

**WHATEVER HAPPENED TO
DEMOCRACY?**

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The Great Democratic Revolution

Not much more than a decade ago, inspired by such events as the defeat of apartheid and the breathtaking velvet revolutions against the Soviet Empire, talk of the global triumph of democracy whizzed around the world. Nelson Mandela walked to freedom from Pollsmoor prison into the arms of the world's media. One man, in the name of democracy, single-handedly fought an army tank in Tiananmen Square. The life of a Romanian tyrant ended abruptly after glancing impatiently at his watch during an interrogation. A Czech playwright was catapulted into the role of king of a castle. Then there were the global achievements : for the first time ever in human history, the project of democracy went on trial in all four corners of the earth. Many noted that the number of democratic states more than doubled in a generation; that dictators everywhere were forced into retreat; and that, for the first time, democratic demands were extended to global institutions, like the UN and the International Olympic Committee and the WTO.

The great democratic revolution was driven by less dramatic events, too. In some countries, Britain for instance, important reforms, like regional devolution and the incorporation of the Human Rights Act, demonstrated that democracies, even the mother of modern European democracies, are indeed capable of democratising themselves. Meanwhile – remember that democracy involves nothing less than a colossal restructuring of the way human beings think about themselves – the spirit of democracy strengthened. Under pressure from intense media scrutiny and rising public intolerance of wrongdoings and incompetence, ministers and whole governments, including the European Commission itself, were forced to resign. The policy effects of social movements were felt. The testosterone levels of masculine authority continued to drop. The rights and claims of children and minorities of all description were no longer brushed aside by judges and politicians. International humanitarian law – symbolised by the arrest and trial of Augusto Pinochet and Slobodan Milosevic – was reborn. Even the ideals of global civil society and global citizenship surfaced.

Given all these achievements, the gloom that is now settling on democratic institutions and ideals is puzzling – and worrying. There are troubles in the house of democracy. The old victory talk of democracy feels like fire on ice. Whatever happened to democracy, we should ask? Why is the global growth spurt of democratic ideals and institutions now stalling? Are there new threats to democracy on the political horizon? Must we now think about new ways of defending and renewing democratic institutions as well as the spirit of democracy itself?

The creeping unease about democracy's future is unevenly distributed, no doubt. Italian democrats worry about the collapse of the party system in the early 90s and the continuing failure to reform the arcane *stato di diritto* (state based on law) – and the lack of effective conflict of interest laws that enabled Mr Berlusconi to evade prosecution, return to power and run both the country and his media empire untrammelled. Some American democrats meanwhile grow anxious about the nationalisation of politics by the Bush administration, symbolised by its passing into law of the draconian USA Patriot Act – a statute that produces cases like that of Mazen al-Najjar, a Palestinian with an American doctorate, who has lived in the United States for over twenty years, has three children born there, who was arrested in 1997 for overstaying his visa, accused of having links with terrorist organisations, ordered to be released by a judge who found no evidence of that; who, immediately after September 11 helped to organise a blood donor drive for its victims; and who was immediately picked up on the street and flung back into detention, where he is currently held in twenty-three-hour lockdown solitary confinement, without access to lawyers or journalists.

Such developments are worrying, but the democratic malaise that threatens the achievements of recent years arguably has deeper roots. It is neither confined to individual countries nor is it simply a hangover effect of the enthusiasms generated by the collapse of Communism and the swingeing electoral defeat (in May 1997, in Britain) of a nasty, sectarian form of neo-liberal government. Nor is the creeping pessimism about democracy's future part of the natural order of things – something like a law of history that dictates that every generation or so democracies slip into talk of crisis. There are such patterns in the modern history of democracy,

certainly. During the push towards the universal franchise at the end of the nineteenth century, for instance, Edwin Godkin's *Unforeseen Tendencies of Democracy* (1898) warned of the threats posed by 'the enormously increased facility for money-making which the modern world has supplied, and the inevitably resulting corruption'. During the Great Depression, pressure by Bolshevism and fascism, J.A. Hobson's *Democracy and a changing civilisation* (1934) and Harold Laski's *Democracy in Crisis* (1933) both worried about the world-wide rise of dictatorship. A generation later, and most recently, the Trilateral Commission published a report on its Kyoto Conference, entitled *The Crisis of Democracy* (1975), in which democratic institutions were seen to be threatened by three types of challenges : *external threats* like steep oil price rises and a bellicose Soviet empire; *social trends* like populist movements, intellectual opposition and the media; and *intrinsic features* of democracy, such as big government, escalating deficits, and mounting political instability (symbolised by the forced resignation of President Nixon).

