Review – Pluralist Democracy in International Relations

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Pluralist Democracy in International Relations: L.T. Hobhouse, G.D.H. Cole, and David Mitrany
By Leonie Holthaus
Palgrave Macmillan, 2018

The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted everyday lives globally. What was taken for granted one day, was challenged the next. Meeting family members, seeing friends, having a cup of coffee in a café, and sometimes simply leaving one's accommodation was no longer possible. Most of all, it has taken more than three million lives to date and many more millions suffer from symptoms of long Covid. Having one's everyday life so dramatically affected, unsurprisingly, it also meant that democracy has had a very bad year. Over the course of the pandemic, many democratic freedoms have been suspended or altogether taken away. While the pandemic provided new opportunities to mainly nationalistic, right-wing movements to challenge democracies and even new such movements like *Querdenken* in Germany emerged, this democratic decline was often not triggered by the pandemic but it merely amplified tendencies that we could observe for many years. In the United Kingdom, for example, Covid-19 further enabled a populist, nationalist government to reduce democratic control and solidify a crony capitalism that existed for a long time and came to the fore after the Brexit vote in 2016. If International Relations, therefore, really wants to bridge the theory – practice divide, our discipline needs to ask what democracy entails and what it takes to be protected from any force that threatens it. As Judith Shklar put it at the end of the Cold War, 'anyone who thinks that fascism in one guise or another is dead and gone ought to think again' (Scheuerman 2021, p.1). It may not be fascism, but, as the Covid pandemic has shown, there are many other threats to democracy.

One way to reflect on these questions is what the generation of scholars like Shklar did at the end of the nineteenth until the mid-twentieth century. Trying to unlearn modern imaginaries by engaging with intellectual thought prior to these imaginaries, they critiqued contemporary affairs and acted as political scholars not least as many of them experienced first-hand the consequences that the global transformation of the nineteenth century had brought about, ranging from the socio-political changes of industrialisation to the horrors of the First and Second World Wars. In a similar way, we can go back to their work today. Admittedly, one has to be cautious in making comparisons and drawing conclusions. The situation today is not the same as back then, but their work can serve as a powerful reminder of what democracies should entail and they help to act as a corrective to threats that they face in today's world. The recent contribution by Leonie Holthaus on*Pluralist Democracy in International Relations* precisely offers such stimulations. This may not have been Holthaus's main intention, but it is a sign of any great work that it takes the reader to places that the author may not have intended or even thought about. Engaging with key British pluralist thinkers, she not only resurrects this intellectual tradition – and shows that there is much more to British political thought than liberalism – but she also encourages a country like the United Kingdom, 'which is often seen as a success story of democracy' (pp.1-2), to be critical and humble about its own past and challenge current political developments.

In her book, Holthaus engages with three British (and British nationalised) thinkers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. First, Leonard T. Hobhouse, a 'public moralist' (p.10), who after studying in Oxford joined the Manchester Guardian and eventually became the first British professor of sociology at the LSE. Second, the 'activist scholar' (p.11), George D. H. Cole, who had a somewhat similar trajectory to Hobhouse, although Cole was much more to the left politically. Equally writing for the Manchester Guardian, Cole was a member of the Fabian Society

and advocated the co-operative movement, before studying at Oxford, eventually becoming the first Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory. Finally, David Mitrany. Although he also briefly worked for the Manchester Guardian at the beginning of his career, the Romanian-born Mitrany had a different trajectory to Hobhouse and Cole. He not only spent several years in the United States but he also continued to criss-cross between academia and the world of policy-relevance, working amongst others for Chatham House. Although all three scholars somewhat diverged in terms of their political allegiances and, as Holthaus (p.10) reminds us, 'there is no doubt that their thinking bore traces of the imperialist and racist legacies of their time', their work still allows to distil insights that are of relevance for today's democracies.

First, the work of Hobhouse, Cole, and Mitrany speaks out against any form of nationalist populism which portrays political communities – in today's world typically the nation-state – as made up of a homogenous group of a 'true' people. This is what their coeval, the Austro-American legal scholar Hans Kelsen, would have called a meta-political illusion, which was denounced by them, as political communities are pluralist. There is not one homogenous group, but people have different loyalties and pursue different interests, as, for example, the three scholars showed with their work on and engagement in transnational socialist movements. As such, they were also acutely aware that democracies 'require considerably more than the occasional choice of representatives'. Rather, it 'is about participation and deliberation' (p.7) by providing fora inside and outside of parliaments. Hans Morgenthau, who knew at least Mitrany personally, tried to encapsulate this pluralism in his concept of the political, meaning that participation in a political community is not restricted to citizenship, but anyone who wants to contribute to the community in approximating a common good is given a voice to do so. This is not only different to nationalist understandings of the state, seeing it as naturally given, but also to contemporary democracies in which political participation often excludes foreigners and even ethnic minorities.

Second, Holthaus nicely elaborates how these three scholars and particularly Mitrany 'diagnosed a disturbing transformation of representative democracy into what he aptly called poll democracy … generally known as Schumpeterian … democracy' (p.209). Their work serves as reminder to take a stance against the increasing depoliticisation in modern democracies (p.214), in which people are being reduced to merely casting a vote every couple of years and political decisions are being reduced to administrative acts. Similar to his coevals on the other side of the Atlantic like Kelsen and Morgenthau, Mitrany already cautioned against the disempowerment of parliaments in favour of an elite bureaucracy, detached from the rest of the population, back in the 1950s (p.213), as it would no longer be able to control government and represent the combined interests of all people. It also would make it much easier to establish and/or maintain an oligarchy, in which a ruling class keeps a firm grip over a country, enabling this class to govern by nepotism and cronyism.

However, while this may not have been her main intention, and admittedly Holthaus has addressed this elsewhere, the conclusion is a bit of a lost opportunity to contextualise this British pluralist thought further, and reflect upon its implications for the discipline today and international politics. Hobhouse, Cole, and Mitrany were part of a generation of scholars, while diverging epistemologically, methodologically, and ontologically, and with different worldviews, they all experienced the horrors of the First and Second World Wars, were trained in many different disciplines, and often were practitioners-cum-scholars. Holthaus mentions classical realism briefly in the conclusion but there seems to me striking similarities with scholars like Hans Morgenthau, Hans Kelsen, Ernst Fraenkel, and Hannah Arendt that deserve further investigation. For them, freedom was situated in the contingency of human encounters and subsequent grappling to approximate a common good in an antagonism of interests. Only democracies that protect the pluralism in their societies can therefore ensure freedom. For a discipline that aims to bridge the practice-theory divide and strives to be truly global (but seems to be more and more disaggregated into their own bubbles) and for a world in which nationalism has made an unwelcomed comeback, exploring the thought of this generation of scholars in detail would provide an important stimulus to develop different global imaginaries.

With *Pluralist Democracy in International Relations*, Holthaus has put forward a work that invites us to think in many ways. She unearthed for International Relations parts of British intellectual thought that so far received less attention than, for example, geopolitics to demonstrate the importance of democracy for the development of the discipline, but for me her reading of Hobhouse, Cole, and Mitrany also stimulates reflection on what it takes to practically protect democracies from nationalism, cronyism, and populism, much of which the Covid-19 pandemic has put into the

limelight in many democracies globally.

About the author:

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