



Journal of Intercultural Management and Ethics

JIME

ISSN 2601 - 5749, ISSN-L 2601 - 5749

published by

Center for Socio-Economic Studies and Multiculturalism
Iasi, Romania
www.csesm.warter.ro

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DEMOCRACY AND THE NEED FOR AUTONOMY

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Abstract

Democracy is a system to keep different groups and interests in balance. External changes like climate change, wars, mass immigration and changes in trade policies can influence the balance. That is why it is important to see democracy as a process. However, we have to be alert, a process is never completed. When changing the rules of the process we have to be alert that the citizens of democratic countries still have the perception that they are heard and have control over their own destiny.

In this paper some elements are described that can influence this perception of being in control.

Key words: Culture, Democracy, Autonomy, Agility, Mental Images, Rule of law.

Democracy and the need for Autonomy

According to the 2019 report of Freedom House, democracy is not something to take for granted. They concluded, “*A total of 68 countries suffered net declines in political rights and civil liberties during 2018, with only 50 registering gains.*” (Freedom in the World 2019, n.d.).

The Freedom House report is not the only source sounding alarm about the state of democracy. A May 8, 2018 article in The New York Times asked: “*Why Are So Many Democracies Breaking Down?*” (Albertus, & Menaldo, 2018)

The article says that, “*Italy, Poland, Hungary and even Spain: European democracy is in shambles. Critical threats to democracy have also surfaced in countries like Turkey, Brazil and the Philippines. Under President Trump’s “America First” orientation, leaders with authoritarian tendencies in places as disparate as Egypt, Honduras, Russia and Venezuela have trampled their political opponents without concern for anything more harmful than a tongue lashing from the United States.*” (Albertus, & Menaldo, 2018)

The question is, ‘Why do so many democracies backslide toward authoritarianism?’

Many scholars point to the erosion of a social consensus about the ‘rules of the game’ and norms of civility toward ‘others’ in society.

Several reasons for this can be quoted.

For instance, Frédéric Worms, in his book *Les maladies chroniques de la démocratie* is saying that no one democracy is static. Democracy is a way of keeping different groups and interests in balance. Our societies are in constant change.

New groups evolve and external changes like climate change, wars, mass immigration and a financial crisis can influence the balance. That is why it is important to see democracy as a process. We have to be alert, a process is never completed (Worms, 2017).

In the introduction of my forthcoming book (Wursten, 2019), I write about my observation that societal arrangements are always developed to give answers to the problems of a certain period in time. These answers have the tendency to ‘freeze’ and thus not to be agile enough to adapt to constant changes. In other words, constant maintenance is required.

Another factor for the uneasiness in finding new rules for democracy is that there is still not enough real understanding that democracy doesn't take the same shape in every country. In a paper on the EU (Wursten, & Lanzer, 2012) we showed how democracy in the UK is different from democracy in Switzerland, the Netherlands and France. These differences can be explained by the value configuration of each country. It was also shown that it can be explained in a systematic way by Seven Mental Images.

To analyze the confusion in the discussions about the shape of democracy I will follow-up on the conclusion from a paper on *Happiness* (Wursten, 2018a):

What is very important for the well-being of people is the perception of autonomy.

This autonomy is defined as the freedom to make your own decisions and to determine your own future as basic needs of adult human beings.

The importance of these basic needs was recently confirmed again by psychiatrists (Verbraak, 2016).

The decline in support of democracy can be explained (to a great extent) by the perception of many people that they do not have a say in the decisions shaping their lives as a consequence of globalization of businesses and internationalization of decision-making, for instance in the EU.

As an illustration of the above, four recent examples about this perception of loss of autonomy follows. In the remainder of this article I will use the abbreviation POLOA for the Perception of loss of Autonomy.

1. Brexit

In a very clever way the 'Leave side' in the UK was able to influence the Referendum to leave the European Union by using the slogan "*Take Back Control.*" This suggested a sense of loss of rightful 'ownership'. It also suggested that the politicians were not able to influence the decision-making in Brussels and to represent their interest. True or not that was not the concern of Peter Cummings, the one who was behind the slogan of the Brexiteers. As previously analyzed in a paper on culture and truth (Wursten, 2018b), in Contest countries (UK, USA, Canada, Australia) the definition of truth is: "*Truth is what works*".

