Transcription

Democracy in Question? – Season 2, Episode 2

Do we need to reinvent liberalism for the 21st century?

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SR: Welcome to "Democracy in Question," the podcast series that explores the challenges liberal democracy is facing around the world today. I am Shalini Randeria, the Director of the Albert Hirschman Centre on Democracy at the Graduate Institute in Geneva, and the Rector of the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna. In this episode, I'm joined by Professor Timothy Garton Ash, who is professor of European Studies at the University of Oxford. He has written extensively about the recent history and politics of Europe, especially about Eastern Europe and the revolutions of 1989. He also writes a column regularly on international affairs in "The Guardian," and is a contributor to "The New York Review of Books." Thank you so much for joining me today, Tim.

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TGA: A great pleasure to be with you.

SR: So, this week we are delving straight into the question, do we need to reinvent liberalism for the 21st century? As we've discussed in earlier episodes, liberalism has been facing mounting criticism. Hungary and its soft authoritarianism is proving to be a real challenge for Europe. China is increasingly positioning itself as an illiberal, but highly successful capitalist leader. Populism is on the rise again, due to the economic and social consequences of decades of austerity politics. Over the years, many analysts have written about and even predicted the death of liberalism. So, should we bury it as an idea, or can liberalism learn from its mistakes and emerge stronger? Let me start with a piece you wrote very recently,

Tim, on the future of liberalism, where you say, "Self-criticism is a liberal strength." So where did liberalism go wrong? And what lessons can we learn from it? From its failures at a time when, in a sense, the transformations towards soft authoritarianism are underway in liberal democracies around the world, from Hungary to India, from Turkey to Brazil. Even in the U.S., even in the defeat that Trump received, he received more votes than in previous elections. Where do we now go from here?

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TGA: Rumors of the death of liberalism have been much exaggerated. Liberalism has an extraordinary history of trial and error, of constant self-criticism and renewal. So, of course, liberalism needs renewal. But that's also what liberalism is good at. It starts with a self-criticism and then moves forward. So, what has passed for liberalism over the last 30 years has been a one-dimensional liberalism, a liberalism which has been essentially economic above all things. Its great failings, I think, have been wonderfully identified by the French scholar Pierre Hassner, already in 1991, who said, "As we celebrate the triumph of universality and liberty, we must not forget the yearnings that gave us nationalism and socialism." And then he names those yearnings. He says, the yearning for solidarity and equality on the one side, and for community and identity on the other. And that, for me, captures perfectly the twin problems with what has passed for liberalism over the last 30 years. Soaring levels of inequality, far too little solidarity in our societies on the one hand, but

also, neglecting the profound needs for community and identity. And every populism that one sees around the world, and there are many of them, has elements of both these discontents. So liberal renewal demands looking for new ways of building solidarity and equality, and restoring a sense of community and identity.

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SR: So let me take up both of these points, one after the other in turn, you have written so much on both of these questions, which I think have a immediate bearing also on the Brexit fiasco, to put it lightly. So one aspect of reincarnated liberalism, so to speak, must consider the fuzzy boundary over the last decades between economic liberalism advocating unfettered markets, and political liberalism. How do we remedy this imbalance?

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TGA: Well, first of all, by recognizing that liberalism has to be three dimensional, if not four dimensional, it has to be economic, political, social, and I would argue cultural. And so, on the solidarity and equality side, I think we have to take really quite major steps, which, by the way, Joe Biden is beginning to take in the U.S. A nearly $2 trillion COVID Recovery Fund which mainly goes to the poor, that's already a major redistributive action. I think we should think quite boldly about ideas like universal basic income, a universal minimal inheritance, land tax and so on, some classic things like that. But it's not only about economic inequality. In a sense, we make the same mistake if we only speak about

economic inequality. It's also what I call the inequality of respect. The fact that large groups in our societies felt simply, not just disrespected, but totally ignored by remote metropolitan cosmopolitan liberal elites. And the Polish populace, Law and Justice Party, so called, have an interesting phrase, they talk about the redistribution of respect. And although their way of doing it is not the way that I admire, the notion is a very powerful one. I think we do need a redistribution of respect, which says that the person who lives in a small town or the countryside who doesn't have a university degree, who maybe does a manual job, is absolutely equally deserving of our concern and respect as a university professor or the investment banker.

