Democracy and the Virus: A Series of Reflections

The Athens Democracy Forum has asked some of our past and future speakers for their thoughts on how the current crisis is impacting democracy, and the lessons to be learned. We will be posting their responses to a series of questions on a rolling basis in coming weeks.

The Future is Wide Open



By Nathan Gardels

ADF: How are the various governmental responses to the coronavirus impacting democracy in the short and long term? Is there a place for deliberative democracy in times of crisis, or is it simply too much of a luxury?

NG: The first real-time global pandemic has so broken the inertia of old ways that the future has rarely seemed so open. The slate is nearly wiped clean. The decisions we take now are thus immensely consequential because they will shape the times to come for the rest of the century and beyond.

Yet, this unanticipated aperture arrives at the very moment of crisis in the democratic institutions through which open societies make their collective choices and set the narrative that guides their trajectory.

The populist eruptions of recent years did not cause this crisis of governance. They are symptoms of the decay of democratic institutions across the West that, captured by the organized special interests of an insider establishment, failed to address the dislocations of globalization and the disruptions of rapid technological change already roiling societies before the pandemic.

To add danger to decay, the fevered partisans of populism have been assaulting the very integrity of institutional checks and balances that guarantee the enduring survival of republics. The revolt against a moribund political class has transmuted into a revolt against sound governance itself at the very moment it is most needed. Leaders from the United States to Brazil, catapulted into

office by posing as tribunes of the disaffected masses, have exhibited such stunning incompetence that they now even threaten the public health of nations.

If the present polarization continues to so paralyze us that we can't even reach a governing consensus on how to cope with the common enemy of each and every one of us, democracy itself may end up being the principal victim of this modern plague.

The looming choices that require democratic deliberation are many and enormous. The Covid crisis has shone a spotlight on long-festering inequality, revealing that the essential "connective labor" of the 21st-century service economy, where people on the front line who matter more than machines – from health employees to bus drivers to store clerks – mostly toil a paycheck away from poverty. Will they finally be paid what they are worth to society? As taxpayers, should they not just bear the cost of bailing out troubled companies in the wake of the pandemic, but also share in the upside of wealth creation through owning equity shares when the economy returns to prosperity?

Are tax breaks for the rich and corporations the best way to stimulate rapid recovery, or, on the contrary, should the wealthy be taxed far more progressively in order to fund universal health care, a broader safety net and putting people to work through massive investment in infrastructure that pumps consumer demand into the economy? Should such investments bend toward a non-fossil-fuel future through a "Green New Deal"? In short order, citizens will be asked nothing less than to ratify or reject a new social and ecological contract.

Such seminal choices extend to the interface with the global economy and world order. How far should we roll back globalization to lessen our exposure to the vulnerabilities of interdependence? What are the limits to such an ingathering retreat from a planetary mentality when pandemics and climate change transcend the boundaries of sovereign shores? What about the military posture which has undergirded the balance of power in a post-Cold War world? To what extent should defense spending priorities shift away from hard-power arsenals toward basic research in vaccines, immunology and climate change mitigation?

Representative democracy, so riven by partisanship and dominated by the organized special interests of the pre-Covid past, will not be able to muster the legitimacy to make such momentous decisions without an inclusive process of broad citizen engagement. For that reason, of all the pressing challenges emanating from the Covid crisis, first and foremost is restoring the capacity for effective governance by mending the breach of distrust between citizens and the institutions of self-government.

At a time when digital connectivity has drawn more players into the political discourse than ever before, that necessarily entails integrating social networks and more direct democracy into the system through new mediating institutions that complement representative government and compensate for its waning legitimacy in the age of distributed power.

Such enhanced engagement by citizens can only be effective if equipped with the capacity to bring knowledge and expertise to bear on the issues at hand while being embedded in institutional arrangements that enable and encourage the reasoned practices of negotiation and

compromise. As the Berggruen Institute's recent report, "Renewing Democracy in the Digital Age" catalogues, there are many deliberative platforms for what it calls "participation without populism," ranging from Citizens' Assemblies indicative of the body politic at large to citizen-initiated ballot measures vetted through a "second reading," either by citizen review panels or elected legislatures.

These practices of deliberative democracy themselves will also be transformed where necessary from in-person to digital means of convening. Under the auspices of its Digital Minister, Audrey Tang, Taiwan is already breaking new ground on this front. Each year a Presidential Hackathon takes place with 10 million online participants — half the population of the country. In this exercise, citizens debate key policy questions and collectively set the top priorities the country should pursue. The president, the government and the legislature are bound to be responsive to that guidance.

None of the big choices that chart the course ahead will be easy. The scope of a crisis that has affected everyone will inevitably also mean changes that impact everyone. All will involve trade-offs between constituencies of the past and the future, among contending interests and contesting worldviews.

For such auspicious decisions just to be taken, no less to take hold, we must find new ways to obtain the distributed consent of the governed in densely wired democratic societies far removed from the 18th-century conditions when the present institutions of delegated representation were originally conceived.

The Covid-19 trauma has presented an historic opportunity for open societies to repair the dysfunction of the institutions through which they make their governing choices by freeing the democratic imagination from received convention that anchored it to the past.

Nathan Gardels is co-founder of the Berggruen Institute and editor-in-chief of its publication, Noema.