2. The mood in the Middle- and Eastern European countries.

Reports show that there is a general feeling in Middle and Eastern European countries of a lack of control over people's lives. Citizens of these countries complain that after the fall of the dominating Soviet Empire they expected to be more free. What happened instead is that, in their perception the ideology changed, but many of the people in power during Communism are still in positions of power nowadays. Moreover, they feel that they were freed from the coercion by the Soviet Union and voluntarily joined the European Union. But now they discover that the rules of the EU are strongly limiting their freedom of decision-making. It is frustrating because in their minds it amounts to a perceived feeling of again lacking control over their own lives.

3. Subsidiarity and the drive for centralization.

Recently Peter Vandermeersch, the parting Editor in Chief of the Dutch newspaper NRC was interviewed in De Morgen, a Belgian equivalent (Vandermeersch, 2019). This was interesting for several reasons. Most of all because Vandermeersch was born and raised in Belgium. Still he was asked to be the chief of a Dutch newspaper. Being exposed to Dutch society he could see the differences in the two political/societal value systems. He discovered that in spite of some criticisms he liked the new environment. It was so strong that he asked for naturalization.

He analyzed the differences in attitudes of Belgians and Dutch about leadership in the EU. These observations lead to an intriguing heading of the article: *“The Dutch think that Verhofstadt is the devil. And Rightly so.”*

Vandermeersch said that, *“The Dutch fear the Verhofstadt narrative. Not because they are afraid of Europe, but because the Netherlands is a democracy, an independent nation-state. And because we want to check the people we give power to. This is one of the reasons why I became a Dutch citizen. The citizen is much more central in the thinking, also for the public administration. If in my street half a stone is replaced I am fully informed about it.”*

Vandermeersch was talking about a very important cultural difference between two neighboring countries, partly using the same language ‘*acceptance of hierarchy*’.

In the fundamental research of Geert Hofstede (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010) Belgium scores high on this cultural dimension, while the Netherlands scores low, meaning that hierarchy is not seen as an existential fact of life but only accepted for convenience.

In a hierarchical culture people accept that decisions are made top-down. It is the privilege of the people who are at the top of the pyramid. In the small Power Distance countries people see it as self-evident that decision-making takes place bottom-up preferably as close as possible to the level where the people have to cope with the consequences.

Verhofstadt, the leader of the liberal faction of the European Parliament, is a fervent fan of more centralization in the EU. As a Belgian this is for him a no brainer. This is just an example of how much culture influences the thinking of people and how much this is underestimated in Brussels.

Of course lip service is paid to the diversity of the European environment. We have to celebrate this diversity some politicians say. Again an underestimation of what it means in reality.

In a special series of articles published by the Economist about management gurus, Geert Hofstede was pictured as the Godfather of Empirical cultural research. The heading of the article was a quote of Hofstede: *“Culture is more often a source of conflict than of synergy. Cultural differences are a nuisance at best and often a disaster.”*

It is said that Monet, one of the Godfathers of the EU idea, once said in a discussion: *“I know that Europe is culturally very diverse and that the social systems are a reflection of that. But let us first build solid institutions so that the policies are irreversible. Then it is time to go back to culture and debate the diversity.”*

The implications of culture were subject of discussion during the preparation of the Maastricht treaty. It led to a clever decision about the steering principle for the EU: subsidiarity. Subsidiarity means that the higher levels in the EU should only decide about these subjects that cannot be dealt with at the local level.

Consequently the implications were underestimated. More and more decisions are seen as the realm of Brussels. More and more people have the impression that the discussions and decisions are made without taking the concern of the local concerns. Brexit and the resistance against Verhofstadt are a reflection on that.

The urgent implication of this lack of understanding the importance of culture is that the growing feeling of POLOA can only be reversed by going back to the principle of subsidiarity and to have extreme transparency to the EU citizens about what can only be done by the central level.

4. Cosmopolitan thinking versus the influence of Nation-States

For a long time it was rather clear what exactly the culture of a country entailed. However, as a result of globalization increasingly there is tension between the values of

people calling themselves ‘Cosmopolitans’ and people believing in the importance of the ‘Mores’ of the nation-states. The Cosmopolitans claim that the concept of the nation-state is outdated and morally doubtful. They even question the existence of something like a dominant national culture.

