, and now you can find it all around the world with different shapes also.

You know, the World Bank has had a role, a very important role on disseminating participatory budgeting as a good example, as a best practice, against corruption. And in favor of engaging the people, we find absolutely different outcomes of participatory budgeting. In some places, it's just absolutely related to the clientelistic networks, and it's been forcing clientelism. And we don't have examples in Latin America for

that, while in others it's increasing social capital. So yeah, context matters, context and institutional design. And this is, I think, another outcome of our research, I would like to stress, is that institutions of participation are not in isolation. And when we analyze recall for instance, in cases such as the Peruvian one or the Colombian one, in systems in which the political parties are in erosion and are quite weak, recall doesn't work well. It just reinforced this trend and it's produced more problems than the ones it was expected to resolve.

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SR: Thank you very much for being with me today, Yanina and Laurence.

YW: Thank you.

LW: Thank you very much for having us.

SR: I think what I'd like to hold onto are two fascinating insights from the conversation. One, that democracy is not about just abstract principles and institutional designs, but it also needs active citizen participation in order to flourish, but that we also need innovations, new ideas, and experimentations about how to protect, defend, and also deepen democracy and democratic practices.
This concludes the second episode of democracy in question. Thank you very much for listening.