

Decoding the Writings on the Wall: Analyzing Democracy from a Historical Point of View

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I 1989 - The Beginning of an Illusion

In his last book, published in 1995 briefly before his death, the French historian François Furet analyzed the global events of 1989 as “the passing of an illusion.” To his mind, the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Eastern bloc had to be understood as the endpoint of a long history of worldwide fascination with communist ideology. At about the same time, the American historian Francis Fukuyama went even further in claiming that, after the end of communism, not only Soviet rule, but all the dictatorial forms of political government would be overcome and that liberal democracy would emerge as the triumphant winner of the ideological struggles of the “age of extremes,” as Eric Hobsbawm puts it. Like Fukuyama, prophet of the “end of history,” the protagonists of “democratic peace theory” and, recently, Steven Pinker have seen the year 1989 as the dawning of an age of freedom, peace and prosperity.

Looking back, it is fair to say that the moment of 1989 was not only the passing, but also the beginning of an illusion. After the decades of the Cold War, the West’s triumph started with revolutionary movements and groundbreaking events in Eastern European countries. In political terms, “the end of history” seemed to promise “post-socialist transformation” in the states of the former Warsaw pact, which would eventually be followed by democratization on a global scale. In the economic sphere, the fall of communism allowed world markets to reconnect with vast regions, promising huge potential for future growth. In parallel, privatization, deregulation and the reduction of welfare transfers were the measures chosen to increase productivity in many Western countries and to stimulate a dynamic that would supposedly be fueled by the slower but even more groundbreaking surge of the “digital revolution.”

Thirty years later, these dreams of the wonders of the liberal age have been shattered. Instead of an era of peace, wars have broken out in the Balkans, the Middle East, Africa, Eastern Europe and Asia. The world economy has been destabilized by a chain reaction of bank crashes and financial crises that began in 2008. And recently, the process of global democratization not only has slowed, it is even on the retreat. Countries like Russia, Poland and Hungary, which were democratized after 1989, are now governed by authoritarian leaders and illiberal regimes. Others, like Afghanistan, Egypt and Iraq, which have gone through fundamental ruptures induced by foreign interventions or revolutions, are now so instable that all hopes for democracy there in the near future have been crushed. Once fairly stable democracies such as Turkey, India and Venezuela, and even some strongholds of the West like the United States, are now being led by governments that are openly rejecting liberal traditions. In hindsight, we can see quite clearly that 1989 represented the heyday of an illusion that did not last very long. Has history ever seen similar situations, in which liberal beginnings led to illiberal outcomes? Does historical research provide explanations and analytical tools that might help us better understand these shifts, which seem to be multiplying at present in our world? Might there even be lessons that can be learned from past experiences?

II Revolutionary Situations of the Past

History does not repeat itself. But by applying comparative methods, the historian is capable of detecting analogies, structural similarities and differences between various historical phenomena.

Which historical situations were comparable to 1989, in so far as they started with hopes of the spread of liberal-democratic rule and ended with completely different results?

The first case that comes to mind is the complex of events that Robert R. Palmer has characterized as the “age of democratic revolution.” The revolutionary spark was first struck in 1776 in the British colonies of North America. A decade later it was taken up in France, where within a few years an absolutist monarchy was transformed into an egalitarian republic. In 1792, the most important French colony, Saint Domingue in the Caribbean, took up the fight against its oppressor, gained its independence in 1804 and became the Republic of Haiti in 1806. From 1808 onwards, Spain was drawn into the turmoil of revolution and a little later most of its colonies in South America were displaying open resistance to their motherland. The 1820s saw new waves of revolutions in Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece, where the population revolted against domination by the Ottoman Empire. This long wave of revolutions marks the first time in history that large parts of the world embraced the liberal dream. The United States and France set the tone for a new era, shaped by visions of liberty, individual sovereignty, equality, justice, virtue, free trade and prosperity. Other nations that could not immediately imitate this example felt they were being left behind. “Them and Not Us,” for example, was the title of a tribute that the German poet Klopstock composed in reaction to the French Declaration of the Rights of Man.