On the opposite side are people claiming that the nation-state is very much alive and they continue to give their citizens protection against the risks and negative outcomes of globalization and they emphasize the importance of national culture (Wursten, n.d.).

Cosmopolitans and Universal Values

Cosmopolitans have the tendency to see the big trends everywhere on the globe and see values as applicable to the human race. This thinking culminates in discussing the worldwide trends in a rational way and by strongly emphasizing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The same rights for all people, not looking at colour, in-group membership, religious affiliation gender or sexual preference.

However, this positive way of thinking can sometimes lead to the perception that they are not showing real empathy for how these abstract moral values can have harsh consequences for people living in their own local reality. The challenge that lies ahead is to strike a new balance between analyzing global trends and developments and promoting the rights of people on a global scale at one hand but also to show willingness to listen to the real concerns for what it means for people having to live the consequences in the local communities.

It is one thing to talk easily about ‘creative destruction’ and it is another thing to have empathy for the consequences of local people trying to cope with all the changes that are happening because of mass immigration and the globalization of economy, technology and finance. It is easy to talk and write about the expectation that digitalization, 3D printing and robotizing is leading to destruction of industries and as a result in a loss of employment. It is another thing to neglect the hardship for the local victims. It is easy to talk about the need to accept (illegal) immigrants, to be tolerant towards other religions, to accept the need for free trade and free movement of people inside the EU. But all this is different if you are confronted with your children who cannot find housing because of the need to accommodate immigrants. It is different if people in the name of a religion are committing terrorist acts in own your direct environment or if you lose your job because of Bulgarian and Romanian truck drivers who work much cheaper outside obligatory local contracts in the Netherlands or Belgium.

To avoid POLOA, it is a must for societal policy makers to create a new narrative for people how to cope with the problems of their children and how to find meaningful solutions for them.

Think globally, act locally

It is a necessity to understand that the problems are international. On the other hand, if we want to give people the feeling they have control over their destiny, solutions need to follow the ‘rules of the game’ of the culture at hand with real concern for the reality of people who are not living in a vacuum but in a concrete nation-state with historic roots, history and values.

Control and populism

Giving back control does not mean that it should lead to simplification of complex problems. The trap is that some people favor politicians who promise to give back a feeling of being in control to their electorate in a simple way.

“Do something about (illegal) immigrants taking your jobs”; “Be firm towards criminal North Africans or drug smuggling Mexicans and send them back to the home country of their (grand) parents and everything will be alright”, they promise.

What should be done is that the local citizens should be heard and be taken seriously in their need to find solutions for their problems. But, this should be balanced with the need to solve complex and global problems on a global scale, taking the Universal Human Rights as the principled approach. To say it in other words: if we want to give back to people the feeling of being in control, human rights are a leading principle but should not be applied without a consequential analysis together with local people.

The importance of the nation-state

For a better understanding, let's go back to the meaning of **cosmopolitan**. Cosmopolitanism refers to an inclusive moral, encompassing economic, and/or political relationship between individuals of different nations. In this way cosmopolitans are zooming out of the daily reality of nation-states.

On the other hand are people that believe in the importance of **nation-states**.

This concept has two meaningful parts:

Nation: people sharing a certain territory and having a shared national Consciousness and in principle accepting...

State: ...the authority, legitimacy and power of their political administration.

In contrast to cosmopolitans, the scholars that believe in the influence of nation-states strongly emphasize that people develop and define their values and norms in the context of the nation-state.

The norms are based on the historical developments of the country and are formalized in agreed upon laws. The visible and invisible ‘mores’ of the nation-state are an important element of the emotional identification of people.

Cosmopolitanism can lead to indifference against the roots of people. Luc Devoldere (Devoldere, 2014) says, *“False Cosmopolitanism is a cosmopolitanism that has no roots and as a result remains empty. We are only good Europeans with our focus if we know how to keep our rich cultural tradition alive.”*

Nation-states, values, emotions and control.

Geert Hofstede defines culture in a broad anthropological sense as:

The *“Collective programming of the human mind”*, where strong emotions are attached.

Some highly profiled politicians, writers and philosophers are convinced that globalization is changing national values and that it is old-fashioned to believe that country values are stable and create deeply rooted diverse mindsets. Even stronger, some of them are saying that referring to culture is to be compared to apartheid on a global scale. And apartheid is racism and fascism in one encompassing word (Sommer, 2016).

