



Transcription

Democracy in Question? – Season 2, Episode 5

What keeps democracies alive?

Shalini Randeria, Host (SR)

Rector of the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM) in Vienna, Professor of Social Anthropology and Sociology at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (IHEID) in Geneva, Director of the Albert Hirschman Centre on Democracy at the IHEID, Excellence Chair at the University of Bremen

Till van Rahden, Guest (TVR)

Professor at the Université de Montréal (Canada Research Chair), Adjunct Research Professor at Carleton University

Published 17 June 2021

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: Welcome to "Democracy in Question," the podcast series that explores the challenges democracies face all around the world today. I'm Shalini Randeria, 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. My guest today is Professor Till van Rahden. He is professor at the University of Montreal, and he specializes in European history, more particularly in German, and also in Jewish history. In his latest book, the title in German is "Demokratie, Eine gefährdete Lebensform," so, "Democracy: A Fragile Form of Life," he identifies democracy not only as a system of government but insists that we see it as a way of life. Thank you so much for joining me today, Till.

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TVR: I'm delighted to be with you today. Thank you.

SR: So, there have been a spate of books on how democracies degenerate and die and are doing so today. And it's, in a sense, hard not to focus on these dangers, when looking at the world of creeping authoritarianism around us. If we think of the storming of the U.S. Capitol by an armed mob, trying to overturn election results or of the slow erosion of democratic institutions in Viktor Orbán's Hungary, to give just a couple of examples. The interesting thing about your work, Till, is that you insist that it's equally important, if not more, to explore what we can do and what has been done to foster and to nurture democracy. So, this time, we're going to ask, what keeps democracies alive?

[00:02:00] Let us start with Walt Whitman's idea of "Democratic Vistas" from which you have drawn inspiration. It's an old piece penned in 1870, against the background of the American Civil War. And interestingly, Whitman argues there, that democracy is much more than elections, in fact, even more than institutional arrangements that would ensure checks and balances. Democracy for him is a matter of character. What I'd like to hear from you is why do you think some of his ideas are so relevant for us today?

TVR: Whitman is relevant, not because he argues that we should not only be concerned about elections and political parties and parliaments and democratic governments because we should. But he highlights something that I think is often lost in contemporary conversations about democracies, namely that democracies do not exist in thin air. A democratic government presupposes something very elusive that we usually call a democratic culture or that we usually conceptualize as the cultural and social foundations of democracy. And then as a shorthand, we talk about civic culture and liberal values or democratic values. And here, Whitman is interesting because he had an intuition that everyday life mattered, how we interact as citizens, how we live together in a democratic fashion, was foundational, not just to a democratic way of life, but to a democratic system of government.

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SR: So, you make an important point with Whitman when you argue that just establishing liberal democratic institutions is not sufficient. It's

necessary, of course, but that's not going to nurture democracies in the long run, and that a free and democratic society needs democratic virtues to be practiced in our daily lives with one another. And then you have an intriguing formulation where you say democracy is a matter of form and not of norms. So, could you explain why you would like us to focus on the democratic form or democratic practices rather than values or norms?

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TVR: In a sense, I would always highlight that it matters less what democrats believe in because in a liberal democracy, which is always a pluralist democracy, we will never find an overarching consensus about democratic values and what democrats should believe in. But what we can agree upon is the form in which we disagree. On the one hand, it's a very simple formula that democrats agree to disagree. But the question of what it takes for us to be able to navigate deeply divisive moral conflicts that are equally divisive as the conflicts that gave rise to the American Civil War. And democracy must be able and democratic citizens must be able to navigate these deeply divisive conflicts. And that is a question less of democratic norms about which we all disagree, but about the forms in which we articulate our disagreement.

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SR: So, let me take up this question of norms which you want to avoid. But I do want to press you on this. Although you rightly point out that in a democracy, we need to learn to live with differences. We need to learn

to live with dissent. We need to tolerate plurality and foster debate even on deeply divisive matters. The question for me is, does this tolerance have limits? Can and to what extent should a democratic society, for example, allow anti-democratic, illiberal, or authoritarian tendencies of the kind that are on the rise today? Or to put it differently, how should it deal with those who don't share the value of plurality or tolerance?