Yet the short- and medium-term consequences of these promising beginnings were decidedly mixed – especially in France, where the bells of freedom had rung the loudest. In 1792, France declared war on Germany; it was the beginning of one of the longest and bloodiest wars in world history, one that lasted for 25 years, spread to four continents and cost between 5 and 6 million lives. In 1793, only four years after the storming of the Bastille, the young French republic was taken over by Jacobin rulers who exposed the country to the Reign of Terror, shedding the blood of some 40,000 French people. Even if the revolutionary terror was short lived, it did not take long until Napoleon Bonaparte transformed the country into a militarized police-state, in which all oppositional forces were censored, spied upon and finally crushed. Other countries which had experienced moments of revolutionary enthusiasm did not fare much better. The slave revolt of Saint Domingue, for example, led to the foundation of a bloody and ineffective regime. And even if many of the former Latin American colonies gained their independence in the course of the 19th century, most of the emerging states were neither liberal nor democratic.

A comparable pattern of “derailment” applies to the wave of revolutions that shook the world in the wake of the First World War. The revolution of February 1917 turned the autocratic empire of the Russian Tsars into a Soviet republic. The experiment started with the establishment of a grass-roots democracy for the workers and soldiers of Russia. In 1918/1919, a second series of revolutions followed, crushing three other gigantic political entities, namely the German, the Austro-Hungarian and the Ottoman Empires. New republics were successively founded on the ruins of these empires. On November 9, 1918, Philipp Scheidemann proclaimed Germany a republic. Two days later, on November 11, Charles I of Austria abdicated amid the turmoil in Vienna. On the same day, Poland was re-established as a republican state, and on November 16, the prime minister of Hungary, Mihály Károlyi, proclaimed the country a republic. On November 18, Latvia became a republican state – following the example of Estonia and Lithuania, which had separated from the Russian Empire earlier in 1918. On January 22, 1919, the union of the two Ukrainian republics was declared, both states having resulted from the revolution of 1917. In Turkey, the revolution of the “Young Turks” led to the foundation of a republic in 1923. All of these newly created nations were originally oriented towards liberal and democratic principles, some of them marrying political liberalism with socialist or communist economic systems.

However, most of the newly founded republics of 1917/1918 were not only fragile and volatile, they very soon developed tendencies towards authoritarianism and illiberalism or even transformed into dictatorships. In the young Soviet republic, the revolution of February 1917 opened the door for the October Revolution of the same year. This put an end to the country's short democratic experiment by dissolving the constituent assembly in January 1918 that had just been elected by 48 million Russians. Instead of grass-roots democracy, party rule and the Red Terror were established. In Hungary, the recently founded people's republic came to an end with a military intervention led by Miklós Horthy in November 1919. The early years of the Polish republic were characterized by changing governments and political violence until, in 1926, Józef Piłsudski turned the tide with a coup d'état that created a personal dictatorship. The tendency towards dictatorship was most momentous in Germany and Italy, where right-wing fascist movements attacked the respective states from 1919 on. Some 20 years after the dawn of a new democratic age in 1917/1918, not only had many of the newly founded republics turned into authoritarian, repressive, sometimes openly violent regimes, but a second world war broke out, leading to bloodshed on an even larger scale than during the first: While there were 16 million recorded war-related deaths between 1914 and 1918, there were 85 million between 1939 and 1945.

III Democracy: Varieties and Metamorphoses

In 1789 and 1918, we can thus observe sequences of events and structural shifts that – at least at first sight – resemble what happened in Europe and other parts of the world after 1989. All three moments in history were characterized by political ruptures that initially led to the proliferation of liberal democracies, but the latter more or less quickly transformed into illiberal regimes or full-blown dictatorships. Comparative analysis of these parallel historical situations has revealed two important observations. First, it is obvious that the nature of democracy does not only change fundamentally in the course of history; at any given moment in time, coexisting democratic states also vary considerably. Second, in the three situations discussed above we can observe links between liberal democracies and the authoritarian, illiberal and violent regimes that some of them evolved into. Both observations speak directly to our core questions.