Jeremiads are certainly a recurrent feature of the history of democracy. Their echoes can be heard in this lecture, in which I should like to stake out and to defend a different claim : that the world's democracies, Britain included, are living in contradictory times of trends and counter-trends, and that, despite everything that they have achieved and stand for, these democracies are beginning to feel the pinch of deep-seated problems, whose symptoms include declining enthusiasm for representative government, new forms of public protest, anxiety about rising tides of anti-democratic behaviour, and a general confusion about what democracy is and what can be done to preserve what has been achieved, and to correct these new decadent symptoms. What are these structural problems that are currently gnawing away at democratic institutions and values? There are several, and they urgently need addressing :

Representative Government

The most obvious problem is *the inner decay of representative government*. John Stuart Mill, Walter Bagehot and others long ago outlined the case for placing government by elected representatives at the heart of what we have come to call

democracy. The theory is so well-known that it is now conventional wisdom, virtually a cliché : democracy is a type of political system that combines political representation with universal suffrage, plus an open way of life in which the values of equality flourish, freed from hereditary guff and aristocratic pomp and perks. More exactly, democracy is a bicameral system of government. Voters periodically elect their preferred candidates into the lower house of the parliament. The representatives are constrained in their actions by the upper chamber, which is structured according to different criteria (like geographic territory or functional group interest). Elected representatives in the lower chamber meanwhile exercise extensive legislative powers, as well as supervise a cabinet that exercises major executive powers. Periodically, the performance of all elected representatives comes up for review, through a general election, in which they may be publicly criticised, re-elected, or booted out.

That at any rate is the theory of representative government, which was backed up in practice by struggles for a universal franchise. It was supposed that sovereign state power could be wielded in defence of marginalised groups, whose status would shift from bullied and ignored to the represented. These struggles further supposed that an imaginary body called ‘The People’ could rule and be ruled in turn, through their representatives. During the nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries, popular self-government in this sense was mostly greeted by the rich and powerful with loathing and fear and – as in the British compromise, the crown-in-parliament system – the determination to tame or divert – or to wreck - its energies. Every trick was tried; crude forms of manipulation multiplied. Hereditary second chambers, gerrymandering (the Austrians politely called it ‘electoral geometry’) and weighted votes for the propertied and educated were common. Peasants and workers were forced to mark their ballot papers under the watchful eyes of their employers’ agents. Urban political machines found much-needed votes at the end of long election days – as in Turin, where (Italo Calvino records) good nuns brought the mentally ill and disabled to cast votes for the Christian Democrats. Meanwhile, the constitutional powers of popularly elected assemblies were trimmed (this was Bismarck’s preferred strategy). Armies were called in. And instead of guns, some dissenters used words, like Thomas Carlyle, for whom democracy was ‘monstrous, loud, blatant, inarticulate as the voice of Chaos’; or the

classic line by Oscar Wilde against tyranny of the majority : ‘Democracy means simply the bludgeoning of the people by the people for the people.’

Today, bellyaching against representative democracy is rising. Growing numbers of people are turning their backs on formal politics. It is not that they are losing interest in matters political; it is rather that they feel that they have lost the means of engagement with politics. There is a creeping sense, in the era of the universal franchise, that not everyone’s vote matters. Why? Trouble arises deep from within the representative system itself. Important factors include the excessive growth of executive power – Tony Blair’s Napoleonic style is a case in point – but arguably the stranglehold exercised by *political parties* and *electoral systems* over the process of representation is the principal problem. It seems that representative government can neither live with nor live without political parties. Parties are a necessary condition of democracy : they aggregate disparate interests among voters, for instance, but their tendency to occupy the middle ground, helped by outdated electoral systems, has a high price. Long-term evidence is mounting that political parties frustrate and disappoint the work of representatives and represented alike.