In his research Hofstede found that what people call cultural preferences are not a result of genes or chromosomes, they are the outcome of a subconscious learning process starting from the moment we are born. He calls this ‘programming’. He found in his empirical research that the content of this programming is best understood by looking at the level of the nation-state.

This idea that country values are old fashioned is refuted by the recent repeat of Hofstede's research published in June 2015 by Beugelsdijk, Maseland, & van Hoorn (2015). They showed that, in spite of global developments, the Hofstede findings are still valid and

consistent over time and valid. This means that ‘national values’ should be taken into account when talking about the consequences of globalization.

The misunderstanding is that cosmopolitans believe that culture is about the symbols, heroes and rituals from the past. What they do not really understand is that, what is important and consistent over time are values, the deepest layer of culture. These values are consistent over time and define the attitudes and sensitivities of the citizens.

This is neglected by the cosmopolitans. Talking about immigration a cosmopolitan thinker, Enzensberger (1992) used the train compartment as a metaphor for the nation-state: some people are already sitting in the compartment. Then the door opens and others are stepping in. The ones who were already there feel annoyed by the newcomers. They are disturbing the peace and are taking available room. You know, of course, that your feelings are “not right.” They have just as much right for a chair as you have.

What they refuse to recognize is the importance of emotional component.

Political commentator Martin Sommer says, “*The nation-state is something you purchase a ticket for and nothing else? No history, no shared destiny, no obligations? I don’t think so.*” He adds, “*When using the train compartment metaphor it is clear what some globalists are seeing as the European identity. That is to say: no identity. The European identity is about human rights, across borders, post- colonial, post Auschwitz. That’s why Europe cannot have real borders; because borders mean exclusion.*” (Piketty, 2014).

As a result, a polarization is growing between the emotions of people on the ‘grass roots’ level who feel POLOA in the different nation-states in Europe and the ‘rational’ opinions of the globalists who believe that it is stupid to be afraid.

5. Wealth, inequality, democracy and control

In 2013 Thomas Piketty put the issue of inequality again on the political agenda in his book *Capital in the Twenty First Century*. His theme is the consequences of wealth concentration and wealth distribution. Piketty shows that we are on a path back to ‘patrimonial capitalism’, in which the economy is controlled not by talented individuals but by family dynasties. Piketty proposes new wealth taxes, global if possible, to limit the power of inherited wealth.

Inherited wealth is dangerous for two reasons:

- Piketty suggests that the very size of inherited fortunes in a way makes them invisible. He says, “*Wealth is so concentrated that a large segment of society is virtually unaware of its existence, so that some people imagine that it belongs to surreal or mysterious entities.*”
- The group of people with inherited wealth can buy influence. It is for instance amazing to see the amount of billionaires that are involved in US elections. This is unacceptable because they can pull strings outside the control of the general public, leading to POLOA.

6. Global companies and the need for (political) control.

In discussions about global trade it is seen as a growing problem that companies operate worldwide and as a result stay mainly out of the control of the governments of the countries where they do business. One particular issue is taxes.

Global companies try to arrange their global business in such a way that they pay no taxes or as low a rate as possible. They try to locate their administrative HQ in countries where the political authorities for whatever reasons allow this to happen. This is a nuisance in the eyes of many citizens worldwide that are politically aware. The call is again to take back control.

Here France is interesting. France is the example of a hierarchical country with citizens who feel POLOA. It is the country of the nation-wide protest of the Yellow Vests,

citizens who feel they lost control. But France is also for the same reasons a country believing strongly in the power of the central Government.

Surprisingly enough France just decided to do something about the untouchable position of global companies like Google, Amazon and Apple. They decided to have a 3% e-tax for these companies. For a long time the global companies were making politicians and citizens powerless. But France is now the shining example of a country daring to do something about it.

Conclusion

To bring back the feeling of control for the citizens of nation-states it is a must to recognize the local consequences of global developments and to involve the members of the nation-states in discussing real solutions in terms of the local rules of the game. The powerful contribution of cultural knowledge is that seven local rules of the game are recently identified that can enable people to make some sense of how to approach the challenges in today's confusing world.

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