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## Introduction to “The Crisis of Liberal Democracy and the Path Ahead: Alternatives to Political Representation and Capitalism”

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# **The Crisis of Liberal Democracy and the Path Ahead**

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# The Crisis of Liberal Democracy and the Path Ahead

Bernd Reiter

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# Introduction

There are two universal crises today and the two are related. One is the crisis of liberal democracy, which at its core is a crisis of political representation and of politics. Most elected representatives do not really represent us and politics has deteriorated into a spectacle the average citizen merely watches, but no longer controls. The other crisis is economic. There is no end to competition. Taken together, decreasing market returns, resource limits imposed by the global ecosystem, and the nature of relational markets impose a behavioral structure in which average people have to compete harder and harder just to keep up. Under the current capitalist model, the only possible end to this scenario is a less and less attractive world and life for more and more people. While each of these problems is serious in itself, their interaction makes them even more pernicious, as political equality is threatened by extreme economic inequality and political inequality is instrumentalized to advance economic privilege (Frank 2011).

The current state of affairs is made worse by a lack of viable alternatives and coherent visions or utopias—particularly on the left (Albo, Gindin, and Panitch 2010). We are in a poor state of affairs indeed if socialism and communism are the only utopias we can envision. While the left seems not to have a shared vision of a viable and desirable utopia, the vision of the right, while coherent, is even less viable and attractive. Ayn Rand and her followers have a concrete proposal for improving the ethics of our times: less government, free markets, and more competition. Their message is easily understood and, thanks to massive support from the likes of the Koch Brothers, Fox News, Donald Trump, Ron Paul, Ted Cruz, and so many more, it is also broadly disseminated. It has received scientific endorsements by such known scholars as Robert Nozick, Milton Friedman, and Friedrich Hayek. After all, “free markets” sounds very similar to “freedom” in general—even if it is

not. While the right's vision is coherent, it is also callous to fellow citizens because its only answer to increased inequality seems to be "it is your own fault." It is also callous to the world because it does not have an answer to the fragility of our shared ecosystem. The right's vision is also poor, as betting on selfish profit motives and hoping for the best is not a vision at all. It is based on poor science and it is morally unacceptable. "More" cannot be our only utopia. Not given the limited resources of this planet (Klein 2014).

The current crisis of democracy and of markets is thus accompanied by a crisis of ideas, which finds expression in a lack of attractive alternatives and viable utopias able to guide our thoughts and actions. To achieve any goal, we first need to know where we are heading (Santos 2014). This also implies a rethinking of what it means to be radical today, as the dogmatic left has captivated this label so that anything not falling within a Marxist framework is deemed bourgeois, liberal, and not truly radical. It is high time to think outside the available socialist-capitalist boxes.

This book shows that it is simply not true that there are no alternatives and that the only alternatives to parliamentarism and capitalism are anarchy and communism. These are lies told by all those who have much to gain from the way the current system works—because it works for them. Our world now has twelve million millionaires, and those twelve million control not just the economies of their countries; they also control politics in most of them and shape the messages that are disseminated to all of us. They rule for us and ultimately they rule us—and they make us believe that there are no alternatives. But they lie. To the over seven billion people living on this planet, these twelve million have been bad and selfish rulers. They have been anything but the enlightened philosopher kings Plato dreamed about. Instead of looking for new rulers, this book argues that with the expansion of education and the communicative capabilities of the twenty-first century, we can all become philosopher queens and rule ourselves. The more we do so, the more we can also reign in our markets and protect them against the abuse by the few.

To prove this point, I present twenty-two empirical cases, historical and contemporary, of societies and groups who have either ruled themselves without relying on political representatives or who have established equitable markets and avoided the formation of great inequalities—or both. I then compare twenty-one cases systematically in order to detect common elements. In doing so, this book seeks to unveil the common and necessary factors that make direct democracy and equitable market organization possible. My main argument and message is: Direct democracy is possible, representative democracy is not the only way to organize even large collectives, and markets can be fair and remain fair over generations if properly institutionalized and regulated.

The evidence collected and analyzed for this book leaves no doubt that there are concrete and viable alternatives to representative democracy and to capitalism—and hence to liberal democracy. This book is written with the explicit intent to showcase these alternatives and to highlight the possible solutions to the problems of elite domination they contain. It is my explicit intent to present a new utopia and a viable alternative to the current scenario of crises—the crisis of political representation and the crisis of capitalism. We *can* create and maintain political and economic systems that allow for more justice, more equality, and more sustainability.

This is, however, not a policy book. Before we can devise policies, we need to find a common goal worth pursuing, which is the contribution this book makes. This is also not a book on how to put new systems in place. It will take political will and social pressure to change the political and economic institutions that currently regulate formal democracies. It will take a strong, pervasive, and consistent global movement.