Parties aggregate interests alright, but often they do so at the price of blandly stated policies, vague idea-less visions, and non-commitments. Some voters (understandably) come to feel that they neither know who they’re voting for, or that those whom they did vote for never deliver on their promises, or that voting once every few years is no good to anybody. Yes and no are confounded by parties; they become (as the German expression has it) *Jeinparteien*. Parts of the electorate become downright apathetic, unimpressed with politicians – they stand for sleazy blokes in suits looking after themselves – or prone to support single-issue initiatives and movements within civil society. The manipulation and misuse of public institutions by private corporations adds to the legitimacy problems of representative government. Tocqueville worried about the decline of citizen participation and voluntary organisations because the middle classes would be corrupted by their own materialism, but these days the feeling among the middle and other classes that government itself has become a tool of materialism seems much stronger. Hence the growth of protest figures and parties – Coluche,

Screaming Lord Sutch, Ralph Nader, Pauline Hanson, Jean-Marie Le Pen, Pim Fortuyn - all of whom, regardless of their left centre or right policies, seem to have one thing in common : they claim to champion the interests of the unrepresented, all those who don't identify with politicians.

Communicative Abundance

The institutions of representative government have been fundamentally disturbed as well by the new communications revolution, whose main feature is the digital integration of text, sound and image in mobile networks that are accessible through an affordable variety of media, from multiple points. We have entered a new galaxy of communications, a world of *communicative abundance*. Gone are the days when democratic politicians like John F. Kennedy could keep their private dalliances quiet, or govern with the help of the BOGSAT principle ('a bunch of guys sitting around a table'). Political processes now operate entirely within a media-saturated environment, which has the effect of marginalising representative government : in the era of communicative abundance, a vigorous, inquisitive, heavily commercial, twenty-four hour system of *symbolic* representation springs up. It runs parallel to, and often conflicts with, the more narrowly political form of representation embodied in the system of representative government. Journalists and the media portray themselves as 'representatives' of everything and everybody. Politicians feel the pinch of conflicting loyalties. It is unclear whether they are representing their constituents, their party, or themselves, which is why political careers now normally end in failure; why their half-life becomes shorter; and why they are easily jostled off public stages by non-political figures. Put differently : communicative abundance is the midwife of civil society. It gives a voice to its institutions, its power relations, its conflicts. It also helps create this society's celebrities : Madonna, Bill Gates, Martina Navratilova, Jane Fonda, Bono, Kylie Minogue, Johnny Rotten, David Beckham, Tina Turner, Michael Schumacher, Bianca Jagger, Shane Warne, Naomi Campbell, Pop Idols, the cast of Eastenders, Ali G.

The upstaging of political representatives by the celebrities of civil society naturally produces backlashes. Some complain about the 'unhealthily destructive'

relationship between the media and politicians (Peter Mandelson) but, mostly, politicians are transformed from representatives into media commentators and advisers, members of what in Washington is called ‘the flackpack. They live by elementary rules : don’t answer journalists’ questions, see them instead as a ‘cue’ to say what you want; since voters have no interest in details, concentrate upon the packaging; (since most politicians are men) buy long socks so that your calves don’t show when being interviewed on a sofa; get a loyal wife; give the occasional speech about human rights abuses, without forgetting to thump the lectern to prove one’s passion; and, of course, make sure that you’ve memorised by heart some policies...

Politicians who behave like this are of course easily seen through, as wooden characters. They are easily sidelined, which adds to the sense that the Westminster model isn’t working. The sidelining of politicians is definitely reinforced by the media cultivation of *publics*, which put politicians and representative mechanisms permanently on trial. Surrounded by networked media, most individuals and groups and movements get the hang of reacting with or against the stories (news, infotainment, drama, film etc.) that are circulated. Audiences chatter, gossip, make jokes, roar with laughter, swoon, feel sadness, re-tell stories, and complain of indecency, confusion, or boredom. All this is quite routine : the audience work of re-working media output is a chronic, everyday affair. But unusual things sometimes happen, with almost magical effect. Certain stories are whizzed around in the cyclotron called ‘the media’ : scores or hundreds or thousands and even millions of voices may well join in, and suddenly whole groups or sometimes (it seems) ‘everybody’ is talking in animated ways about the same figure, event or actual or expected outcome. A big scoop, a blockbuster media event, is born. And then, suddenly, sometimes, something even more unpredictable and quirky happens : a body called ‘the public’ surrounds the stage.

These publics can be variously sized – from *micro-publics* of up to just a few thousand people, through *meso-publics* that comprise some millions, to *macro-publics* that encompass many millions of people at the continental or global levels. These publics are fashioned and moulded : they are imagined collectivities that are not (*pace* Walter Lippmann) merely wishful thoughts in the heads of democrats.

