

ESTORIL POLITICAL FORUM 2017
Defending the Western Tradition of Liberty under the Law

The Dahrendorf Memorial Lecture
Troubling Times for Liberal Democracy
Marc Plattner / 27.June.2017

Discussant Statement
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I would like to start by thanking the Institute for Political Studies the kind invitation to be here as a discussant of the Dahrendorf Memorial Lecture that has just been delivered by Prof. Marc Plattner, whose biography and leading academic status our session's host and chair have already referred. Siding Prof. Clifford Orwin's intervention, my purpose will be to highlight the most calling ideas and alerts laid down by our distinguished keynote speaker while adding some personal notes for the coming debate or for further reflection.

Prof. Marc Plattner is a renowned world observer and expert on that delicate ideological and political construction called liberal democracy. His lecture offered us three major angles: firstly, a retrospect of the last quarter-century, since the boosting victory of the third wave of democratization until our more worrisome and uncertain days; secondly, an analysis of the growing conflict between democracy and its lurking enemy – authoritarianism; and thirdly, some insightful thoughts and recommendations on how to solve or tackle with “the contemporary malaise of liberal democracy”, surely its worst crisis since World War II.

As a grand political thinker, out of his long-gained expertise at the NED's *International Forum for Democratic Studies* and editing the *Journal of Democracy*, Prof. Marc Plattner is neither a utopian optimist, nor an apocalyptic pessimist. I would venture saying that, following the cautious and shrewd path of Lord Ralf Dahrendorf, we are in the presence of a realist liberal democrat, keenly aware of the threats that endanger that option, but relentlessly hopeful of its inner goodness, of its moral superiority, of its centrality as an inescapable feature and legacy of the West, and of its everlasting potentiality to maintain or to build more humane, secure, developed and happy societies.

Knowledge of the past only achieves civic importance and resonance by helping to enlighten what led us to the present. Therefore, history is not merely a static record of facts, dates and names, but rather a way to understand time and space, as

a humanist discipline; and short-termism can only provide political analysis with blurred and imperfect pictures. Our keynote lecturer gave us a lesson on history, on how world affairs have been evolving since the early 1990s and accelerating into some unknown future in the past one or two years. His own chief bibliography has already detailed that same path. In 1993, Prof. Marc Plattner edited his book *The Global Resurgence of Democracy*; then came *Consolidating the Third Wave Democracies* (1997), *The Democratic Invention* (2000), *Democracy without Borders? Global Challenges to Liberal Democracies* (2008), *Democracy in Decline* (2015) and *Authoritarianism Goes Global: the Challenge to Democracy* (published last year). Check the title words carefully chosen to signal the milestones of recent liberal democracy: “resurgence”, followed by “consolidation” or “invention”, before “challenge” and “decline”, seemingly at the hands of authoritarianism, a pseudo-alternative that we thought and hoped to see in a descendent, and not in an ascendant, course.

From history, then, our lecturer departed to present politics. There is indeed, as was rightfully underlined, a “democratic recession” on the going – not so much a “receding democratic wave”, in Samuel Huntington terms – visible in the spreading tendency of various countries to shift their rhetoric and institutions into strange “illiberal democracies” or open authoritarianisms (both undermining the rule of law), and in the rise of populist parties and candidates in Western countries. We were offered relevant national examples and possible explanations for this “growing vulnerability of liberal democracy”: economic strains, rising social inequality, political squabble, the effects of globalization, and moral and cultural decadence. But, as we also heard, some of these phenomenon are *regional* or *local*, whereas the allure of authoritarianism – or of populism, which can be an antechamber to the former – is *global*, affecting both non-Western *and* Western countries. In our times, authoritarianism does not work through an all-out assault against existing liberal institutions; it rather uses “soft power” to weaken democracy, promising efficient governance, a better economic performance or a safer, albeit closed and intolerant nationalism. Moreover, as emphasized also, our 21st century is reinforcing a post-Western scenario where the word and the full moral and civilizational meaning of “democracy” seem a distant and too abstract a reality to large parts of the globe.

