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In clinging to power, Nicolás Maduro, Hugo Chávez's handpicked successor, is steering Venezuela's once-rich democracy to autocracy. Carlos García Rawlins/Reuters

Is Democracy Dead or Alive? What democracy exactly are we supposed to nurture?

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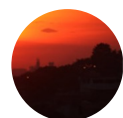
*These comments on the global fate of democracy, the second part of the series *Is Democracy Dead or Alive?*, are gathered by *Democratic Theory* and co-published with the *Sydney Democracy Network*. Several of these comments will feature as full-length articles in a special issue of *Democratic Theory*.*

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Imagine a new form of popular sovereignty

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If we cannot imagine a future for democracy after the break-up of its historic marriage to capitalism, then I suppose we should declare it dead. But I prefer to think that capitalism's spurning of democracy offers a context for instituting new forms of democratic governance.

The institutions of the modern democratic state have always stood for the interests of proprietors, upholding formal rights (equality of opportunity) over material equity (equality of condition).

The revolutions that threw off monarchical and colonial rule in the late 18th and early 19th centuries were, with very few exceptions, bourgeois revolutions. The state's obligation to the collective interest of the people thus finds a limit in its competing and contradictory obligation to the protection of private property.

From this vantage point, the corporate takeover and decimation of existing democratic institutions may free us to conceive and cultivate more radically democratic organisations that centre on the welfare of peoples, rather than individuals.

Movements such as Occupy Wall Street clearly tend in this direction, experimenting with radical, participatory democracy in the belly of the beast.

On the model of Occupy, radical democracy entails the creation of myriad autonomous zones, whether temporary or semi-permanent.

As ethnonationalism and authoritarianism flourish in the ruins of capitalist democracy, it remains to be seen if the Left can reimagine itself, no longer as a dissident force, hostile or marginal to the institutions of capitalist democracy, but rather as a force for institutionalisation, elaborating new forms and practices of popular sovereignty at the local, regional and planetary scale.

Democracy expresses itself in many ways

Jean-Paul Gagnon, University of Canberra

When someone says “democracy is dead” they aren’t critiquing democracy itself. They’re critiquing a specific expression of it, usually the representative kind. To conflate democracy with but one of its expressions is dangerous because this dismisses more than 2,000 of its other expressions.

Some, like deliberative democracy, are normative projects in part destined to improve the representative institutions that most of us are familiar with.

Others, like Waldorf democracy, where “waiters and financiers, telephone girls and captains of industry, coatroom clerks and merchant princes [sit] side by side” at dinner, are historical expressions that can help us find new purchase on some of today’s more enduring problems such as class division.

There are also expressions of democracy in action: kabuki democracy and karaoke democracy are used to explain modern Japanese politics; garbage democracy captures Fidel Castro’s opinion of representation in the US; and somnolent democracy is used to describe countries with docile citizens.

These expressions help us make sense of the democracies we live in – think in particular of unwieldy democracy, green democracy and corrupt democracy.

So, it doesn’t make sense to say “democracy is dead”, because democracy doesn’t mean just one thing. As we come to know each of democracy’s expressions better, and make sense of them collectively, it’s my wager that this will lead to more inclusion, equality, self-rule, autonomy, fairness and non-violence within our states, between our states, and in our lives.

Enemies within exploit ideology of democracy

Nadia Urbinati, Columbia University

The ideology of democracy has disfigured democracy and is one of the reasons for its weakness today.

Democracy is still a dominant force this century. No government or political leader literally opposes democracy and openly attempts to break it down. Indeed, they instrumentally use democracy to legitimise their own rule and governance.

Democracy has, in this sense, absolute power over its alternatives, as Francis Fukuyama declared more than two decades ago.

So why is democracy dysfunctional in spite of its global and universal appeal among leaders and ordinary people? One reason is that leaders manipulate the meanings of democracy and people misunderstand it. People do not understand democracy as its scholars do.

Moreover, a large proportion of Asians do not conceive democracy as most Westerners do. When thinking about democracy, many Chinese people imagine economic development, the domestic and regional dominance of Han China and social order.

