A Good Democracy Is Hard to Find

Why Progress Takes So Long and Falls Apart So Easily

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Democracy and Dictatorship in Europe: From the Ancien Régime to the Present Day
BY SHERI BERMAN. Oxford University Press, 2019, 544 pp.

Democracy's global travails continue to mount. What looked as recently as a decade ago to be real democratic progress in countries as diverse as Brazil, Hungary, South Africa, and Turkey has been either reversed by illiberal strongmen or unsettled by revelations of systemic corruption. Some of the most stirring recent political openings, such as those in Egypt and Myanmar, have slammed shut. The United States and several long-standing democracies in western Europe are struggling with serious democratic challenges, especially the rise of illiberal populist forces. And the two most significant nondemocratic powers, China and Russia, are strutting on the global stage.

Faced with this dispiriting state of affairs, worried observers fret over three basic questions: Why is this democratic recession happening? How bad is it? And where is it heading?

This is the backdrop for the political scientist Sheri Berman's substantial new history of democracy in Europe. Synthesizing several decades of scholarship, Berman throws long and deep, aiming both to illuminate the causes and significance of Europe's current democratic woes and to set realistic expectations about democracy's chances in the many countries that have tried in recent decades to slip authoritarianism's grip. Readers will come away from Berman's account with useful insights on the vital question of why democracy sometimes succeeds but often does not. But it does not explicitly grapple with a further crucial question: As events push Western democracy into uncharted waters, how much can democracy's past reveal about its future?

THE LONG ROAD TO DEMOCRACY

Berman starts her story in the seventeenth century and follows it through the defining events of modern European political history. She focuses on the large western European democracies—France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom—with two chapters on eastern Europe to round out the account. (The smaller countries of western Europe and those of northern Europe are largely absent.) The longitudinal sweep of her narrative is daunting. She tours the French Revolution, the revolutions of 1848, the battle over the Corn Laws, German and Italian unification, the rise and fall of fascism, the Spanish Civil War, the Marshall Plan, the postwar successes of western Europe, and the failures of communism. In doing so, she manages to convey the essential

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elements without getting lost in the details, analyzing political actors and their doings while keeping a constant eye on underlying economic and societal trends. Her analysis mostly persuades, although it rarely surprises, conforming as it does to conventional accounts.

Berman's central argument is that countries usually achieve liberal democracy only after a long series of setbacks, conflicts, and failures. France offers a case in point. After the early glory of the French Revolution, the country followed an exceptionally bumpy path. A long slog of successive troubled republics consolidated into liberal democracy only after World War II. Germany had to endure its own punishing odyssey before solidifying as a remarkably stable and productive democracy. Berman accounts for the United Kingdom's exceptionally smooth transition from aristocracy to democracy by pointing to the willingness of the country's landowning elites to cede power peacefully, albeit slowly and grudgingly.

As Berman makes clear, the combination of free and fair elections, the rule of law, and widespread respect for democratic institutions that is today termed "liberal democracy" is a recent and rare achievement. From the late eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, European democratic strivings usually produced illiberal or electoral democracies, such as the short-lived Second French Republic (which lasted from 1848 to 1852), in which large numbers of citizens were disenfranchised or governments offered only weak protections for political and civil liberties. It was only in the second half of the twentieth century that liberal democracy became common. Berman pushes hard on this point and insists on the careful use of the term "liberal democracy," emphasizing that it does not apply to the earlier phases of European democratic life. American analysts would do well to adopt this conceptual rigor, given their habit of blithely applying the same term, "democracy," to the system of governance maintained by the United States today and to the one that the country maintained in the nineteenth century, which excluded women, African Americans, and other groups from full citizenship.

If liberal democracy is recent and exceptional, what makes it possible? Despite popular fascination with political leaders, the process that produces liberal democracy is not, in Berman's view, principally the work of great men and women. It is more fundamentally the result of deep economic and societal transformations. In order for liberal democracy to emerge, countries have had to forge national unity and break up—or grow out of—strong concentrations of economic power. War often served as the handmaiden of national unity in Europe. Many of the necessary economic transformations were also violent, given the reluctance of landed elites to relinquish power.

Liberal democratic regimes, Berman concludes, are most likely to succeed when they are built on national unity and a strong state. She points to Italy to illustrate how difficult it is to make liberal democracy work in the absence of these conditions. This analysis would seem to support a "development first, democracy later" prescription, urging democratic activists to hold off until others have built a capable state and bridged communal divides. Yet Berman adds nuance to that simplistic story by noting that coercive state building by

dictators often goes only so far and that "some of the most striking advances in state- and nation-building in European history occurred only *after* dictatorships were overthrown."

WHERE IT ALL WENT WRONG

Berman's history covers an enormous amount of ground. Yet although the book is billed as an account running up "to the present day," it barely touches on events after the early 1990s. Berman's detailed exploration of western Europe runs out of steam in the 1980s. Her analysis of eastern Europe gets to 1989 and its immediate aftermath, but hardly any further. In the concluding chapter, she mentions some recent events, but only sketchily, devoting little more than a few paragraphs to all that has happened since the early 1990s. It would have been useful to bring the narrative up to date with a thorough analysis of crucial developments such as the enlargement of the European Union, the 2008 financial crisis, the eurozone debt crisis, the rise of populism, the migration crisis, and Brexit.