They have a definite material ‘reality’ about them, thanks to the efforts of journalists, who help to circulate *images* and *stories* that suppose that ‘the public’ exists, and that it is listening, reading, watching, chatting, on- or off-line. This supposition that ‘the public’ exists - that it is ‘real’ - is strongly fictional, but despite that it is a quintessential feature of the era of communicative abundance. Witnesses of the blockbuster media event are required; its producers and directors and *dramatis personae* cannot play for long to an empty house. Media performances cannot work without publics, who can at any moment heckle, applaud, drift off, or desert the theatre in droves.

Admittedly, these publics for the most part do not resemble the face-to-face gatherings of citizens exemplified by the classical Greek *ekklesia*, the Roman forum, or the New England town meeting. And although no membership cards or entry tickets are required, they are not realms of universal involvement. All publics – including the global publics that spring up around global media events – tend to exclude others. Yet it is nonetheless important to see that the publics that regularly form under conditions of communicative abundance – the publics who witness or follow public health controversies, governmental sex and corruption scandals, large public demonstrations, who mourn the death of a people’s princess, or revel in music concerts for global justice – are *public* in several important senses that we have inherited from our forebears : these are spaces of openness in which controversies break out over who gets what, when and how, and in which things once concealed are now revealed, for the alleged benefit and in the name of many (‘all’) others. These publics have many unpredictable effects – sometimes, for instance, a tiny butterfly incident in the scale of human affairs surprises everybody by having cyclonic effects upon the body politic - but it is safe to say that in our times something like a ‘parallel’ government of publics has developed. Power-brokers, including politicians – especially those who look like spin statement dummies in the hands of ventriloquists – are put on their toes, or made to look irrelevant. The impression develops that politicians and governments are out of touch, that they are unspontaneous, bland, wooden – or just self-serving or corrupt shits.

Cosmocracy

The democratic malaise is presently deepening for another reason : *the radical stretching of geo-political horizons*. There were times in Britain and elsewhere when representative government was inscribed within a circle made up of households, local communities and national politics. Electorates often thought of themselves as living within families that were embedded in institutions of local government and community spirit; these in turn were seen to be linked to politics at the national level. Within this circle, local MPs were the cotter pin linking the family with the nation. They lived around the corner, knew the community, and had vested interests. In business, or members of a trade union, they cultivated roots, and would knock on doors and listen to the voices and concerns of local people. They also spoke in the House, and people listened. The buck stopped there.

No doubt, it is easy to romanticise times past, but the contrast with present-day trends is striking. Charles Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend* features a self-important character, Mr Podsnap, who says, with some self-assurance : 'Foreigners do as they do, sir, and that is the end of it.' Podsnaps of the world beware : your days are over, because virtually all governments are now operating within an emerging world polity – the first ever - that has unsettling and destabilising effects upon democracies everywhere. This new polity can be called *cosmocracy*. Despite the fact that it does not appear as such on maps of the world, cosmocracy is an agglomeration of governing institutions that are glued together by world-wide webs of interdependence – of actions and reactions at a distance. Thanks to various modern communications technologies, which greatly reduce, sometimes nearly to zero, time and space barriers, governmental institutions of various shapes and sizes – local governments and courts, territorial states, quasi-imperial powers like China and India, regional bodies like the European Union and Mercosur, global bodies like the United Nations and the International Criminal Tribunal based in the Hague - find themselves, despite their many differences, increasingly caught up in thickening, fast-evolving webs of links, both bilateral and multilateral. The simultaneous devolution and Europeanisation of British politics is a taste of bigger things to come, and it follows that those who wield power within the structures of this cosmocracy are more or less aware that a single event, transaction or decision somewhere within the system – the accession of China to the WTO and the attacks

on Washington and New York, to take just two examples from one fateful week in recent world politics - can touch off a string of consequences elsewhere in the system. They know, in other words, that their decisions are potentially or actually *unrestricted* in scope and effect – that what they say and do (or do not say or do) impinges upon the lives of others elsewhere on the face of the earth.

Cosmocracy is not ‘world government’ in any simple or familiar sense. It is an agglomeration of three overlapping zones of governing institutions. Its inner core includes the political, legal and military structures governing the peoples of North America, Japan, South Korea, the Council of Europe countries, and Australasia. Here the webs of governmental interdependence, most of them constitutionally democratic, are longest and thickest; the density of efficient telecommunications is heaviest; and land and sea barriers to the movement of people, goods, decisions and information are consequently least meaningful.

