

Policy Brief

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THE FREEDOM OR AUTOCRACY DILEMMA

By Alfredo G.A. Valladão

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Despite the United States' disastrous record in both Iraq and Afghanistan, President Joe Biden is right in asserting that the world faces a confrontation between autocracy and freedom. And that a choice will ultimately have to be made. This makes people cringe, particularly in Europe, which remains polarized on the subject.



THINK • STIMULATE • BRIDGE

THE US-EUROPE CONTROVERSY

Despite the pressing demands of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelinsky, many countries, including France, are, like it or not, paralyzed by a long-standing pro-Russian sentiment and accordingly act with ambiguity. Other countries, such as Germany, dwell on their present pacifism, guilty conscience and energy interest to help Ukraine...as little as possible. As does Italy and the very pro-Russian Hungary. Europe's wealthy countries want an immediate cease-fire, provided business resumes and food and energy shortages do not cause social unrest at home. This obviously calls for urgent negotiations with Vladimir Putin.

Other countries, to the East, having experienced Russian totalitarianism up close, hope the United States can rescue them from the new Russian Empire's growing appetite: these include former Warsaw Pact members, as well as two Nordic countries that had been neutral to date. Sweden and Finland thus joined the Atlantic Alliance in a hurry in a bid to secure military protection. The press hastily, yet perhaps accurately, labelled one side as that of Chamberlain's Munich and the other as that of the war-mongers.

The truth is that the argument in Europe misses a crucial element. Political pundits - whose job it is to comment- and politicians have already advanced every possible argument, whether relevant or not, attempting to justify their positions: unequal military power between the belligerents, nuclear menace, world famine, energy dependence and the geographical fact that "we still have to live with Russia in the future". All this, of course, despite "the will and heroism of the Ukrainian people"...

THE DISINTEGRATION OF NATIONS

One argument though remains absent from the controversy: that of the slow disintegration of nations. This may seem ironic at a time when sovereignty of all sorts is in fashion, where "deglobalization" is touted and democratic states are increasingly ungovernable, under the threat of nationalist parties, both right and left.

One should not forget that most nations are barely one hundred years old. A chaff in the eyes of history. Seminal works by Anglo-Saxon historians Ernest Gellner (1983) and Benedict Andersen (1983, 1991)¹ remind us that nations are not "natural" but "imagined" or "constructed" entities, particularly since the US and French revolutions, and Latin American independence. Like all human constructions, nations are subject to expiration. As Lenin, who knew plenty of political coups d'état, already noted in his celebrated *What to Do* (1902)² : in grouping large numbers of workers in a few locations - along with the foundation of unions and struggle for collective and sectoral demands - industrial society (today equated with capitalism) laid the groundwork for mass revolt. A revolt on which a hierarchical political organization, capable of capturing power within specific nations, could be construed. In other words, for almost two centuries, representative democracy was associated with "national" industrial society. Bolshevism, as well as the "bourgeois" parties, therefore relied on these societies organized in "nations". But what of nations, the state, institutions, parties, unions and even voters in a post-industrial "globalized" society?

1. 1983,1991 : Andersen B. – *Imagined Communities* – Verso -London, New York
1983 : Gellner E. – *Nations and Nationalism* – Basil Blackwell - Oxford

2. 1902 : (ru) Lénine – *Que Faire ?* – Verlag von J.H.W. Dietz Nachf. - Stuttgart

NOSTALGIA FOR THE "PAST"

Our world today is that of radical change. All strategic challenges faced by our societies are "global": global warming, pandemics, local wars, famines, inflation, self-sufficiency through repatriated production, purchasing power, and accelerated technological innovation These issues can therefore not be resolved at national level. Hence the growing indifference of voters towards "national" politics. Much to the dismay of all those, both left and right, who wish to "save democracy" at all costs, as the only system capable of safeguarding individual freedoms. As early as 1946³, the great German philosopher, Ernest Cassirer, wrote of this yearning for a harsh yet mythologized past, at the time of major historical mutation. A refuge from the "unknown" for people disoriented by a world that is moving too fast. And it drives populations to raging nationalism, exacerbated xenophobia and into the arms of short-sighted authoritarian regimes.

ENDLESS GROWTH

Industrial societies, as they developed in England and the rest of the Western world in the early 19th century, took on specific characteristics in each country. One thing, however, distinguished these forms from the past: that is the accumulation of capital. Based on indefinite capital growth (so-called "progress"), these relied on at least four essential elements: unlimited access to cheap raw materials, growing numbers of consumers, steadily increasing productivity and continuous innovation. This "model" was to grow indefinitely, until it globalized production and incorporated ever larger masses of consumer/producers (China, India and the developing world). But eventually collided with its own constraints: the world's resources are not inexhaustible, nor are its consumer pools (for political, technical, cultural and other reasons...).