According to the standard definition given by the political scientist Larry Diamond, democracy consists of four key elements: a political system for choosing and replacing the government through free elections; the active participation of the people, as citizens, in politics and civic life; protection of the human rights of all citizens; the rule of law, in which the laws and procedures apply equally to all citizens. But as we shall see, this definition, which seems plausible for understanding the present, is of limited value for analyzing the democracies of the past. The city republics of ancient Greece, in which the concept and practice of democracy was invented, did certainly not fit Diamond's definition; they were dominated by small aristocracies and excluded the middle and lower classes and the slaves. The parliamentary monarchy of Great Britain had democratic elements, but even after the substantial reform of its electoral system in 1832, voting rights for the House of Commons were not granted to more than 3% of the total population. Even in the revolutionary democratic republics of the 18th century, participation was a privilege reserved for the few: In the early United States, before the reforms of 1828, less than 5% of the population was entitled to vote. And in the First French Republic, with the introduction of "universal suffrage," approximately 7 million men, a little more than one-fourth of the population, enjoyed voting rights, of which only some 10% actually went to the urns to elect the convention in 1792.

The fact that, before the 20th century, democratic participation was limited to small portions of society even in the most liberal regimes serves as an incentive to broaden the definition of

democracy for the purpose of historical analysis and accept that it has had many manifestations over the long course of history. Looking at the First French Republic again, we understand that it is not only a good example of this trend, but also paradigmatic of how quickly a democracy can turn into a dictatorship. It only took 12 months and the determination of the *Comité de salut public* to weaken the influence of parliament, to centralize the structures of government and to introduce a system of “revolutionary justice” used to pursue enemies of the regime. Interestingly, the constitution of 1792 was never officially overthrown. Moreover, the main perpetrators of *la Terreur* were all elected representatives of the republic and insisted they were acting in the name and the interest of the people, justifying their extraordinary measures with the danger that a civil or foreign war could ensue. The “twelve who ruled” even worked on a new Declaration of the Rights of Man and a new, even more democratic constitution that was voted on in a national referendum, but never put into practice. This historical case provides important insights: The French democracy of 1792 was not only vulnerable to authoritarian rule, it even provided the very structures and resources that led to its own abolition. In other words, the illiberal dictatorship of 1793/1794 paradoxically used democratic elements and discourse to create a regime that was undemocratic. A similar point could be made about the reign of Napoleon Bonaparte after 1799: He came into power with a coup d'état but legitimized his new constitution with a referendum and reintroduced universal suffrage in France.

Democracy's variability and its relatedness to regimes that at first seem to have entirely undemocratic features is even more visible after 1918, when the age of mass democracy finally began. In the context of the new republics of 1917/1918, “liberal” certainly meant “democratic,” but often also a strong leaning towards socialist or communist ideologies. A democratic republic was founded in Germany after the First World War. The Weimar Constitution established a catalogue of fundamental rights for its citizens and a multiparty system, and it enabled 36 of the 60 million Germans living at the time to vote, which also included women. Yet the young German democracy was fragile from the very beginning. The burdens of the Treaty of Versailles, a series of economic crises, a lack of identification of the elites with the new regime, disorder in a parliament with far too many diverging parties and fragile coalitions, inefficiency in the apparatus of a state that proved incapable of addressing the ongoing economic crisis of the time, progressive radicalization of the republic's enemies on the left and on the right, frequent recourse to violence – all these factors contributed to the weakening of the young republic and to the rise of a dictator. Yet Adolf Hitler was not only an enemy of the Weimar Republic, but in many ways a product as well. Even though he openly campaigned against democracy, he successfully operated within a democratic system. The NSDAP was a well-organized party, one that knew how to deal with its increasing membership, how to address Germans in very successful campaigns and how to score well in elections. Consequently, Hitler came to power in 1933 in a constitutional manner. It was only once his rule was established that he started, step by step, to transform the republic into a dictatorship based on racial exclusion. It is uncomfortable but fair to say that Hitler, in the 1930s and even in the first phase of the Second World War, ruled in the name of the majority of the German people.

To analyze liberal democracy's variability, vulnerability and potential to transform into other, illiberal regime types, the Israeli historian Jacob Leib Talmon has coined the term “totalitarian democracy.” His famous book looks at revolutionary France, Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany, and thus at three cases which are certainly extreme, but which open our eyes to more general phenomena: First, in history democracy has appeared in different forms that range from liberal to authoritarian. Second, liberalism and democracy seem to have specific weaknesses or even built-in mechanisms that, under certain conditions, can lead to the transformation from liberal to authoritarian democracy or

even to self-destruction. Historical research, as we shall see in the following, has identified some of these mechanisms.

