

The March Towards Post-Democracy, Ten Years On

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Abstract

Events since I published my book *Post-democracy* in 2004 suggest that democracy continues to decline in effectiveness in those parts of the world where it has been most strongly established. The global financial crisis, the consequent euro crisis, the likely shape of a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and growing evidence of the political power of giant mass media corporations all suggest that the dominant forces in today's politics are not those of democratic will. Movements like Syriza in Greece possibly suggest a democratic reawakening, but that is too early to determine. Meanwhile, it is important also to be aware of democracy's limits, and to try to resolve the problem of post-democracy by extending its reach beyond its competence.

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NO ONE can say that contemporary western societies are anti-democratic, like the world's many dictatorships. Elections, free debate, the rule of law all function; but somehow the dynamism of the political system is moving elsewhere—just as industry still exists in a post-industrial society, but most of the dynamism has gone to the services sectors. Hence, we are marching on the road towards post-democracy. That was the central theme of my book *Post-democracy*.¹ The 'elsewhere' to which I saw our politics moving were the small circles of overlapping business lobbyists and a politico-economic elite. No conspiracy theory explained the process; its causes were beyond easy human control.

First, the political parties of western democracies were based on the religious and class antagonisms of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century societies, when different groups had acquired a sense of political identity in struggles over the exclusion and inclusion of their religion or their class. Since the days of universal citizenship, new classes developing in post-industrial society did not have to struggle for inclusion. As a paradoxical result, they did not (need to) develop a distinctive political awareness of who they were. (Note: this is not the same

as arguing that there are no classes; only that they do not develop political identities.) The big exception to this was the global class of major shareholders and business executives, who knew exactly who they were, had a hegemonic ideology (neoliberalism) to express them, and had the power to exercise major political influence.

The second process was economic globalisation, which meant that power was increasingly being exercised by international business interests ranging at will over transnational territories beyond the reach of nation-states—the level at which democracy remained largely trapped. These interests were more or less coterminous with the global class of shareholders, who were the only class to have a clear consciousness of their political identity in contemporary society.

Third, as a result of these two processes, the political class was finding itself increasingly unable to relate to voters through parties, which seemed to belong to the quarrels of the past, while business elites and lobbyists were providing either increasingly congenial company or providing a combination of offers and threats, as well as a market ideology that gave them clear guidance as to what they should do across a wide range of

policy areas. Elections, while still crucial for protecting citizens' rights, were becoming an increasingly empty shell when it came to expressing serious conflicts of interest.

We had not yet arrived at an endpoint of this slide towards post-democratic politics, I argued, otherwise the environmentalist and feminist movements, or indeed the new xenophobic populism, would not have been able to have their impact; but we were on the road towards it.

The march continues

All that was written before the financial crash of 2007–8. The international response to the crisis has been managed completely in line with my expectations of how post-democratic regimes would respond, showing that we have marched a good way further down that road. The banks, having been deemed 'too big to fail', were given privileged treatment in setting the terms for rescue from the disaster to which their negligent behaviour had brought us all. Rescue packages placed the burden on the rest of the population through cuts in public spending, especially therefore on those most dependent on help from the welfare state, people far poorer than the bankers whose incomes and institutions they were now helping to stabilise. In the process, the crisis was redefined by political and corporate leaders as having been 'caused' by excessive levels of public spending. The crisis has therefore now been used to achieve permanent reductions in the size and scope of the welfare state in many countries. The argument about public spending is valid in a roundabout way, in that governments who sought political advantage by not increasing taxation to pay for expanding social policy had been able to finance their sleight of hand by borrowing from the banks. But the banks had been willing to make such loans, which clearly had little chance of being repaid. Normally an irresponsible creditor shares the burden of a bad loan with the irresponsible debtor; but not when the creditor has the political clout of the great banks in the wake of the crisis. Our dependence on these institutions, and a few giant firms in a number of other economic sectors, has become so great that they are subject to the rules of

neither the market economy nor the democratic polity.

This post-democratic aspect of the crisis was seen at its most extreme in the euro zone, where an ad hoc group constituted by the European Commission, the European Central Bank, the International Monetary Fund and a committee of the banks involved imposed terms on the debtor states of south-west Europe and Ireland. True to post-democracy, the deals were democratically 'ratified' by national parliaments, which also legitimated the temporary appointment of extra-parliamentary heads of government. Meanwhile, the European Parliament had no voice at all.