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TVR: There are two answers. One is a, sort of, short-term answer, which is pretty straightforward, that a democratic state has the right to protect its, sort of, democratic basis and democratic institutions. However, there's a long-term argument that I think is even more important: Unless we nurture the, kind of, democratic spirit that allows citizens to navigate these deeply divisive issues, such as questions of abortion or the question of the veil in public, etc., the virtue or the character to use all these old fashioned terms that allows us to navigate these tensions, these conflicts, these dilemmas, again, are not things that drop out of thin air, but that have to be carefully cultivated in everyday life.

[00:07:30] And I think the fundamental misunderstanding of major thinkers of liberal democracy that came out of the moment of 1989 and 1990, was that liberal democracy at the end of the day was, like, a perpetuum mobile, like a perpetual machine. Once set in motion, it would go forever. But that's a huge misunderstanding because a democratic spirit, a democratic culture, a democratic way of life is something that needs to be nurtured and cultivated in everyday

encounters every day, and not just at, sort of, celebratory moments where we come together and have I don't know, where we celebrate the constitution and these things.

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SR: So, let's look at the kinds of spaces that you have analyzed in your book, where post-war Germany did succeed in changing some of the highly authoritarian fascist practices, values, but also attitudes and behavior that had become for many the norm through years of socialization under National Socialism. So, you point to the family as one side of the practice of gender equality, where something changed dramatically after 1945 in Germany. You talk about how democratic virtues were cultivated in relationships between parents and children. And you have a very interesting discussion of what you call democratic fatherhood, how children were then socialized also into democratic way of life in schools, in kindergartens, but also at home. So, I think it would be very interesting to hear from you how it was really possible for ordinary Germans to accept and to appropriate for themselves these non-authoritarian, anti-authoritarian democratic ways of life, after many years of having learned exactly the opposite.

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TVR: The immediate starting point is a profound sense of shock that came out of the cataclysmic violence of the Second World War and a kind of implicit or explicit knowledge of the genocide. And so, out of this came a moment of soul searching that involved people in many political

parties, many social and cultural milieus, Catholic, Protestant, secular associations, who were all concerned with how to remake Germany into a better—and better for them usually meant democratic—society. And here, the question of child-rearing is obviously essential. And it's essential because citizens, democratic citizens, again, do not come out of thin air, but are the result of countless conflicts and counters that begin with small children and continue with teenagers and adolescents, and obviously, then also continue with adults. But to find ways of nurturing children so that they can develop traits that are seen as essential to a democratic society, such as maturity, the ability to make informed judgments about one's own preferences, the ability to navigate ambivalences and ambiguities to tolerate tolerance or to practice tolerance, all of these things are essential to the question of how to raise citizens in a democratic society. And here then, the family, not just the bourgeois nuclear family, but family broadly conceived all kinds of educational institutions, schools, kindergartens, but also universities, colleges are essential, not because they provide children and then adolescents with a certain skill or knowledge, but because they cultivate certain virtues that then become central for the idea and the lived experience of a democratic character.

SR: So, could you give a few concrete examples as to how this happens in a German household in the 1950s and '60s?

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TVR: So, one of the key issues in the early years is whether and under which circumstances, physical violence against children would still be legitimate. There's a consensus emerging in the early-mid-1950s that physical violence against children is unacceptable. And it's unacceptable because it destroys something that is fundamental to the process of democratic child-raising, namely trust. So, the role of the parent is no longer primarily to exert authority but the role of the parent and the responsibility of the parent is to win and cultivate the child's trust, right? This becomes something that is reconfigured in the course of the 1950s and 1960s. And then, is again reconfigured during the years of '68. But it's central that the big obsession, namely that parents, especially the father had to exert authority, gave way to a conception where mothers but also fathers were encouraged to love their children so that they could win their trust because that would form the basis for, sort of, mature adults, mature adolescents, who then have all the, sort of, skills in a kind of social-cultural sense to navigate the tensions in a pluralist democracy.

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SR: So, one of the things you point to in this connection is the role of institutions. And one institution that you pinpoint in your book is the court. Could you say something about the role that law and the courts played in changing these kinds of attitudes, behaviors, practices in the domestic sphere?