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SR: Let's turn to the second aspect, which is liberalism's problem, I think, with drawing the boundaries of the political community. What has not happened is a rethinking about whom should the political community of the nation state include or exclude. Liberalism seems to have a problem about how to include the rights of minorities, including solidarity, practices of solidarity with migrants and refugees. So what could a nuanced liberalism look like in that respect?

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TGA: In practical terms, the problem we had over the last 30 years is that we, metropolitan cosmopolitan liberal internationalist like me, and, dare I say, possibly even you, *we* talk, quite rightly, a great deal about the other half of the world, but not enough about the other half of our own

societies. Those people who felt ignored and disrespected. And what we therefore did was to leave the nation, with all its tremendous emotive and affective power, we left that to the right, to the nationalists and the populists. So, in my view, what we have to do is what Emmanuel Macron actually pioneered in practical politics, which is to talk about both, Macron's famous *en même temps*, [which means] at the same time. And in talking positively about the national community, to say, the nation yes, but what kind of nation? In which anyone from anywhere, whatever their culture, whatever their religion, whatever their sexual orientation, can equally be a Brit, or French, or German, or Austrian, or whatever it may be. And actually, I slightly disagree with you Shalini, because I don't think liberalism has a big problem with *that*, we just haven't been practicing it. But actually, the French republican model, but also the slightly more sort of muddled and pragmatic British model of civic integration, has scored huge successes. Our societies are full of people who come from elsewhere who have very different cultural, ethnic and other backgrounds, but who feel absolutely British and absolutely French, we just have to do it. We have to reclaim the nation and connect it to a world of freedom and a world in which it is self-evident that you can have multiple identities.

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SR: If I take that point a little further, what is the lesson we can learn? What lessons can liberals learn from the Brexit experience in this regard? People who are not willing to consider themselves both British and European, and how does one reengage some of those who voted leave

without sacrificing the liberal principles of openness, tolerance, minority rights, multiculturalism, there's been a huge backlash against multiculturalism all over continental Europe as well, which had never embraced it in the way that Britain had, to begin with.

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TGA: The first thing to say is, Brexit was anything but inevitable. There were some deep structural causes, but there were also some very conjunctural individual causes. If we'd had a different leader of The Labor Party, the result might have been 52% remain, 48% leave, and our entire conversation about Brexit would have been a completely different one. So, beware what Henri Bergson called the illusions of retrospective determinism. Point number two, let's not think that Brexit is some sort of weird British eccentricity. Of course it has some specific features. But as you rightly say, this is an issue not just in every European country, but actually in every liberal democracy around the world. First of all, we can't maintain the position that only minorities are entitled to their identity politics. So, you end up in a world which everybody except the majority, say, typically white working class, is allowed to have their identity politics, because then you get a Donald Trump who comes along with white identity politics. So, I think that we have to move beyond identity politics, acknowledging the many good things in multicultural initiatives. It's a very good thing that we know more about each other's cultures, it's a very good thing that we're happy for people to, as far as possible, live in their own ways, their own cultures, their own forms of self expression.

[00:11:30] But to emphasize the *shared* identity of the liberally defined nation. And by the way, in the British case, there's a very interesting subtext of this. So the United Kingdom is a weirdly smaller liberal entity, because it's a nation composed of four nations. So it is already a multinational nation. The particular identity within that which felt neglected and which has been taken up by the populists is the English identity. So that in our particular case, it's a matter of reclaiming the English identity and saying, England is not just the English Defence League, and Oswald Mosley, and football thugs and Nigel Faraj. It's the country of John Stuart Mill, of John Milton, of John Lilburn, all the great John's, of George Orwell, and others. That's, I think, a really important part of of winning people back, but also addressing the inequality of respect.

[00:12:30] Taking seriously the neglected people in our societies, listening to their experience in its own terms with respect. Amongst the complaints that the populists exploit is the complaint about political correctness. So, what the ordinary bloke, male or female, says is, "Well, you don't listen to me at all. And as soon as I tell you what I think you tell me I'm a fascist." So, we have to find a new way of negotiating that conversation so that we are capable of listening to each other, and not simply shouting each other down.

SR: Let me shift the conversation, Tim, to another aspect of it, which worries me equally. The anti-liberal mobilization today is not only explicit

and national, but it's also global, and driven by the soft power of the Chinese model, which in a sense is offering a different model of modernity altogether. I worry about how attractive such a model is, given China's growing economic strength and also international power.