This inner core of cosmocracy, out of which thick and long webs of interdependence radiate, is the heartland of the recent democratic revolution. It is embedded within, and dependent upon, several outer zones of political power. One of them encompasses the populous, large-scale, quasi-imperial territorial states, like China, India, Indonesia and the Russian Federation. Except for India, these are not power-sharing democracies (two of them are in fact post-totalitarian regimes). Their governing structures, although jealous guardians of their own territorial ‘sovereignty’, are nevertheless closely interlinked, both with themselves and with the rest of the cosmocracy, so that for instance Russia, the world’s second largest arms peddler, has its most developed supplier-buyer relationships with India, China and Iran. Then there is a third zone within the cosmocracy : the agglomeration of territorially-bound governments, some of them (like Brazil) potentially powerful actors on the global stage, but most of them - Nigeria, Bahrein, the Philippines, Thailand - less powerful small states, or proto-states. Although some of these governments are beginning to cluster, in the form of regional bodies like ASEAN and CARICOM and through recent agreements like the Free Trade of the Americas, the webs of governmental interdependence within this outer zone of cosmocracy are thinnest and most frayed.

A few of these governments, like Zimbabwe and Pakistan, are failing states that totter on the extreme outer margins of the cosmocracy, where worldwide webs of governing institutions give way to no-go areas, in which cosmocratic power is unwelcome. These outer fringes include whole areas, like parts of the Muslim world, where there is a high density of self-preoccupied, failing or failed states. Finally, there is the nether world beyond cosmocracy. It includes regimes, Burma and Laos for instance, that are hyper-jealous of their territorial integrity, and whose authorities - despite some important connections with the rest of the world, in matters of drugs and guns - are openly hostile to cosmocracy. This outer zone, underneath and beyond the institutions of cosmocracy, also includes the world's grim landscapes of war (Juan Goytisolo) : blood-soaked, land-mined, ruined and rubble territories, like Chechnya, Sierra Leone, southern Sudan, and the ill-named Democratic Republic of Congo, where non-violent structures of government hardly exist.

Lots of things can and need be said about cosmocracy, but here it is important to emphasise the ways in which cosmocracy is an unstable form of government riddled with contradictions. Its fault-lines produce shock-effects on the whole system, which is why it must be considered an *inadequate* form of global government : it certainly does not bring peace and good government to the world, let alone usher in the calm and open order in which democratic institutions can flourish worldwide. Cosmocracy functions as a *destabiliser* of all governments of the world, democracies included. Whatever advantages flow from its clumsy structures, the system of cosmocracy displays definite signs of entropy. Although we inhabit a world shaped by over a century of global institution-building – manifested in arrangements like Universal Standard Time, the International Court of Justice, and United Nations treaties, from the Declaration of Human Rights to the Law of the Sea – the *under-concentration* of global powers remains a basic problem for democracies everywhere. The lack of driving seats and steering mechanisms, and the ineffectiveness of many that currently do exist, are among cosmocracy's basic weak points. So, for example, cosmocracy has spawned no investment treaty and has no central bank that could impose restrictions on the destructive flows of hot money. It has no properly functioning parliament through which representative demands from global civil society could be peacefully

channelled. There exists no executive power, for instance an elected, fixed-term and impeachable president of the world. There are no political parties that campaign globally, on a regular basis, in search of support for certain policies. There is no global criminal justice or policing system. And there is no global army or global strategy for dealing decisively with the new triangle of violence – nuclear anarchy, uncivil war, apocalyptic terrorism - that has settled on the whole world.

Quite a few of the institutions of cosmocracy are *publicly unaccountable*. It is not quite a species of absolutism, since its core zone (plus India in the second zone) contains rich networks of democratic procedures designed to expose and oppose hubris. Yet cosmocracy is full of rotten boroughs. Its decisionmaking structures are invisible to many millions of eyes. The ingredients of representative democracy are in short supply, or entirely absent. Time-limited power granted on the basis of open electoral competitions, the obligation of power-wielders to solicit different opinions and to explain and justify their actions publicly, and to resign in cases of gross mismanagement or misconduct – these vital democratic rules are flouted by the obscure and secretive structures of cosmocracy. Whether in Beijing or Berlin, Dohar or Washington, those who wield power feed upon various alibis for concealing their motives and moves. They say that it is foolhardy to reveal one's hand to one's opponents and enemies (this could be called the Rumsfeld Rule : 'In difficult situations, governments do not discuss pressing matters'). Or they repeat some version of old Plato's Rule that affairs of government are too complex and difficult to explain to publics, who would not in any case understand what is at stake.