All arguments considered – and that is how I understood Prof. Marc Plattner’s final lines – the democratic malaise cannot be countered neither by some outdated neo-imperial vision imposed by the West on the “rest”, nor by mere technical

solutions coming from top-to-bottom bureaucratic reforms. Reasserting, saving or restoring liberal democracy calls for a higher and binding solution, one that rewrites powers and their voters, states and their living nations around what could be termed as a sentimental, moral or philosophical consensus, namely, that liberal democracy is co-natural to the human aspiration to live freely and that, in the ideological market, liberal democracy is still, and will remain so, the best of all possible alternatives. In the end, then, the lecture we've all had the honour to listen to is a thoughtful wake-up call: resistances, downfalls, bumpy roads and enemies are not new to democracies the world over. Since history has shown the enduring resilience of such a formula, why should this time be different?

While reflecting on how to discuss Prof. Plattner's lecture, I browsed the *Democracy Index* yearly published by the *UK Economist Intelligence Unit*: in 2016, out of 167 countries in the world listed, 76 were democracies, 40 had hybrid regimes and 51 lived under authoritarian regimes. This means that only 45.5% of the countries, encompassing 49.3% of world population have full access to the blessings of liberty. The goal ahead is to enlarge these numbers. For those who have it, democracy is too much taken for granted, as a given; it shouldn't be like that. If we add civic anomie, blind protest or a descend into populism to the larger panel of problems already afflicting Western societies – economic crisis, middle class impoverishment, radicalism, terrorism, instability or corruption – we will be paving the way for all those who claim to know what's best for us. The real danger of authoritarianism resides in its seduction, claiming to offer a way out to every challenge, while relieving people of the task of thinking, debating, choosing, building and existing. The waning of democracies starts precisely whenever people resign from their unalienable civic responsibilities – and without these, by the way, no one can rightfully demand unalienable rights, except maybe those which derive from our natural human dignity.

I am an historian. The past offers us some lessons, in the shape of anti authoritarian antidotes. Large strata of voters and public opinion would not entertain populists and anti-democrats if they could remember where their promises and actions led. The work of such respectable academics as Prof. Marc Plattner resound *Sir Winston Churchill's* aphorism that, in the end, the worst democracy is still superior to any authoritarian and/or utopian alternative. It's a simple idea – and in politics, many times the simplest ideas are the best ones. The various steps and needs to materialize or defend that idea may be lengthily and complex. But if one doesn't lose

sight of the basics, the roadmap is much more easily understandable. In his famous speech in Normandy, in June 1984, remembering the allied forces that had died in D-Day, Ronald Reagan defined democracy in a simple yet elegant manner, as “the most deeply honourable form of government ever devised by man”. That’s it, and that should be enough to re-boost the Western attention to nurture it.

But the past is a permanent confrontation with the present and the future. How serious – and our lecturer showed us it *is* serious – is the up surging of a globalising authoritarianism in its various shades? Any answer to this worrying question raises, I think, a set of other possible questions. Will the European Union regain its somehow lost momentum? Within the old continent, does the near future belong to Emmanuel Macron or to Viktor Orbán? What will be the future shape of Brexit? Will the United States still pursue life, liberty and happiness? What will capitalism and globalization bring to Africa or Asia (namely China)? What global franchise of terror will be branded after the fall of ISIS? The world was much simpler in the 1990s than it is now. Vertigo, uncertainty and a sense of novelty (be it bad or good) are the existing coordinates. This is why the opening words of Charles Dickens, in his famous 1859 historical romance *A Tale of Two Cities*, could literally be applied to our year of 2017: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times; it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness; it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity; it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness; it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair; we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way”.

So where are we heading to? The beauty of history resides in showing us that there never was, nor will ever be, a predetermined future; the beauty of politics resides in the civic call summoning all of us to think and work out the best solutions to organize, in a humane, free and lawful manner, our social collective being and living; and the beauty of liberal democracy resides, ultimately, in remembering and teaching us where the best solution, or at least the best hopes, can be found.