IV Pathologies of Democracy

Historical research has enhanced our understanding of the question of why liberal democracies – and particularly young democracies founded in revolutionary moments – are fragile and have a certain potential for self-destruction and for transformation into authoritarian regimes. The overall purpose of historical studies in this field, however, has not been to find universal patterns of historical evolution that can be applied to every empirical case and even to predict future developments. Its aim, first and foremost, has been to analyze singular and specific historical moments and to propose modes of explanation of limited range. This is actually one of the features that distinguishes historical methods from those of political science. But even though historical explanations tend to have a limited range and are context-specific, it is possible to generalize to a certain extent. Concerning our core question about the “pathologies” of liberalism and democracy, four observations drawn from a wide range of historical studies seem particularly important:

1. The Pitfalls of Revolutionary Moments

A first set of explanations lies in the very nature of revolutions. They are, as François Furet has stressed, moments of enthusiasm and illusion. Emotional and ideological agitation is necessary to bring a revolution about, and revolutionaries have often described the beginning of a revolution as a state of collective intoxication that makes sober assessments and planning very difficult. This state of mind allows for the overthrow of an old regime but is not helpful for the creation of new stability; this is one of the reasons why post-revolutionary situations are characterized by a high level of contingency. Moreover, the new political personnel that enters the stage in a revolutionary moment often lacks experience, and new revolutionary regimes cannot rely on traditions and long-established routines that enjoy the trust of the citizens. All the political and administrative routines have to be reinvented, and it is normal that, at least in the first years after a revolution, a new regime lacks competence and efficiency. These factors explain why very young democracies like France in the 1790s or Germany in the 1920s were more likely to fail than Great Britain or the United States in the 20th century, since the latter had centuries of experience and trust on their side.

What makes it even more difficult to control a revolution is the fact that it is, by definition, a moment of conflict and violence. Revolutions mobilize various groups, pitting them against their opponents: champions of the new regime versus its enemies, enthusiasts of change versus nostalgics longing for the old times, winners versus losers who are just waiting for a moment of weakness to reappear. In most revolutions, such as those of 1789, 1917/1918 and 1989, the conflict's structures are even more complex, as there are also dividing lines between different groups of revolutionaries and between different enemies of change. In revolutionary situations, which are characterized by the overthrow of executive power, these complex conflicts between groups which all claim to be in possession of the truth are prone to violence. Historians have shown how difficult it was in the revolutionary situations of 1789 and 1917/1918 to stop the cycles of violence and counter-violence.

2. The Shortcomings of Democratic Leadership

A second point that historians have stressed has to do with problem-solving competences. The broader the participation is in a political regime, the longer and more complex are the decision-making processes. Especially in times of crisis, the slow and deliberative procedures of democracies do not seem suited to responding to pressing needs and emergencies. This was certainly true for the First French Republic and for the Weimar Republic, with its plethora of rival