TVR: One of the defining features of the Federal Republic from the very beginning is something that the allies forced the Germans to accept. And

that is one of the most robust forms of constitutionalism in the history of liberal democracy. So, the German Constitutional Court is basically as powerful as the American Supreme Court in shaping some of the major political development and decisions since its founding in 1951.

[00:15:00] And one of the areas that were particularly contentious was the question of gender equality in the 1950s and 1960s, obviously, a question that continues to be debated today. But the obsessiveness of the compensation was unique in the '50s and 1960s. And here, the court played a key role in advocating for a broad understanding, a far-reaching understanding for gender equality. And if one brackets the Scandinavian countries that had dismantled, the family father as a family patriarch in the 1910s and 1920s, post-war West Germany is actually the first western country to fully dismantle the legal foundations of patriarchy in 1959. So, courts play an incredibly important role. But on another level, these courts, again, do not act in a vacuum. All the judges are, sort of, well connected to political parties and to political organizations, and so there's a lot of lobbying going on behind the scenes. But it's a moment in which you see, it's not yet a *Bürgerbewegung*, a civic or Citizens' Movement in a narrow sense, but a broad public opposition to governmental policies leading to a court verdict after a few years that really made for a completely different conversation about paternal authority and the role of the father in the family in the 1950s and 1960s.

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SR: One could make the argument that in the 1950s and '60s, Germany is a relatively homogenous society, culturally homogenous. Often there is the assumption, and you point out a mistaken assumption that cultural homogeneity is a condition for democracy as a way of life, one, which is then seen as under threat from migrants or minorities. So, why do you think that democracy not only needs diversity, but it also needs passionate disagreement and how can this, kind of, acceptance of the kinds of practices of democratic fatherhood or gender equality in the family that you're talking about, can this really become general practice in a society which has very diverse cultural backgrounds?

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TVR: Pluralism, deep diversity is the inevitable effect of liberal freedoms. The moment we conceive of ourselves as free citizens, every one of us can articulate her or his conception of the public good, conception of democratic virtues, conception of equality, conception of solidarity, conception of justice in the public sphere. And so, you have a polyphonic conversation from the get-go. Migration is an interesting, so to speak, subcomponent of this diversity, but it's not the key. The key is that even the most stable society with no in-migration is a deeply divided and deeply pluralist society as long as it is a liberal society because you will have a wide range of conceptions. So, if one takes ethnic homogeneity as a cultural measure, yes, the early Federal Republic was more homogenous than Germany is today. But if one takes the question of diverse issues, that make for conflicts that cannot be reconciled, for

which there is no easy solution, and the only thing you have is sort of temporary compromises to navigate this tension, what you have is a robustly pluralist society, despite the fact that it may be ethnically homogeneous.

[00:19:15] Yes, of course, conversation change when you have a greater degree of religious diversity. Conversations change, when, as we know today, large segments of the society now see of themselves as secular. All of this changes the conversation. But if you track the conversation about, let's say, abortion rights, homophobia, all these conversations have a deep history that cannot be easily mapped onto a moment in which the ethnic diversity of the immediate post-war 15 years, and it's no more than that, comes to an end. And more importantly, and this is not just true for Germany but the ethnic homogeneity of post-war Western Europe is an exceptional moment in modern European history. Modern European societies, from the 17th century on are deeply pluralist, diverse societies. And it's only because of this brief moment that we have this fantasy of a, kind of, cultural, ethnic, national homogeneity as a defining feature of European or modern European history.

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SR: But let's look at another part of your argument, which I think is very, very interesting because you stress in your book, the role of public spaces, where sociality is not only formed but where democratic forms can be practiced. So, these are parks, playgrounds, swimming pools become very important, spaces to which everyone in the community has

access. The question I ask myself often is, is it just enough that these spaces exist? You can see often in Berlin, in the parks, little groups of people just sitting each one picnicking on its own with very little exchange. And then, of course, conflicts arising about whether Bratwurst should be grilled in that space or not. What if some of these public interactions are based on prejudices, they may lead to conflicts, how can we really make sure that these public spaces foster a democratic way of living together?