By giving short shrift to those subjects, Berman isn't able to persuasively answer the question of why European liberal democracy has fallen on hard times. Liberal democracy's success in western Europe, she argues, rested on three factors: the role of the United States in constructing an economic and military order that promoted peace and prosperity in Europe; the successful advance of European integration; and the construction of social democratic systems that avoided economic crises, kept inequality low, and narrowed social divisions.

The trouble began in the 1970s, she contends, when all three pillars of this foundation started to crumble. First came U.S. President Richard Nixon's decision to leave the gold standard, a move that brought "an end to the postwar–Bretton Woods monetary system" and "reflected a decline in the United States' willingness or ability to shoulder the burdens of hegemonic leadership." That decline, Berman argues, accelerated in the past two years, as U.S. President Donald Trump has undermined the United States' basic commitment to the postwar order. European integration, meanwhile, went off track in the 1970s with the decision by European leaders "to move forward with monetary cooperation and eventually integration" while neglecting to develop regional political institutions. And Europe's economic difficulties during that decade opened the door to neoliberalism, which over the next several decades generated "slow and inequitable growth" and eventually contributed to the financial crisis of 2008, fueling right-wing populism.

After Berman's careful analysis of the previous several hundred years, this rather hasty explanation of Europe's current democratic woes feels inadequate. Nixon's unilateral abandonment of the Bretton Woods system certainly shocked many allies in Europe. But Berman neglects to mention that Nixon's administration also pioneered new kinds of multilateral engagement, starting with what would become the G-7, a forum dedicated to coordinating economic policy among the world's major industrialized democracies. Certainly, Trump's skepticism of the United States' international security commitments has contributed to a hostile environment for European democracy. But none of the seven U.S.

presidents between Nixon and Trump backed away from the basic postwar economic and military commitments that undergirded democratic consolidation in Europe. Indeed, their steady adherence to those obligations is precisely what has made Trump's approach so jarring.

And although Berman is correct to observe that the EU's move toward technocracy has fueled a backlash against Brussels, this problem has tarnished the legitimacy of the EU more than it has that of liberal democracy. Berman suggests that the EU's growing unpopularity over the past decade has fueled "the nationalism and populism that threaten liberal democracy in Europe today." Yet in many troubled European democracies, the EU is more a convenient punching bag than a driver of populism itself.

Berman's sweeping claim that the turn to neoliberalism in the 1970s is to blame for Europe's slow growth, economic dislocations, and rising inequality is equally unpersuasive. As Berman acknowledges, growth was already slowing in the 1970s. In the United Kingdom, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's economic medicine in the 1980s was unquestionably a harsh tonic, but it did counter the slow growth that social democracy had ended up delivering the decade before. It would also be difficult to blame neoliberalism for the economic travails France has faced in the past four decades, given that most economists would say the theory has never been seriously put into practice there, at least not until the current administration of President Emmanuel Macron. The same can be said of Italy. It is true that the financial crisis, which hit Europe hard, was a product of a global capitalist system

that had been heavily influenced by neoliberal ideas and policies. But Europe's failure to maintain the economic performance it achieved in the first three decades after World War II into the next three decades and beyond has far more complex causes than those suggested by Berman's simple narrative of a transition from social democracy to neoliberalism.

INTO THE UNKNOWN

Berman repeatedly emphasizes the importance of looking at the present through the lens of the past. There's considerable value in her account, not just with regard to Western democracy but also for adding perspective to the many attempted democratic transitions in developing countries that are hitting hard times. The rockiness of Europe's long road to democracy shows that it should have been possible to predict the troubles encountered by democracy's so-called third wave, which began in 1974 and spread across a wide swath of countries in Latin America, Asia, eastern Europe, and sub-Saharan Africa. That is especially true considering that recent democratic transitions have occurred mostly in countries with weak states, concentrated economic power, and combustible communal divisions.

But how much does the historical record help in predicting the future? Western democracies are experiencing tectonic shifts. Will they come undone, despite having enjoyed an almost unbroken 50-year run of stability? Here, history offers only a limited guide.

Broadly speaking, European and other Western democracies were built on the back of two centuries of remarkable economic growth, albeit with major shocks along the way. Now, the West is in for a protracted, possibly indefinite, period of slow growth or even stagnation. It's not clear whether the liberal democratic consensus can withstand the inevitable public anger and alienation that will result. The toxic political fallout of the financial crisis does not bode well.

New technologies are also battering democracy. Past communications breakthroughs, such as radio and television, had major effects on democracy, but they at least tended be spaced out, giving democracy time to adapt. The problems raised by the current wave of technological change—the loss of authority on the part of traditional media gatekeepers, the vulnerability of all information to manipulation, the new capacities for total surveillance—are hitting liberal democracy all at once. And they are just the start of what will be even more revolutionary developments, as machine learning and other disruptive technologies take off.

The wider world is changing, too. The influence of the West is declining relative to that of non-Western countries, many of them nondemocratic. Liberal democracy consolidated just as Western power reached its zenith. In the decades ahead, Western countries will face greater constraints on action outside their borders, and other countries will infringe more on their internal affairs. That is certain to unsettle liberal democratic governments. And global trends including climate change and migration will tug even harder at the fabric of liberal democracy.

Understanding democracy's past is vital to understanding democracy's present. But democracy's future remains mostly unfathomable.