Then there are the facts of complexity : the fragmentation of political authority, combined with a technocratic mind-set among officials and a lack of public-friendly, well-trained administrative staff, ensures that many parts of the cosmocracy are closed off from either mutual or public scrutiny of any kind. Matters are worsened by what can be called the hubris of distance : despite the noblest public-spirited motives, many decisionmakers find it difficult or outright impossible to grasp the ways in which decisions blocked or taken at one point within the system of cosmocracy have long-distance effects, whose consequences are often hidden from the eyes of the original culprits. Sometimes these various

alibis converge, as when the institutions of cosmocracy – the *in camera* tribunals set up under NAFTA, the ‘green room’ system operated by the WTO - deliberately shield themselves from public scrutiny because their express aim is to favour a corporate power group within global civil society. Using such techniques as secrecy, spin, and legal coercion, authoritarian arrangements of their kind give a bad name to global governance. They not only interfere with but also threaten the authority of democratically elected governments. The power of property feels unchecked; it seems that the global economy has become master to none, that hard-won citizens’ rights at home are being gobbled up by unchecked worldwide ‘market forces’. This conclusion easily fuels despondency : as the Canadian writer John Ralston Saul has pointed out, growing numbers of citizens of many democracies find it hard to identify with their own representative governments. A sense spreads that governments are powerless in the face of mysterious forces operating ‘out there’; the world feels less and less democratic, as if it is in the grip of buccaneering forces who take no notice of anybody except themselves.

A Dominant Power

All democracies, old and new, are today threatened by the fact that the body politic of cosmocracy contains a destabilising anti-body that is also a democracy : a *dominant power*, the United States. America is a democracy with a difference. It is a power that differs from all previous dominant powers in two fundamental ways. Not only is it the first such power in human history that finds itself in a position, partly thanks to a measure of historical luck, to lay claim to world hegemony. It is also unusual because it is a dominant power equipped with a revolutionary world-view : republican democracy based on the original Philadelphia model of 1776. In these two respects, America differs, say, from the House of Habsburg, which was a dynastic confederation of states (stretching from Portugal and the Netherlands to Naples and Milan through to Bohemia and Hungary) that gathered around the altar of international Catholicism. The new dominant power also differs from nineteenth-century Britain, which even at the height of its global power acted pragmatically because it sensed the folly of risking everything, including its fleet, to conquer the world. Where Britain perceived that it could not intervene successfully, in continental Europe or South America, it refrained from doing so.

The United States shows few signs of acting in this way. Like revolutionary France and Soviet Russia before it, it is a territorial power dedicated to transforming the whole world in its favour, even if this requires using the very methods that its democratic ideology abhors : violence, manipulation and ‘bossism’ (Stanley Hoffmann).

Like all previous modern dominant powers – from Habsburg Spain to the Pax Britannica of the nineteenth century - this one seeks mastery over the whole system. There are even times when its leaders catch a glimpse of themselves as the world’s first unchallenged global imperial power, as a sequel and effective replacement of the old system of nineteenth- and twentieth-century imperial powers that once ruled the world, and have now collapsed. The United States, a democratically constituted state, tends to behave arrogantly - undemocratically - despite historical evidence that all previous dominant powers produce geopolitical instability, and despite the fact that the world has become too large and complicated to be governed by a single power.

The dominant power nevertheless behaves bullishly because its governing class feels compelled to secure its flanks and to protect its dominant power privileges. Their perception is accurate. Considered as a political sub-system of cosmocracy, the dominant power is the heartland of the turbocapitalist economy, the driving force of the global telecommunications and entertainment industries, and the homeland of the mightiest army the world has ever known. The Gulf War of 1991, the Bosnian pacification of 1995, the overthrow and arrest of Milosević after the war in Kosovo all showed that decisive military action at the global level depended on the United States. So too has the war against the government of Afghanistan, which collapsed quickly under the impact of the most advanced military technology known to humanity : state-of-the art bombing, missiles fired through doorways by unmanned Predator aircraft, interception of the enemy’s every telephone call and radio transmission, bombs that bust open the deepest bunkers. The American war-fighting budget for 1999 was only two-thirds of what it was in 1989, but still the dominant power now accounts for 35 per cent of the world’s total military spending (Russia’s share is ten times less). The United States has meanwhile consolidated its role as the biggest arms dealer, with sales in the year

2000 worth US\$ 18.6 billion, more than half the \$36.9 billion global arms trade figure. During the Clinton presidencies, it also completed the transformation of its strategy of global containment into the capacity - so far untested - to fight two major regional wars (as a recent US Department of Defense document explains) 'nearly simultaneously' .