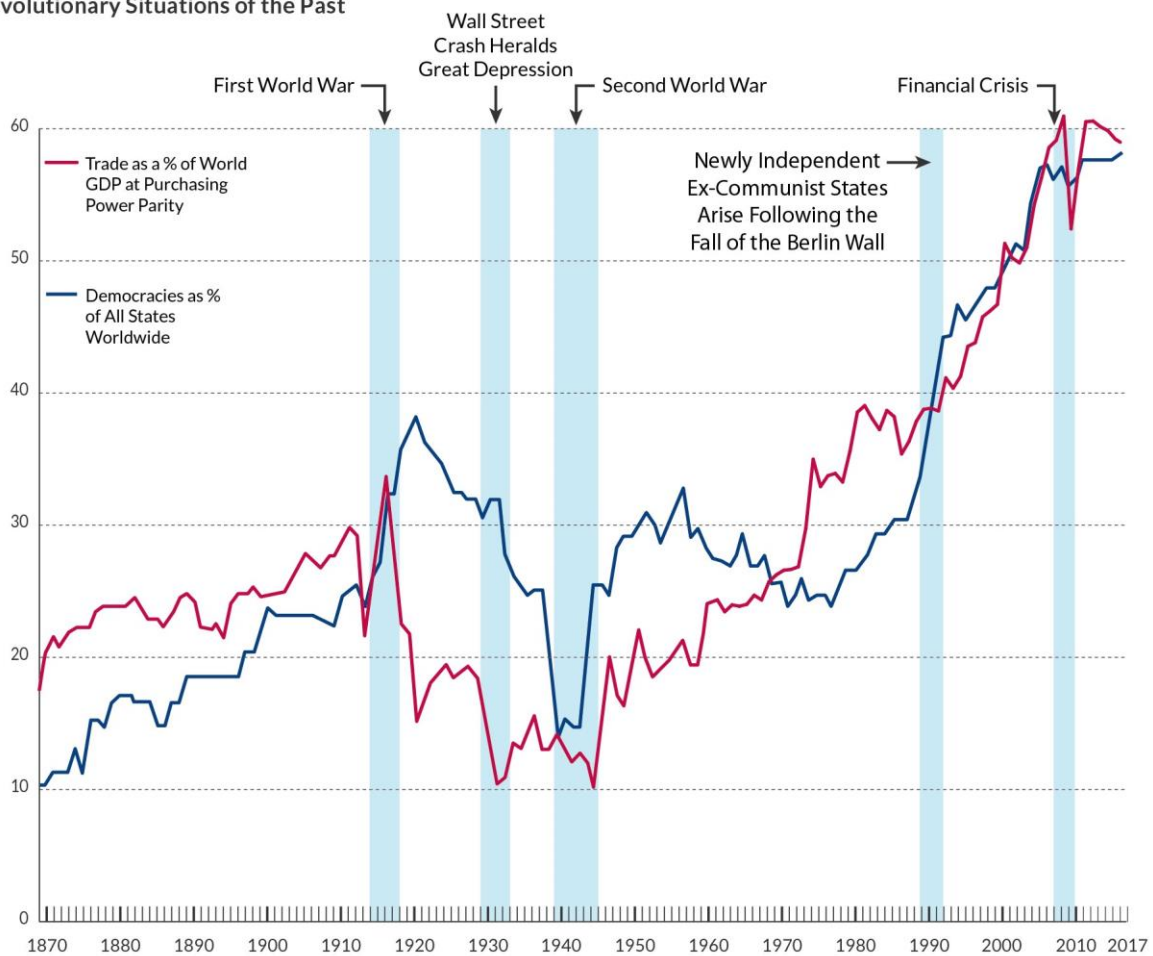
parties and its difficulties forming stable governments. To the extent that citizens feel frustrated about a political elite which does not seem to have answers to pressing problems, the likelihood increases that they will be drawn to populism and strong political figures. In revolutionary France, Robespierre and Napoleon appeared as providential figures who successfully claimed to be able to overcome the blockade of never-ending democratic debate. Hitler and Mussolini played similar roles in the 20th century. All of these leaders appeared in situations of crisis and presented themselves as almost superhuman beings capable of uniting and directing all the forces of their respective societies towards combatting the major problems of their time or an external enemy.

3. Democratic Nations and Globalization

It is worthwhile to remember that all three situations of expansion and retraction of liberalism – 1789, 1918, 1989 – happened in times of accelerated globalization. The second half of the 18th century was the high point of triangular trade between Europe, Africa and the Americas, and the inaugural phase of a global industrial revolution that brought new modes of production – such as the plantation economy – to the four corners of the world. These global economies generated income on an unprecedented scale. At the same time, however, they exposed all the actors involved – European entrepreneurs and consumers, colonial administrators, African slave traders and slaves, Caribbean planters – to new challenges and insecurities. The elevated level of economic competition led to an extension of colonial activities, added to the rivalries of European powers and led to armed confrontation, including two large-scale conflicts that have been designated history's first world wars: the Seven Years War (1756–1763) and the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792–1815). In a comparable way, the First and the Second World Wars were consequences of a phase of heightened global competition that started in the 1870s and found its clearest expression in the “scramble for Africa,” in an international arms race and in a particularly volatile world economy.