While some observers on the left had seen the crash as being one for deregulated neoliberal capitalism and therefore likely to challenge its survival, in the event it served only to demonstrate the power that financial institutions held over (post-) democracy. Several observers have now demonstrated how this occurred and how what seemed like neoliberal hubris became its intensified triumph.² In my own contribution to this debate,³ I argued that particularly important was the way in which some governments had become dependent not just on their own chronic debt, but on their citizens taking on high personal debts in order to sustain their living standards at a time of stagnant real incomes. I called this process 'privatised Keynesianism'.

There has been further evidence that the march to post-democracy is proceeding. A readily visible, if perhaps trivial, example was the artificial, stage-managed British general election campaign of 2015. Party leaders pretended to enter cities where they would address large public crowds; in fact they huddled in an antiseptic, controlled space on the outskirts with a small selected group of supporters who tried to give the impression they were waving spontaneously generated placards that were in fact obviously manufactured by the party organisation. All three main parties followed an identical strategy. More significant aspects to which I had not given enough attention are analysed in contributions to this special feature section of *The Political Quarterly*. I had talked about globalisation in the abstract, but Claire Palmer documents in detail what this means

for the political power of transnational corporations. They are able not only to dominate governments but virtually to become governing powers across the world over major issues. All this is before the possible advent of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). This proposed deal between the European Union and the USA would remove many if not most of the institutions put in place by either European countries or the USA to regulate capitalism. Worse, it would erect the institution of Investor-State Dispute Settlement, whereby disputes between governments and corporations are resolved not in formal public law courts, but by panels of corporate lawyers.

Although I discussed the distortion of political communication as an aspect of post-democracy, I did not give enough attention to the power of media corporations. Natalie Fenton remedies this in her article, which draws richly on what we learned about it during the Leveson Inquiry into the News International phone-hacking scandal. One might add to her account that the subsequent history of what became of Leveson provides further evidence of the weakness of democracy. There was all that public anger; an enormous official inquiry that attracted mass attention and produced a trenchant and disturbing report; apparent acceptance by politicians of all parties that the power of media corporations had become excessive. What was the outcome? Nothing; a few individual journalists, scapegoats, have gone to prison, but the corporate leaders are unscathed and proposals to implement Leveson have been completely forgotten.

When, in *Post-democracy*, I pointed to the way in which social movements still possessed some power to shock the system, I was writing before the emergence of Syriza, Podemos and similar movements, and in the early stages of the growth of the right-wing populism that has now affected virtually every country in Europe. Are these evidence of a transcendence of post-democracy? Katharine Dommett asks this question. She shows that these groups have shown considerable capacity to innovate and challenge, but also how they gradually become sucked into the vortex of post-democratic politics. One issue raised by this concerns the distinction between parties that compete for

election to government, and campaigning groups that try to concentrate attention on issues and to mobilise power outside the parliamentary arena. The former sacrifice sharpness of focus and campaigning zeal for the bland middle-ground strategies of post-democratic politics in order to gain public office. The latter sacrifice the chance of wielding governmental power in order to maintain their uncompromising vision. Movements of the Syriza type are seeking to combine the two in order to combat the march towards post-democracy. Are they wise? Will movement-based parties be the saviours of democracy, or will they simply lead campaigns into the post-democratic trap? So far we do not know, but Dommett's article throws considerable light on the problems involved.

The appropriate limits to democracy

If I can claim considerable support for my thesis in subsequent developments, I have also learned from various critics that it needs to be refined. For example, I missed the extent to which the leading neoliberal thinkers had, in their serious if not their popular writings, demonstrated considerable discomfort with the idea of democracy itself—something that Wolfgang Streeck and Philip Mirowski⁴ have recently demonstrated in their separate, excellent analyses. I also overlooked the potential of a feminisation of democracy—something I have tried to remedy in an earlier issue of *PQ*.⁵ Here I want to concentrate on a different problem: that of the appropriate limits to democracy.