The dominant power has troops stationed in nearly 100 countries. It can and does throw its weight around – most recently, in Iraq, in Serbia, in Afghanistan. It acts tough : in matters as varied as steel imports, environmental regulations, and contributions to the World Bank (it is the bank's largest shareholder and yet contributes only 0.1 per cent of its gross domestic product in aid, the lowest proportion among rich governments). Its leaders know that money, information, blood, kilobytes and steel count in world affairs. They are tempted, like every previous dominant power of the modern era, to act as a vigilante power, to see their power as the ability, especially when push comes to shove, to measure their strength against all of their rivals combined. America does so partly through straightforward designs of aggrandisement and partly by appealing – here the emphasis is quite different, and contradictory - for the global observance of governing structures that promote democratic freedom and solidarity.

Why More Democracy?

Future historians may well look back on the past decade or two and see in each of these trends the end of the great democratic growth spurt of our times. Perhaps these trends - the inner decay of representative government, the shock effects of the new galaxy of communicative abundance, and the instabilities caused by a cosmocracy whose power structures are publicly unaccountable, vulnerable to dominant power manipulation and incapable of reducing violence – are digging democracy's grave. Perhaps indeed our fate has been so decided. Perhaps democracy has no future at all. Nobody of course knows, but in all this rather confused or downright depressing reality the positive counter-trends (mentioned at the outset) and the possibility of fresh beginnings should not be overlooked. Fatalism is an enemy of democracy, and we should not heed its siren calls – even if

long-lasting remedies for the weaknesses of democracy are nowhere to be found on the shelves of the existing cupboards of political acceptability.

So what is to be done? What can be done? Greater public recognition of these weaknesses is badly needed. Bold and imaginative practical remedies are also required. We are not ancient Greeks, and nobody should expect the weaknesses of democracy to be solved by benign or angry gods. Human, all-too-human remedies – the remedies of citizens, think tanks, universities, policy units, bold political leaders - will be needed. Distinctions and nuances will need to be drawn, for instance between problems that can be addressed within Britain versus those that require European-level or global solutions; and between solutions that must be the work of government versus those that require the initiative of actors and organisations of civil society. Solutions are certainly thinkable. Wherever possible, practical reforms must take to heart the wise maxim of Jean Monnet : that half the battle in the politics of vision and improvement is to find the point of leverage where small steps (*petits pas*) produce very much larger consequences (*grands effets*).

On the basis recommended by Monnet, the inner decay of representative government has some potent remedies : an upper chamber much more representative of living people – including black and Asian people - and their functional interests; a ballot system based upon some version of proportional representation, like the additional member system (AMS) used in Germany and New Zealand and (in modified form) in Scotland and Wales; state-funded elections; giving the kids the vote by lowering the age of majority to 16; and pushing and pulling governments to bin the spin and to risk putting politics back into politics. The growth of independent, multi-voiced publics within civil society needs to be more highly valued, better anchored and democratised so that the loudest or richest voices are not the only ones heard. Various means are thinkable and viable : improved citizen representation and citizens' juries within the operations of government, not only in jury duties but in such fields as health and transportation; the rejuvenation of local government and the redesign of town halls, so that they feel much more like public spaces; technology public assessment bodies, of the kind that have sprung out of the old Danish tradition of

folkeoplysning; and more and better public service media, including equalised broadband internet provision.

Meanwhile, cosmocracy needs a radical shake-up and new institutions – perhaps an elected parliament, global taxation mechanisms, special courts that set standards for tackling criminality and environmental destruction - and these need to be made more publicly accountable, beginning with the neighbouring institutions of the European Union. Global governing institutions and new strategies will be needed to deal with the triangle of violence that the world has drawn around itself – a triangle bounded by apocalyptic terrorism, uncivil war, and nuclear annihilation. Bold political leadership and prudent military interventions and courts of law will certainly be necessary, but so too will militant public campaigns against nuclear weapons and installations, as well as citizens’ support for organisations that campaign against political repression and torture (like Amnesty International, which has more than one million members in 162 countries) and organisations like Saferworld – a London-based research and lobby group that publicises the deadly effects of global arms flows and pressures bodies like the European Union into restricting arms sales to dictatorial states and armies that abuse human rights.

