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The Second Danger to Democracy

We talk so much of the first danger to democracy– we seem to speak of nothing else – that we hardly have time to think about the second. The first danger is known by all: populism. No decent journal or political analyst exists on either side of the political spectrum that has not raised its voice against the growing threat of populism. There is a second threat however to which Marc Plattner calls our attention to in his seminal essay. This second threat is radical pluralism.

Plattner suggests that democracy is also a hybrid system – as opposed to those approaches according to which only non democracies are considered hybrid regimes. In the sense that the essence of democracy is given by two opposing, or at least competing elements: democracy is simultaneously majoritarian (democratic) and anti-majoritarian (liberal). There has to be balance between these two fundamentals, as the American Founding Fathers realized early on, for example in the Federalist Papers. Federalist No. 10 warns of the dangers of the total victory of democracy and offers diversity as a restricting principle against it, rightly so.

The abuse of majoritarian rule brings a lot of tension into this constant competition, and the one sided shift towards the democratic principle produces the already mentioned populist zeitgeist. Plattner however does not stop here but speaks with The abuse of majoritarian rule brings a lot of tension into this constant competition, and the one sided shift towards the democratic principle produces the already mentioned populist zeitgeist. Plattner however does not stop here but speaks with equal emphasis of the second danger which is when radical pluralism (the anti majoritarian principle) runs amuck. In this case we mean when diversity becomes all encompassing to the extent that it sucks in social cohesion – which stems rather from the democratic principles – and societies disintegrate into atomized groups of individuals. Here too Plattner refers to the second Federalist, which calls attention to the danger of too much diversity, and rightly. All encompassing diversity endangers the essence of liberal democracy, the balance of the levels of individuals and community.

We therefore have two equally significant dangers: radical pluralism wants to get rid of the community leg of democracy while the one sided majoritarian principle wants to suck the life out of the part of democracy concerning the individual. If this is the case we are right to raise the question why do we talk almost exclusively of the first danger – or rather the populist challenge connected to it – and why do we not see the second encroachment as dangerous? Further more why do we see populism as a delusion nurtured by misguided souls that is independent of and alien to

the essence of democracy while we overlook, or perhaps never even notice the other excess?

The answer lies in the position and influence of the representatives of political theories. The fact that of the two dangers we are solely sensitive to populism comes from the influence of the liberal political and intellectual community; under this we mean informal influence often independent of government forces. In practice this means that the liberal political actors are much better at convincing people of the negative effects of populism than those democrats who think that the danger to democracy comes from the side of the exaggerated liberal doctrine. It is an even greater difference in influence that liberals could reach that we no longer see democrats as democrats, rather as the enemies of democracy who wish to eliminate it. The representatives of the majoritarian principle do not have such power to stigmatize. This is far from being about who is right (in politics this is always relative) but about who has more impact. Furthermore, there is no doubt that this influence prevails in Central Eastern Europe as well. The dominance of the narrative according to which populists endanger democracy (especially in Poland and Hungary) is perfectly clear. Conversely the populist narrative only explains half of the matter. We have to complete the picture in the spirit of Plattner; in the future it would be worth evaluating the past 25 years from the optics of exaggerated diversity.