Since the 1990s, we have entered into yet another phase of globalization that, this time, was ushered in by the vanishing of the Iron Curtain (which opened vast new markets), by the economic, social and political changes often referred to as the “neoliberal revolution” and by the digital revolution which continues to fundamentally impact the functioning of economies all over the globe. It is certainly problematic to compare instances of globalization in three different centuries with their specific economic and technological features and the different extent to which they connected the four corners of the world. But today's concerns about global competition, about uncontrolled migration and terrorism and about loss of identity are not unprecedented. Even in 19th-century Europe, workers feared the concurrence of cheap labor and products from Asia and immigrants taking their jobs; even then, citizens were concerned about “anarchists” and “freedom fighters” detonating bombs in their cities. But this ambivalence towards globalization was compensated for by the fact that Europeans were convinced that they were part of a superior culture that ruled the world and that they were entitled to dominate and exploit other cultures around the globe. What is new, and particularly worrisome for the Western states and their citizens today, is the fact that they are no longer dominating and controlling the process of globalization like they did in the past. The world's nation-states simply look incompetent and unable to regulate global investment activities, to punish enterprises that escape national legislation by operating transnationally, to provide security within digital networks that do not have a national anchor or to control the waves of migration taking place on an unprecedented scale. Globalization adds to the shortcomings of democratic rule that have already been discussed and increases the attractiveness of seemingly strong leaders and nationalist, identitarian and populist parties.

Revolutionary Situations of the Past



Source: Trade: Klasing and Millionis 'Quantifying the evolution of world trade, 1870 to 1949', Penn World Tables (from 1959).
 World GDP at Purchasing (from 1960-2016): <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NE.TRD.GNFS.ZS>.
 Governance: Our World in Data Center for Systemic Peace (Polity IV Project).

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4. The Challenges of Equality

As early as the 19th century, the French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville analyzed the complex relationship between liberty and equality. Looking at the French revolutions, he claimed that for the majority of the French equality was more important than liberty. Moreover, he observed that equality has a built-in dynamic: Once the ideal of equality has entered the political realm, it is difficult to bring its momentum to a halt. As the principle of equality bears no exception, ever new groups and individuals see themselves as entitled to equal rights and opportunities. In 1789, *égalité* only meant equal rights for a narrowly defined circle of citizens. The 19th century saw the emergence of social equality – the right to work or to social protection – and Karl Marx's ideas. The Russian Revolution, at least in theory, built on these ideas, promising to put an end to social injustice and exploitation of humans by humans. Today, we are experiencing the proliferation of claims to legal, political and social rights by minorities.

In its historical evolution, democracy has been inseparable from equality. From the very start, democracy's successes and failures also depended on the degree to which it was able to fulfill the promise of equal rights and opportunities. This has created tensions ever since the revolutions of the 19th century, when those groups excluded from full citizenship (women, the poor, servants, slaves) demanded to be included. The young republics of the 1920s struggled with the contradiction that, on the one hand, they had proclaimed political and social equality, but, on the other, years of living in a war economy had accentuated the differences between those who had massively profited

from that economy and the majority of others, who were struggling for survival. The problem of Western democracy today is that in the second half of the 20th century in the West, and particularly in the European welfare states, it was possible to create a level of equality that – under the conditions of heightening global competition – seems impossible to maintain. Philipp Ther in his book *Europe since 1989* has analyzed how the rising pressure on national economies has led to a decrease in social equality in many European states. Particularly the societies of the former Eastern bloc, which had embraced democracy believing in the promises of liberty and social equilibrium, have been shocked by the experience of inequality of an unprecedented nature. Thomas Piketty makes a similar argument for the United States. Taking a different angle, Wendy Brown argues in her book on “neoliberalism’s stealth revolution” that, more than the rise of inequality, the economization of the individual and of public life has contributed to the destruction of democracy.