This criticism was first expressed by Stephen Welch in *Hyperdemocracy*,⁶ where he argues that rather than a decline of democracy, we are today trying to have too much of it, politicising issues that are inappropriate for such treatment. But he and I are talking about two sides of the same coin. I would reconcile our positions by pointing out that when political debate is about nothing, it tries to be about everything. When there is very little real debate over major policy directions (a fundamental characteristic of post-democracy), politicians start exploring every little avenue they can in order to claim that they have found a difference from their

opponents—anything from each other’s personal morality to the desirability of particular medical treatments or ways of teaching children to read. This leads to an intrusion of politics—whether democratic or not—into areas with which it is not well equipped to deal.

Adrian Pabst’s contribution to this special feature is very apposite here. As his discussion shows, democracy, like all institutions of governance, needs a framework set by an authority outside itself if it is not to undermine itself by using its own powers to change the rules that are supposed to govern it. This is a major reason why the great majority of democratic states (apart from the United Kingdom) have constitutions that can be amended only through very special and difficult procedures rather than simple parliamentary majorities. Democracy needs not only such formal rules but also the informal values that are Pabst’s main concern, mechanisms that are themselves not themselves subject to democratic control, exactly as the market needs external regulation of its parameters as well as what Adam Smith called moral sentiments.

In particular, external constraints are needed to restrain powerful interests that have risen within the system and which then use it to make it serve their own interests (powerful political groups in the case of democracy, monopolistic firms in the case of the market). Having achieved control, these groups use the rhetoric of the system’s legitimacy to undermine external frames and civil society so that they can use the system to extend their own powers further. The emergence of such powerful interests in the polity is part of what I call post-democracy, but the consequence of what they do can paradoxically be hyper-democracy. When democracy becomes weak, there is a risk that voters will become detached from it. While this leaves the field even more vulnerable to manipulation by powerful interests, these may also become uncomfortable that they lack legitimacy. They need people to vote and to be engaged by voting according to a mass of minor questions that avoid raising major questions over who is really gaining from the way the system is operating. Politicisation of a mass of little, often technical, issues then becomes very useful.

It is therefore necessary to achieve some kind of understanding over which kinds of issues are very properly at the heart of passionate political debate, and which are primarily technical questions that should be the domain of professionals.⁷ There are no *a priori* means of making such a distinction, and indeed making it is itself the kind of major decision that is fit meat for democratic controversy. Academic analysis can point to the need for such a debate, to suggest how the lines might be drawn, and to indicate the kinds of structures that might best defend the necessary boundaries between democracy and professionalism in the interests of both.

In mentioning values alongside structures as safeguards of both democracy and the market economy I am acknowledging the force of Adrian Pabst’s criticism. He is right to direct attention also to the ‘non-formalisable, non-legal judgements, shared mores and a sense of “common decency”’ on which in the last instance formal institutions depend for their social support. He also rightly draws attention to the importance of the informal and voluntary associations of civil society that are the lifeblood of democracy, but which are threatened by claims for the sole democratic legitimacy of formal political institutions (and the market). As we have learned from continuing scandals of corrupt behaviour among the world’s leading banks, regulation cannot be an adequate substitute for trustworthiness. The problem with trust is that it takes many years to generate but can be broken very rapidly. Now that it has been completely betrayed in so many parts of the financial sector, and the rewards for dishonesty have been shown to be so great, we shall have to depend on regulation, for all its limitations, for many years to come. Democratic politics has not suffered quite as bad a crisis, but it has moved in that direction, and a similar recourse to formal rules has had to be taken. These rules, for transparency, judicial review, freedom of information and so forth, provide an important counter-trend to post-democracy. There is however also a danger that they reinforce the self-congratulatory complacency about the state of democracy that is the official stance of the early twenty-first-century political class.

Notes

- 1 C. Crouch, *Post-democracy*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2004.
- 2 See in particular M. Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste*, London, Verso, 2013.
- 3 C. Crouch, 2009. 'Privatised Keynesianism: an unacknowledged policy regime', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 11, 2009, pp. 382–99; *The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2011; *Making Capitalism Fit for Society*. Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013.
- 4 W. Streeck, *Gekaufte Zeit*, Berlin, Suhrkamp, 2013; Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste*.
- 5 C. Crouch, 'Putting neoliberalism in its place', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 85, no. 2, 2015, pp. 114–21.
- 6 S. Welch, *Hyperdemocracy*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- 7 I have tried to develop this theme further in *The Knowledge Corrupters: Hidden Consequences of the Financial Takeover of Public Life*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2015.