Certainly, the rule of law, limited government, civil liberties, political rights and press freedom do not matter much in mass conceptions of democracy in certain corners of the world.

Even in advanced countries, when strong leaders such as Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen speak about democracy, they emphasise dominance and the rule of the majority and try to take minority rights away. We may be living in an era of democratic dominance for the first time in history, but its practices are not necessarily liberal or democratic.

Lamentably, democracy's cultural foundation is shallow. We need more education about democracy and popular engagement with its diverse forms.

Where is the evidence for claims of doom?

Dawn Brancati, Columbia University

Dramatic claims that democracy is in peril around the world or, worse yet, that it is already dead, make great headlines. They may even be valuable in motivating governments and individuals to be vigilant against threats to democracy around the world.

However, there isn't sufficient empirical evidence to support these claims.

Statements about democracy's recession are often based on a few anecdotal, but salient, cases of where democracy has been genuinely curtailed, and do not take into account the number of cases where democracy has remained strong or has advanced in recent years.

These statements are also often about aspects of political systems that are important, but not about democracy per se. Claims that democracy is on the decline have been made based on bureaucratic incompetency, corruption, government criticism of the media, and so forth.



Donald J. Trump
@realDonaldTrump

Contemporary democracy is at the centre of this paradox: as a political system, democracy enjoys an undisputed global hegemony so that even constitutional “reforms” that curtail civil liberties and contradict the spirit of political openness are made in the name of democracy as more genuine affirmations of democracy’s values. Venezuela and Hungary offer prime examples of this.

Venezuela's democracy under threat



As well as fighting for the basics, Venezuelans are fighting to hang on to Venezuela’s 60-year-old democracy.

Particularly after the Cold War, the ideology of democracy has found itself in a situation of planetary solitude. The paradox is that no other names today are available to give legitimacy to political enterprises that are not easily rendered as democratic in the constitutional and representative mode in which democracy is valued.

So we witness the coinage of oxymoronic terms, like authoritarian democracy, technocratic democracy and meritocratic democracy, among others.

One of the effects of this paradox is that political orders named as democratic are not only in contrast with democracy but are moreover primed to cast doubt on the value of democracy. How can we value political equality when our democracies promote technocracy or national-populism?

Not to have names to name these transformations of democratic governments is a problem because it contributes to delegitimising democracy. The ideology of democracy obfuscates political reality and leaves us with no argument against adversaries of democracy from within.

This is the cultural and political context in which a new form of representative government is today primed to emerge within the democratic nest, thus changing democracy from within, silently and inadvertently.

A problem of shallow cultural foundations

Youngho Cho, Sogang University

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Many democracy indices exist that can discern trends over time, but there are no indices that identify or measure all aspects of political systems, that define open and competitive elections, and that are needed, therefore, to make conclusions about which aspects of democracy are on the decline and which are on the rise around the world.

Such comprehensive data would make for a much less titillating view about the state of democracy in the world, but it would be a more accurate and responsible one.

Democracy as equality

Clare Woodford, University of Brighton

For too long political thought has muddled democracy – the enactment of the equality of all – with representative regimes we call democratic but which are in actual fact always oligarchic.


The equality of the people cannot be institutionalised. This does not mean that some forms of institutionalisation would not be more disposed towards democracy than others.

It seems pertinent to question the relationship between democracy and the regimes that go by its name. But the focus of such questioning must surely be the manner and extent to which any regime creates and supports (or represses and undermines) the ongoing conditions for democracy rather than simply institutionalising and entrenching one form of equality over others such that it becomes stale and oppressive.

A debate over whether democracy is dead or alive may only work to discipline the demos in an ill-fated attempt to defend it. But the very emergence of this debate highlights the urgency with which we must attend to the ways in which emancipation has become entangled with and subverted by domination through institutionalisation.

To misrecognise democracy is to place more barriers in its way. As long as things could be other than they are democracy is always possible. Regardless of how long it is suppressed or lies dormant, and to the perpetual chagrin of its opponents, democracy can never die.

You can read the rest of the series [here](#).

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Is Democracy Dead or Alive?