V Competent Democracies of the Past

Yet even if some democracies have proven to have particular weaknesses and to be vulnerable to failure and to transformation into other regime types, others have shown – even in the same historical moment – astonishing levels of resilience and have survived under extreme stress. Our historical discussion would thus not be complete if, before concluding, we did not take a look at examples of democracy’s strength. The historian Tim B. Müller, in his book on democracy after the First World War, contrasts the rise of authoritarian rule and terror in Germany, the Soviet Union and so many others states in the 1930s to three countries which took very different paths in the same period: the United States, Great Britain and Sweden. In 1929, the US was hit by one of the largest economic crises in its history. The stock exchange crashed and massive unemployment and poverty led to hunger and even starvation, destabilizing American democracy to a degree that made its failure a realistic option. The American president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, was elected into office the same year Adolf Hitler became German chancellor. From the beginning, he was aware of the scope of his challenge and was determined to prescribe “strong medicine” for the American public. His political project resembled a revolution and, in stark contrast to many European states, he reacted to crisis with more, not less democracy and with a higher level of participation and social justice. The “New Deal” was a multifold program. At its core were measures to combat unemployment. They involved a massive increase in government employment and huge investments in infrastructure and public works. New legislation allowed for state control of banks and the stock market. Child labor was banned and a minimum wage introduced. The state even intervened in production processes and began setting prices. In 1935, the Social Security Act introduced unemployment insurance and a retirement plan. The New Deal was nothing less than a reinvention of America and its capitalist economy by a president who was convinced that there is no such thing as an “invisible hand” guided by market forces. What was perhaps as important as the concrete political measures was Roosevelt’s ability to speak to the people. In Congress, in thousands of speeches all over the country and in his famous “fireside chats” on the radio, the president was able to inspire confidence in democracy and in the future of the country.

On the other side of the Atlantic, Great Britain was facing economic and political crisis. The economy had been weak ever since the 1920s, the fascist movement was on the rise and intellectuals like the writer Leonard Woolf even predicted the downfall of the country’s democracy. Several factors helped to stabilize democracy. On the one hand, the creation of a government of “national unity,” i.e. a broad coalition of democratic parties, functioned as a bulwark against the extreme right. On the other hand, until his death in 1936 the king, George V, served as an anchor providing stability. As in the US, the government strengthened support for victims of the crisis, the poor and the unemployed. By devaluing the British pound, exports were stimulated and British

industry strengthened. These measures were accompanied by protectionist policies that were meant to stimulate trade within the British Empire and to shield it from foreign competition. Thus, finding compromises that combined a market and a planned economy, Britain responded to the political and economic challenges of the interwar years by vigorously following “The Middle Way,” as Harold Macmillan, the Conservative politician who later become prime minister, called it.

These examples, to which smaller countries such as Sweden could be added, show that it was possible to deal with the crisis of the 1920s and 1930s in different ways. Whereas some countries resorted to radical and aggressive forms of nationalism and racism, others decided to address the problems of their times with an extension of democratic rule and equality. Interestingly, the economic policies that went along with these initiatives were often not so different from those adopted by countries which took the path towards authoritarianism.

VI Conclusions

The fragility of liberal democracy today and the tendency towards authoritarian and illiberal rule seem to be part of a recurrent historical pattern that has characterized revolutionary moments ever since the birth of modern democracy in the 18th century. In 1789, 1918 and 1989, fundamental political, social and economic change created the conditions for the proliferation of democracy *and* for its decline into illiberal regimes. This essay allows for a number of general conclusions:

- Democracy, as we understand it today, is not only a rather recent phenomenon, but also one that, at any given moment in history, has only been found in a limited number of countries.
- Throughout history, democracy has existed in many different forms. Even in the 20th century, which finally saw the appearance of mass democracy and rule of law, the ideal type defined by political scientists has been rare, while – on both the left and right sides of the political spectrum – derivative forms exist that have traits or are full-blown expressions of “authoritarian” or “totalitarian” democracies.
- It is undeniable that the different types of democracies are intrinsically related, that they have fluid, genealogical relations to each other and that one form can merge into another.
- This makes it necessary to think about the links between democracy and illiberal forms of government and about the mechanisms that make liberal democracy vulnerable. This paper has explored four of these mechanisms: the specific kinds of illusions and delusions inherent in revolutionary moments, the shortcomings of democratic leadership, the deficits of nation-states in reacting to globalization, and the challenges of equality.
- The examples of the New Deal and Middle Way have shown that democracy is not doomed to fail in crisis, but can react effectively and even be fortified, if it manages to find the right answers to the challenges of its time.