And America? Prudence counsels that sending troops to its shores would be unwise, which means that those who deal with the dominant power would be well advised to develop a whole host of counter-strategies, all the while keeping in mind the comparison between absolute monarchies and republics drawn by the great seventeenth-century Dutch political commentator, Jan de Witt. De Witt claimed that in absolutist regimes princes act with the force of lions and the cunning of foxes, in line with the recommendations in Machiavelli’s *Il principe*. By contrast, said de Witt, those who are publicly elected and in charge of republics tend to act with less hubris, like stealthy cats, which are both ‘agile and prudent’. Whether the United States will prove to be the lion and fox and succumb to the temptations of world aggrandisement, or whether it can be convinced and pressured to behave like a cat and to avoid hubris, for instance by playing the role of catalyst of a more dynamic, publicly accountable and egalitarian form of cosmocracy, is among the great, if highly dangerous political questions of our time.

Some final words are needed about the democratic ideal itself. Efforts to bring greater democracy to democracy must not be blinded or demoralised by the strange elusiveness of the democratic ideal. Within the history of different types of earthly regimes, democracy is utterly unique. Exactly because it means, minimally, the self-government of equals – their freedom from bossing, violence, and injustice - it demands more than humans seem willing or are capable of giving. What we call democracy is never ‘pure’ or ‘authentic’. There is never enough of it, whether in the bedroom, or in the boardroom or cabinet meeting, or on the battlefield. We are always chasing it around corners, through halls of mirrors, across uncharted landscapes, up into blue skies. Improvement, perfectibility – and failure – is inscribed within the very ideal of democracy.

So why bother with it, given that it consistently disappoints because it demands more than we give? Why should people ever strive for more democracy? What’s so good about it, after all? Today’s democratic malaise feeds upon the fact that the standard answers of the past no longer work. The presumptions, for instance, that Nations are naturally democratic or that the Christian God gave the people the power to govern themselves at the expense of others, are worn out. E.M. Forster was on the right track : ‘So two cheers for Democracy’, he wrote. ‘One because it admits variety and two because it permits criticism. Two cheers are quite enough : there is no occasion to give three.’ There is in fact a third, and it is in our time of waning democratic euphoria more pertinent with the passing of each day : the cheer that should be given for democratic power-sharing as the best human weapon so far invented against the hubris that comes with concentrations of power.

The struggle against blind arrogance and stupidity caused by power is never ultimately winnable, yet it is among the struggles that we human beings abandon at our own peril. Democracy is a powerful remedy for hubris. It champions not the rule of the people, but the rule that nobody should rule. It refuses to accept that decisionmakers can draw their legitimacy from gods and goddesses, or tradition, or brute power. Democracy is a way of life and a way of governing in which power is publicly accountable, in which sitting on thrones and making decisions behind the backs of others – and the intrigues and ambitions that usually accompany arbitrary rule - are deeply problematic.

The history of democracy is replete with a weird and wonderful cast of figures who believed in democracy because they saw that it could humble the arrogant. This history begins in the fifth-century B.C., with characters like the Sophists, who hurled javelins of fun and sarcasm - and farted in public – for the purpose of democratically humbling arrogant authority. The history of democracy extends through to modern figures more familiar to us : God-fearing Christian and republican opponents of slavery; atheist rebels who built street barricades, raised red flags, and aimed cobblestones at glass panes, in the name of democratic liberty; workers who refused to be wage slaves; the suffragettes who read Ibsen and Pankhurst, or chained themselves to railings, rented Zeppelins to drop leaflets on parliament, and rallied in Trafalgar Square in defence of free speech, garbed in purple and green; the bearded dissidents of Moscow, Warsaw and Prague, hunched over their typewriters and huddled together on sofas in smoke-filled apartments; and Buddhist monks in crimson robes, walking barefoot, keeping ‘the mind mindful’ as they collected rice from the faithful for the cause of civil freedom against brutish dictatorship.

For all these figures, democracy was a way of life, not a tradeable commodity. They did not suffer fools gladly. They refused the temptations of aggrandisement and did not much like big clichés and smelly little orthodoxies. They trusted in simple decency. They did not believe that an unequal society was inevitable. They thought that human beings could and should govern themselves. They believed in the power of the powerless. That is why, in these testing times, their democratic spirit badly deserves to be renewed.