PRODUCTIVITY AND INNOVATION

To salvage growth, as well as the entire system, there is only productivity. And innovation. But this requires a shift in logic. This is precisely behind the current upheaval underway in Europe, with the nostalgia for a return to mass production, unbridled consumption of the national oikos, "infernal work-rates" and hardline trade unionism of the post-World War II years. Material production has now given way to services (or to integrating large degrees of services into production). Mass consumption is now "personalized and individualized consumption". Trade unions are in decline and the traditional parties associated with them have lost luster and influence. Societies are increasingly fragmented and individualized.

FROM REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY TO SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

Representative" democracy provided the best national political solution during the industrial revolution for ensuring internal order, primarily since it was capable, thanks to Franklin Roosevelt and J. M. Keynes, of evolving into "social" democracies. Political authority was thus partly shielded from extreme solutions through a broader distribution of the "fruits of

3. 1946 : Cassirer E. – The myth of the State– Yale University Press – New Heaven

growth" at national levels (see Guy Hermet - 2007).⁴ The deadlocks of decolonization, as well as the fall of the Soviet Union and of its totalitarian system, also lent a hand.

Nevertheless, social democracy is itself under attack from all sides for its inefficiency in addressing people's daily realities. It is equally true that most problems can no longer be solved at national levels (global warming, inflation and purchasing power, energy, wars of conquest, pandemics). The "national" is squeezed between issues that can be solved "locally" and those where genuine "international" cooperation and integration are needed. Yet, can democracy, in whatever form, survive outside the "nation"? Will it not fall prey to new empires and succumb to totalitarian and authoritarian regimes that promise greater "efficiency"?

NATIONLESS DEMOCRACY

Constitutions for the post-industrial era must therefore be drafted. At first glance, only three possibilities exist: an isolated and totalitarian national government (on the lines of North Korea), imposing what it deems right on a terribly impoverished population. Or an autocratic nationalism that resorts to repression to force its population to accept reforms it considers necessary, putting forward considerations tainted in nationalist and often expansionist ideology within neo-empires. Alternatively, a power that works for profound changes- including to the law - while protecting individual liberties. All of this in the knowledge that North Korea, like Cuba or Venezuela, albeit in different ways, are only popular with very limited minorities. Similarly autocratic Empires, unable to produce their claimed "efficiency", subject populations to their yoke by means of rigged elections. Decisions in so-called "democratic" systems are too slow and lack of immediate "efficiency". There is therefore considerable pressure from those who seek a return to the "good old days" of the harsh industrial society, even if this entails giving up a few freedoms and ... provided the nanny state and "social democracy" protect them. All this is quite difficult to reconcile. So, it appears we are doomed to accept strong governments. A choice will have to be made if we are to escape imperial logic and retain a maximum of individual liberties. Nothing is given in advance. Transcending sovereign and democratic nations is clearly not a stroll in the park.

The two first options are not inherently flawed and may, unfortunately, appeal to many. A nation that simply exports raw materials is naturally attracted to strong national power that guarantees internal order for (mostly foreign) investors and can defend the country against change. A totalitarian regime therefore looks like the solution. A developing country seeking to attain industrial status may also look favorably on an autocratic regime that can find shortcuts without restricting innovation and new organizations too much. For the power of a strong man and weak political parties, controlled or not by the armed forces, may seem the best option to ensure both order and a minimum degree of competition necessary for a successful "development" process.

That leaves the Western "social democracies", committed to the rule of law, equality and individual rights. The marching order for them is to "adapt", except for those seeking a return to the old industrial society and willing to tolerate a bit of authoritarianism. For a strong, "vertical" government is needed to impose necessary change on a reluctant and increasingly fragmented population devoid of national space. Concurrently, a highly

4. 2007 : Hermet G. – L'hiver de la démocratie - - Armand Colin - Paris

flexible, "horizontal" government is needed to resolve (or control) the local problems created by such change, on a case-by-case basis.

STRONG GOVERNMENT

It is now apparent: Our world is crashing against the walls of ecology and mass consumption. We will therefore need to accept a degree of poverty that is inherent to epochal mutations. Solutions, in fact, will require at the very least sacrifices in standards of living (including, and this is an irritating subject, in public services), "personalized" consumption with a far greater share of services and constant innovation, without which nothing will be possible. In other words, globalization is not over, it is just getting started. Material production itself will derive its value primarily from those services that are "embedded" into products.

UKRAINE: FREEDOM X AUTOCRACIES

A new global race for profits is underway. And it will require adjustment, including at institutional level: the "representative democracy", political parties, national rights we inherited will no longer be sustainable, nor will we have the money for "social democracy", another irritating subject. New times call for new systems of organization. Are we therefore doomed to lose our individual liberties? Confronted with the invasion of Ukraine, US President Joe Biden recalled that it is a question of choice: Those who seek to safeguard individual freedoms will do everything to defend them, while others - and they are many - will settle for their respective dictatorships.

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The Policy Center for the New South (PCNS) is a Moroccan think tank aiming to contribute to the improvement of economic and social public policies that challenge Morocco and the rest of Africa as integral parts of the global South.

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The views expressed in this publication are those of the author.

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