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TVR: The assumption is not that the democratic commons, the ensemble of all these public spaces, made for a harmonious form of living together, sort of, defined by peace, love, and understanding. The argument is that the democratic commons provides the necessary context in which we can begin to address the deeply divisive matters. The key here is that what a democratic commons allows us to experience is that social circles mix, cultural milieus mix, classes mix, and they encounter one another as strangers obviously, and these are difficult encounters, but they encounter one another.

[00:22:30] And the example of a swimming pool or the example of a park is really instructive because it's precisely how much noise can you make? What food can you bring? How do you perform masculinity, femininity, and everything in between in the public setting? What is legitimate? What is illegitimate? And this is obviously a very German

obsession, how do you protect the environment while you're in the park or in a forest, or in a trash?

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SR: Trash, trash becomes very important.

TVR: These become deeply divisive issues. But I think that without a democratic commons, what you see is a withering away of our very ability to navigate these conflicts. And this is why the democratic commons is not just some, sort of, nice-to-have aspect, and if the economy is doing well, we can afford to build a swimming pool or maintain a park or even build a new park or something. But why is it so important for democratic governments to understand that these institutions, in the same way as constitutional courts and parliaments, provide the very basis for a democratic society?

SR: So, I take your point, because one of the arguments you are making is therefore the democracy is expensive and that it needs a well-resourced state to keep it alive, but a state which is willing to put public resources into keeping these spaces public. Let me close, Till, with the questions of sociability under conditions of the pandemic when use of public spaces is restricted and physical distance is required. So, how can the vitality of democratic life be maintained and nurtured under the current conditions? And do you think the internet can function even temporarily as a substitute for such unmoderated public spaces?

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TVR: To me, the first and most important thing is that we need to separate physical distancing from social distancing. So, yes, the pandemic forces us to observe physical distancing but there's no reason why we cannot try to maintain as much public sociability as possible. So, keep the parks open if possible. Try to find ways and keeping the libraries open. Trying to find ways perhaps even keeping a museum open, so that a rudimentary form of democratic commons is sustained or maintained. Obviously, the digital public sphere is not going to go away, Zoom is not going to go away, Twitter or Facebook. But I think that precisely because we know that they're here to stay and we know that they are changing the public sphere, we need to strengthen the very, sort of, material foundations of a democratic commons in which people can encounter one another on a daily basis and which democratic citizens can experience what I see as foundational, namely, the idea of equality and the idea of freedom in quotidian encounters.

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SR: There is another idea which is foundational to democracy. And that is the idea of the public good. How best can that idea of a common good, a public good, be fostered in times where we have fallen back into some kind of nationalism. The vaccine nationalism would be just one aspect of it. But also at a time when the pandemic has forced most of us back into our own narrow domestic walls.

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TVR: I think conversations about the public good, a very useful way of highlighting that my emphasis on form as opposed to norms and ways of life as opposed to values and moral certainties, is in itself, obviously also normative. But the normativity is, so to speak, weak. Most democratic theories when they address questions of values, they invoke a strong normativity that is based on a consensus of all citizens. And in my understanding, that's problematic and the conversations about the public good are a good illustration. If we have a very strong conversation about the public good, how do we deal with those in a democratic society who happen to have a different conception, a competing conception of the public good? So, for me, the public good is everything that allows us to live with the fact that we have different conceptions of the public good. And the public good that kind of reflects a weak normativity is the way of life, the set of institutions broadly conceived, that allow us to live with never-ending controversies over the idea of the public good or common sense, or any of these seemingly self-evident categories that indicate a rational consensus or a fixed sense of solidarity, etc., etc.

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SR: So, thank you very much, Till, for these fascinating insights, which shift the focus from the need to establish functioning democratic institutions, which as you point out, are definitely necessary, but they're not sufficient to keep democracy alive. Democracy is a fragile way of life, which needs to be nurtured in public spaces that invite and enable us to experience and to tolerate difference, to practice equality. Democratic

citizens, as we've learned with you today aren't born. They have to be made. And that liberal democratic societies are by definition divided in plural societies because liberal democracy creates and allows for dissent about fundamental matters. Therefore, how we learn to live together as citizens in daily life with and despite these differences, is crucial to the health of democracies. So, thank you very much, Till.

TVR: Thank you again for having me. It was a pleasure.

SR: Thank you for listening to this episode of "Democracy in Question."