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TGA: So, first of all, you put your finger on it absolutely. In China, you have, as you rightly say, an alternative model of modernity, to put it rather kindly. A model of developmental authoritarianism, which, in a sense, takes one of liberalism's strongest cards for the last 200 years, which was prosperity and modernity. And so, if we can be more prosperous and more modern than you, and this is immensely attractive to many people around the world. Take Latin America, take Africa, particularly developing countries, which look at the mess the West got itself in since the financial crisis. What do we do about it? Well, two things I would say. First of all, there's a German phrase, *Konkurrenz belebt das Geschäft*, "competition is good for business." And arguably what we missed in the 1990s was precisely the ideological competition, which, as Eric Hobsbawm and others have argued, had kept us, so to speak, *honest* throughout the Cold War. It had meant that we paid attention to the other half of our societies, we build up our social democratic models, our welfare states, and we got lazy and we got hubristic.

[00:15:00] Now, that competition says to us, "You got to raise your game." And I think we're all aware of that. And I'm profoundly convinced

that we can do that, that we can renew liberalism along the lines we've been talking about. Point number two, we have had our crisis, or we're still in the crisis of the liberal world. We're going through a process of self-criticism and agonizing and we're beginning to learn from it. Look at the Biden agenda in the United States, that's clearly learning from it. To some extent, I hate to say this, but even the Johnson government in my own country in Britain, with the agenda of leveling up, is learning from the mistakes of the past. China has its crisis still to come. Because, under Xi Jinping, it has gone back to a truly Leninist model of one-party rule, and actually the rule of one man within one party.

[00:16:00] And the one thing we know about Leninist systems, and we have a 100 years plus of experience of them, is they are not good in managing the problems of a complex economy and society, which is what you now have in China. So the contradiction between the politics on the one hand and the economics and the society in China is going to reach a crunch. That crunch is not gonna end magically with a Velvet Revolution and a wonderful Chinese liberal democracy, but it will be a crisis of the Chinese system, of that I'm absolutely persuaded. So those are two considerations. Firstly, competition is good for business, and we are actually beginning to learn from it. And secondly, they have their problems too.

SR: But Europe has its problems too. And that's what I want to draw you into discussing with me now, and that is, what role do you think can

Europe play in the global struggle against anti-liberalism? Given that, of course, Europe is still home to most of the liberal democracies in the world today, and yet, if you look at it from a non-European perspective, doesn't Europe seem a little hypocritical in preaching liberal values and principles, not only because of a past Imperial history, we'll leave that aside for the moment. But the fact that Viktor Orbán in Hungary is, for example, a declaredly illiberal society and state which is still a member of the European Union.

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TGA: Shalini, that was a wonderful bit of British understatement when you said, "A little hypocritical." *Massively* hypocritical. I'm afraid, to much of the world, Europe looks weak, divided, and hypocritical. At the same time, according to the latest Freedom House report on freedom in the world, of 82 countries that they classify as free rather than partly free or unfree, 42 are in geographical Europe, more than half the free countries in the world are in the wider Europe. And therefore, a huge responsibility rests on us, particularly because the United States has got itself in such a mess that even though I hope it will come back as a major international anchor, and even leader under Joe Biden, it's a long, long way away from being the city upon a hill, a model democracy. And the first thing we have to do is to practice what we preach. And at the moment, I mean, there are many examples of our hypocrisy, including, treatment of refugees, the people who are risking their lives and indeed dying trying to get into Europe. But the biggest, the most dangerous single example, is the fact that the European Union explicitly declares itself to be a democratic

community consisting only of liberal democracies. And there is one full member state, Hungary, which is no longer a democracy already. It's a hybrid system, something like a competitive authoritarian system. And the EU has done nothing, but nothing effective to prevent that demolition of liberal democracy, which has happened over the 10 years since 2010 while Hungary has been a full member state of the European Union. So, in my view, the challenge of having a non-democracy in what is supposed to be a model community of democracies is as big a challenge to the future of the European Union as Vladimir Putin, climate change, the immigration issue, post-COVID recovery, and so on.