VII Policy Recommendations (Some of Them with Respect to the EU)

It is the purpose of historical research – as has been stressed – to explain specific situations of the past, not to find universal principles or predict the future. But even if history does not repeat itself, that does not mean the past cannot inspire decision makers in the present in dealing with the challenges of our time. Not being an expert on policy-making, I will try to formulate recommendations on a more general and reflective level, taking the pathologies of democracy into consideration.

- It is very important for Western elites to rethink the moment of 1989. With the fall of communism, liberalism was not freed from all its obstacles and democracy did not become a regime-type without alternatives. This is due to the fact that some of democracy's main problems lie *within, not outside* of it. Democracy cannot triumph forever; there is no such thing as an "end of history." It can only survive if it remains – to use Ernest Renan's famous expression – "a daily plebiscite." This also applies to the EU, for which the fall of the Iron Curtain was a moment of hope that led to the inclusion of Eastern Europe.
- Looking back at situations of the past that are comparable to our present also helps us understand that the stakes are very high. The revolutionary age of the 18th and 19th centuries saw two world wars, which brought about the rise of a new global power: Great Britain. The most dynamic phase of the 20th century brought about two world wars on an even bigger scale, which redefined the globe and established the United States as a global hegemon. Given the similarities of the three revolutionary situations in world history addressed in this essay, there is also a high risk of new world wars taking place in the ongoing aftermath of 1989. Without any doubt, this would accelerate the ascension of yet another world power: China.
- Those who make foreign policy should be more careful about welcoming, fostering or sustaining revolutions and radical ruptures around the world. The recent developments in the Mediterranean are a good example of the risks of bringing liberal democracy to the world. Neither the military interventions and imposed regime changes in the region, nor the much-welcomed Arab Spring have brought the Mediterranean closer to liberalism, democracy and peace. Quite the contrary, in the Arab World we have witnessed yet another cycle of liberal revolutions that have turned into their opposite.
- Friends of democracy should be aware of the variability of that particular regime type and of the danger of the ineffectiveness of democratic procedures. By fearfully clinging to routines and established processes, a democracy might lack exactly those competences for problem-solving and crisis management that could secure its survival. Successful democracies of the past suggest that in hard times democracies can and must go into a more operative mode – with stronger leaders, more centralization and exceptional measures, but also with a higher level of citizen involvement – in order to avoid devolving into an illiberal regime. Striking a balance is hard: strengthening authority without becoming authoritarian, strengthening participation without becoming ineffective. It will be very interesting to see how Emmanuel Macron masters this kind of experiment in France.
- If we compare the crisis in the years after 1918 to those of today, one of the most striking differences is the absence of deeper economic dislocations. To a degree, we are seeing similar political developments, but they are not driven by crashes, bankruptcies,

unemployment and hunger. In a way that has not been entirely understood to date, the new economic situation created by globalization and digitalization seems to trigger political change. Nation-states have difficulty formulating answers that calm the fears of their citizens and prevent them from turning to those who offer easy solutions. That is why the stakes for a supranational institution like the European Union are particularly high. It is on this level that the threat of high-risk banking and over-speculation could be addressed, that the concerns about rapid changes in the world of labor have to be taken seriously, that a shield against international terrorism could be erected, that data security and privacy protection could be enhanced, that environmental questions could be solved. Only the EU is able to find solutions for the biggest challenge of our time: mass migration, which, if one can judge by the demographic prognosis for Africa, will only increase.

- In many countries of the world, there is a tendency to forget the fundamental bond between democracy and equality. This applies to Europe, but even more so on a global scale. The liberal democratic model of sharing power and decision-making processes cannot function under conditions of social polarization and a very unequal distribution of wealth. The role of the European Union in this respect has been an ambivalent one in the past. On the one hand, the EU only allows for limited democratic participation; Catherine Colliot-Thélène has rightly characterized it as a “democracy without demos.” On the other, it has been too strongly oriented towards growth and economic dynamism, too little towards social protection and social justice.
- History also teaches us that we have to be patient with young democracies. It took almost 100 years to progress from the French Revolution to the first stable democratic republic on French soil. We cannot expect that the same process will happen rapidly and smoothly in the young democracies of Eastern Europe, Asia or Africa.

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