Some analysts, myself included, believe that such a movement is already under way (Melman 2001; Wolff 2012). Solidarity economies are spreading. A German author presents one hundred empirical examples of alternative ways to organize different parts of our daily lives—from eating to dressing, the way services are provided, living, finance, education, health, communication, mobility, to having “fun” (Habermann 2009). In Austria, a group formed around the idea of an economy for the common good has, as of November 2016, over 7,700 supporters among municipalities, associations, persons, politicians, and companies. (see <http://economia-del-bien-comun.org> for updated numbers). Gibson-Graham’s network of community economics lists thirty-four active academic members, plus an extended research network of several hundred scholars (see <http://www.communityeconomies.org/people> for updates). In southeastern Turkey and northern Iraq, among the Kurdish minority, a council movement has emerged, practicing self-rule, local autonomy, gender liberation, and agro-ecology (TATORT 2013). In Quebec, Canada, social economy initiatives are sprouting because they receive active governmental support (Bouchard 2013). Fair trade is expanding and has become one of the fastest-growing economic sectors in Europe and the United States, while in the United Kingdom, the Transition Town Movement has not only conquered England, but has spread across the globe, with its message to create more livable and less polluted communities (<http://www.transitionnetwork.org/>).

Parts of the message this global movement spreads resonate strongly with another worldwide movement—one that found a voice in Tunisia in 2011 and from there traveled all over the Middle East and the world: the movement against corrupt governments that do not represent us (Sitrin and Azzelini 2014). Part of this movement involved uprisings and protests—against

Wall Street, against a Brazilian government more worried about soccer than the well-being of its millions of poor people, against elitist universities in Chile—and in general against “the establishment.” In Italy, the Five Star Movement came in second place in the general elections of 2013 with its platform of direct democracy, e-democracy, nonviolence, and de-growth. In Spain, Podemos (Yes, We Can) came in third place in the Spanish general elections of 2015. Similar to Five Star, Podemos has included many policies that aim at reigning in the power and influence of multinational corporations and the central state.

The other part of this movement unfortunately found its voice in the support of right-wing and anti-immigrant political parties and movements, all of which are taking advantage of the very pervasive discontent with traditional party politics and traditional politicians by offering yet another nontraditional candidate in hopes to finally side pass the “establishment.”

In the United States, this has led to growing support for libertarians who tend to highlight their “against the government” ideology, while downplaying or hiding their oftentimes nasty anti-poor, anti-black, anti-foreigner, and pro-rich policies. The presidency of Donald Trump can only be explained, I think, with this sort of growing discontent with politics as usual and the absence of viable alternatives. In continental Europe, this anti-politics tendency has strengthened the anti-immigrant parties and legitimized the platforms of the Le Pens, Pegida, the Orbans, the Hofers, and their ideological brothers and sisters elsewhere.

For Sandro Mezzadra, “the problem of transition reemerges in each historical moment when the conditions of translation have to be established anew” (Mezzadra 2007, 4). The “conditions of translation” have indeed been lost to many, in many different countries, as nations seem to become more divided and the different camps are increasingly unable to understand the premises and convictions informing the political and cultural choices of other camps.

What unites these phenomena, it appears, is a widely shared and growing skepticism against the way government is practiced today. In the absence of viable alternatives, this discontent finds an outlet in *new* political parties and movements. On the right, they take advantage of this widespread disenchantment and sell it, laced with racism, xenophobia, and pro-business policies. In the absence of concrete and viable alternatives, the left has succumbed to an “against” movement that does not have a concrete, let alone shared, vision for how politics and economics *should* work. Given the hegemonic discourse about what “politics” means and can mean, the only option available is to create another political party. Once social movements become political parties, however, their ability to effectively change politics is lost. They either play along or remain ineffective, as the history of the Green Party in such countries as Germany has long demonstrated.

Without an alternative vision, it is not surprising that there is no left agenda or roadmap of concrete steps that can and must be taken. The left, in short, is in a deep ideological crisis. It is a crisis of ideas and utopias, as well as a crisis of concrete policies connected to a comprehensive vision of a better future. It is a very deep crisis indeed, as there are currently no serious treatments of alternatives to capitalism and representative democracy. Anything outside of this paradigm is presented as lacking seriousness, of being impractical, utopian, or overly radical.

On an even deeper level, the current crisis is rooted in a crisis of the way we organize. The political and economic crises are both “crises of organization,” as almost all organizations we currently have, including the biggest and most powerful of all organizations, the state, are organized hierarchically and around the idea of leaders, elites, and rulers. Most societies have erected systems in which the most callous, least scrupulous, and most power-hungry individuals rise to the top of social, political, and economic hierarchies. Once there, most of them find ways to defend their undeserved privileges and entrench their elitism. We need to rethink the way we organize our collective lives—at home and at work, but also in and around our political systems and the state (Laloux 2014).