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SR: What is a characteristic feature of Hungary that it's basically an erosion and a dismantling of liberal institutions from within. Now, Hungary is a textbook case, but we can see that in Turkey as well, in India, we see that all over the world. The question for me here is, how do we mobilize people in support of these institutions when the principles to be supported are so abstract like rule of law, or separation of powers?

TGA: One quick point about the way in which Hungary or Poland differ from Turkey or India, after the end of communism in 1989, these countries engaged in a process that I would call member state building. In other words, they built all their independent, democratic, etc, institutions, with a view to qualifying as a member state of the European Union. Thus, by 2010, they had the most perfect, as it were, paper model

of what an ideal European liberal democracy looks like, better than many West European countries. And what Viktor Orbán has so skillfully done is to dismantle the reality of democracy while preserving the façade.

[00:21:00] So, on paper, media pluralism, independent courts, you name it, they have it all. So that's a peculiarity of the situation. I think the EU has to do a hell of a lot more about that. Because not only is it a system built on preserving the façade, it's a system built, as you very well know, on billions of euros coming from the EU into the coffers of the national government to be distributed, in effect, to keep them in power. So that's point number one.

[00:21:30] Point number two, mobilizing people. There's nothing like a bit of adversity to mobilize people. People in Poland, which I know very well, took for granted all these institutions that were being built, basically because that's what we need to get into Europe, when we want to get into Europe, they didn't think very hard about them. Now that they're under attack, you are for the first time getting people walking around with T-shirts saying "constitution" going out and chanting support for the rule of law. I even saw a demonstration in Krakow where people were chanting, wait for it, "Trójpodział władzy" which means, "Triple separation of powers."

SR: That's amazing!

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TGA: I haven't been in many demos when people chant, "Triple separation of powers." So, ironically, the populists may be the force that wishes evil but ends up doing good, because it is actually generating its own antibodies. But that's the optimistic interpretation. And I'm afraid, rather like the body of fighting the COVID virus, it needs a little help from outside as well.

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SR: One final question on another aspect of what needs to be protected in liberal democracy, or shared liberal public sphere, which really needs a free press, freedom of expression, of assembly, but also critical civil society institutions, autonomous universities. And as you have pointed out recently in a piece in "The Guardian," the disappearance of public sphere and free media pose a great threat to liberal democracies. And I think the threat comes from two sides at the moment that makes it so complicated. On the one hand, you have the throttling grip of the state on the media in these soft authoritarian, electoral authoritarian regimes. On the other hand, you have the oligopoly of big tech corporations.

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TGA: I think that we are in danger of losing the shared public sphere, the marketplace, the agora, which is quintessential to democracy ever since ancient Athens. That was the basic idea of democracy 2500 years ago, the citizens get together on the bricks, they hear all the facts, they hear all the arguments, they decide what to do. Now, we're losing that,

actually, I would say not so much because of the authoritarian censoring stage. But because the way the Internet has developed makes it possible, indeed easy for people to separate out into entirely separate marketplaces. And the extreme case of this is the United States. There are the people who read "The New York Times," watch MSNBC, listen to NPR, and go to *those* sites on the internet. And there are the people who watch Fox News, listen to Rush Limbaugh or other talk radio, and go to *those* sites on the internet, and now the twain shall meet. And so, it's an absolutely fundamental challenge. There's no single fix. If you have a halfway decent public service broadcaster, you should triple the budget and ring fence its independence. I think we need big foundations and funders to come in to support good, investigative, serious journalism. I also think we need the platforms, not simply to adjust their community standards, to shift their algorithms. Because at the moment, it's the algorithms which are taking people off into these separate marketplaces. I think it's one of the fundamental challenges of our time.

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SR: Thank you so very much, Tim, for this really wide ranging discussion of what ails liberal democracies today, but also, what liberals themselves could learn from their failures. So, what we've seen with you is that a move from a one-dimensional liberalism is necessary to a more nuanced form, which is able to encompass the economic with political principles, but especially also the cultural dimension of liberalism, which would take seriously not only the need for identity and community, but also for equality of respect, along with cultivating a solidarity, a shared sense of

identity for civic nationalism. We've stressed the need for cultivating multiple identities, but especially then for establishing a shared public sphere as something which is pivotal, crucial to the epistemic foundations of liberal democracies. Thank you very much.

TGA: Thank you for a superb summary, it was a pleasure.

SR: This concludes our episode of "Democracy in Question" today. Thank you very much for being with us.