### A NOTE ON METHOD

Theory, the way I understand it, cannot solve social or political problems. Theory is a heuristic tool to order the world and make sense of it by reducing its complexity and by naming and categorizing it. Proposing different causal explanations and models allows us to look at reality a certain way. Nothing guarantees that the world actually conforms to our theories about it. As a result, I do not seek to solve the problems of entrenched political and economic elitism theoretically. Instead, I have spent the past years looking for empirical examples (cases) from which to learn. Each case I found (I have found twenty-two so far) offers a partial solution to the problem of elitism and we can learn from each one. The kinds of solutions I am interested in are institutional solutions; that is, solutions that have become consolidated, repeated, legitimized, produced associated roles for different individuals and groups and predictable behavior that, in a broader sense, contributes to the structuring of a society or group. This interest in institutions is grounded in my conviction that the world is socially constructed and that it is potentially open—even if most institutions, once in place, appear fixed and “natural” to us, even reflecting back at us so that we use them to make sense of our own biographies (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

This book is thus motivated by a search for viable, practiced, and practicable political institutions able to regulate social, political, and economic life better than those we currently have in the Western, “modern” world. Particularly, I set

out to find political institutions that have achieved, at one point or another and in one place or another, political and/or economic equity. I found many, and I will describe and list them in what is to come. Knowing these institutions alone, I think, provides a powerful argument against all those who argue that “there are no alternatives” or that we have reached the “end of history.” Each single institution described contradicts this claim. Taken together, they provide a formidable political toolbox to address the problem of political and economic elitism and protect fairness and equal opportunity on different markets.

Once listed, the question becomes: How can we compare such a large number of rich cases systematically so that we can learn from all of them, taken together? Traditional analytical tools are of no help here. Fortunately, a relatively new tool, introduced to an English-speaking audience first by the American sociologist Charles Ragin (1987), called Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), promises a solution. Relying on set theory, QCA seeks to identify the common factors or conditions present in all cases examined—and their interaction—in producing an outcome. The assumption is that if some factors are present across all cases with the same outcome, they must be, to some degree, necessary or even sufficient to explain this outcome. Procedurally, this method proceeds by constructing “truth tables” in which values are given to the specific factors present in different cases with the same outcome. Membership in a set at this stage of this still-evolving approach is defined by degrees, ranging from 0 to 1, with different decimal values in between, where 0 stands for “fully out” of a set (that is, a nonmember) and 1 stands for “fully in” (that is, a full member). The 0.5 value represents the “crossover point.” What is above the crossover point is more in than out of a set. What is below the crossover point is more out than in. The in between values thus stand for “more in than out,” “mostly in,” “almost entirely out,” etc. Ragin and the growing group of researchers applying this approach have termed partial membership Fuzzy Sets, so that the method is now called Fuzzy Set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA). QCA then relies on the rules of Boolean Algebra for the analysis of causal conditions occurring across different cases.

Ragin has developed a (free) software package so that anyone can now run fsQCA. For the purpose of this book, fsQCA offers a promising, systematic, and rigorous method to compare a larger number of cases and to assess which factors contained in them are of causal relevance for producing and protecting equity in politics and in markets.

## THE PLAN OF THIS BOOK

In chapter 1, I will elaborate the conceptual foundations on which the ensuing analysis rests. After highlighting the importance of utopian thinking in

the social sciences, I explain and define the way I treat culture, institutions, politics, power, and the state.

Chapters 2 and 3 lay out the theoretical foundations for the analysis to follow. Chapter 2 focuses on democracy and chapter 3 on markets. Without theory, we cannot perceive the world. Theories or theoretical models give us guidance. They inform us what to look for and how to order information in such a way that patterns and meaning emerge. Without theoretical explanations, the world does not make sense to us. Without an *explicit* theoretical framework, we run the risk of adopting theory without knowing it and explaining the world in the terms of someone else's theoretical outlook. To avoid this, I will first spell out the theoretical framework that makes this investigation possible in part I of this book. Part II then presents the empirical findings I have collected over the past years. Part III finally seeks to bring all the empirical cases together for a systematic, qualitative case comparison.

The methodology I have used to analyze my cases is first descriptive. I provide a very short overview of those aspects of a given society or community that are relevant to the purpose of this book. I focus primarily on innovative institutions, regulations, laws, customs, and constitutions. I purposefully brush over the negative aspects or even the (yet) unfulfilled aspects of reality, as I am not concerned with those. This book intends to highlight possibilities and point toward new directions, and I am fully aware that most cases have not achieved the "perfect" state of affairs—or not even the state of affairs written down in their laws, regulations, and constitutions. Any description is theory driven, and in my case, this means that I focus on those aspects of reality, or even of an idealized reality, I find promising and relevant.

The second part of this book thus consists of a description of twenty-two empirical cases that are relevant to the purpose of this book, namely, finding alternatives to liberal democracy. The cases range from ancient Athens to contemporary Zomia in East Asia. In the third part, I compare my cases systematically, using fsQCA with the specific purpose of identifying common and hence necessary factors related to a given outcome across different cases; here direct democracy and equitable markets. The book ends with a summary of my main findings, some conclusions, and some policy recommendations for a better, more sustainable, and more democratic future.