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Guest Editorial: Rethinking Democracy

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Despite the general claims of triumph and success by its proponents and defenders, the universality and normativity of democracy is currently under scrutiny. Its proponents claim democracy as the most important development in the twentieth century (Sen, 1999). Democracy has been widely accepted as the ‘normal’ form of government to which all nations are entitled – whether in Europe, America, Asia, or Africa. The assumption is that for a nation to prosper, a democratic state is required. Democracy is hailed as the only system of governance where there is freedom of expression, equality, economic development and peace.

Recent academic debates, however, have revealed diverse attitudes toward democracy. On the one hand, there is a general agreement within mainstream scholarship – what Kanbur (2002) has called the mainstream of development economics – that democracy is a requirement for the emergence of accountable and responsive forms of government (Faguet, 2014). This idea has become widely accepted and nourished local and global debates around the sustainability and desirability of democratic regimes. For instance, the 1 May 2014 edition of *The Economist* in an article on ‘What’s gone wrong with democracy’, argued that:

‘Democracies are on average richer than non-democracies, are less likely to go to war and have a better record of fighting corruption. More fundamentally, democracy lets people speak their minds and shape their own and their children’s futures. That so many people in so many different parts of the world are prepared to risk so much for this idea is testimony to its enduring appeal’ (The Economist 2014).

On the other hand, scholars like Ballestrin (2014) call attention to the colonial logic of hegemonic western democracy, and its link to capitalism and the natural disasters and conflicts it has created. She and others argue that the hegemony of western democracy founded on the central tenets of Thomas Paine, undermines other equally democratic and just systems of governance around the world, as well as limits the possibility of practicing local democracy. It seems that democracy is again a subject that needs to be rethought.

As we explore in this journal issue, rethinking democracy implies a critical attitude of going beyond claims of universality and normativity of democracy as a given concept and set of practices. In its broadest sense the word democracy (demos and kratos) can be simply translated as people

power, rule of the people, or from the people-by the people-for the people. This basic idea has been translated to the dominant form of (western) democracy that we have today – a system of government considered so good that, instead of asking if a country was fit for democracy, twentieth-century scholars assumed that a country should become fit through democracy (Sen, 1999). However, in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, democracy has taken a turn that has resulted in various signs of civil discontent with contemporary form(s) of government. Massive demonstrations have taken place in the main squares and avenues of several cities – particularly in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, and Latin America – against authoritarian rule, massive corruption and governments’ failures in providing employment and social welfare. Since 2009, the world has witnessed: the ousting of ruling regimes in Benin, Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, the formal birth of elected governments in Pakistan, the rise of the global Occupy movement that emerged out of the Wall Street effort, which has been active in more than 30 countries worldwide against corporate influence in politics;¹ the allegations of repression against civilian protesters in Iran, Syria, Turkey, Venezuela and Ukraine; and the uprising of social mobilizations in Brazil against the enormous costs of hosting the 2014 FIFA World Cup. These mass demonstrations and uprisings around the globe indicate the widespread nature of civil discontent against the liberal norms of western democracy. As we write the editorial, we have just witnessed the brutal execution of 30 Ethiopian and Eritrean nationals in Libya, and the ongoing debate about democracy related to the Middle East and Africa where people have tried to escape the ill fate in their homeland, only to meet death when their boats sank in the Mediterranean before reaching the coast of Europe.

The journal articles, writing from diverse and critical viewpoints about democracy as they are currently being debated in development research and policy illustrated through case studies in Bolivia, Colombia, India, Indonesia, Malawi, Peru, South Africa and Uganda. Each of the articles look at democracy and its practices in these specific contexts and portray a different voice that is contributing to a rethinking of democracy. The journal issue reflects overall on the problems of democracy by asking several questions: is it (western) democracy that is so desired by the people around the globe, or is it rather, a better life for all? Is the (western) form of democracy as we have it today, the only way of practicing democracy? Are current efforts to democratize the world not just another form of colonialism?

The articles are drawn from papers given at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), Erasmus University 12th Development Dialogue organized by PhD students at ISS, including those in the editorial team. We invited researchers from around the world to gather at a conference held in October 2014 to rethink democracy by sharing their original research on different dimensions of ‘democracy’. We had a wealth of responses and the Dialogue featured studies in areas such as health, education, social security systems, social movements, land grabbing and food sovereignty, environmental studies, finances and microfinance, world and domestic trade, production systems, conflict studies, and legal and institutional reforms. As reflected in the 12th Development Dialogue and now this journal issue, the overall message is that people desire economic and social well-being and that most people do see democracy as the most likely means to achieve that, and not an end in itself. The different articles demonstrate that although democracy might be universally valued, in practice there are many ways of doing democracy. Most of all, we need to be critical about the interlinkages between democracy, capitalism, and how this leads toward increasing militarism and military invasion of ‘democratic’ countries toward ‘non-democracy’, leading to the resulting disasters for so many people today.

Three papers from South Africa evaluate the problems within democratic systems, and encourage us to think about how to improve the practice of democracy in those cases. The papers

from Bolivia, Indonesia, and Uganda show that despite the claim that democracy is uniquely western (Greek) in origin, there are other systems of governance that are equally democratic in value. The same papers along with two others from Colombia and Peru also highlight the fact that in other parts of the world, forcing (western) democracy onto pre-existing systems where decisions are made communally can lead to problems within those communities. The communities showcased in these papers have their own participatory systems of government, which while not known or defined by these communities as ‘democracy’ per se, works quite the same. Unfortunately, in our effort to fit everyone under the same model of democracy we may have failed in noticing the existence of other forms of democracy, and might even have weakened them in order to establish what we consider democratic systems within those communities. Should we decide to stick with the dominant form of liberal democracy as we know it today, it is also possible for it to be modified and adapted to fit the needs of a particular community instead of the other way around, as demonstrated through the case of emancipatory democracy in one particular community in Indonesia. The possibilities seem endless, once we open our mind up to what democracy means and the multiple ways in which it can function.

We hope that this journal, like the 12th Development Dialogue did for those who attended (see Who’s Who this issue), provides a space to rethink democracy. We acknowledge there are many points of view. For some, democracy need not be questioned, because it promises to fulfill what most human beings would desire: freedom, equality, social justice, and welfare, though a just governance system that values participation, accountability and transparency may not always deliver. For others, democracy itself needs to be questioned, because it is a dead end – a western political ideology that justifies a new form of colonialism.

As scholars in development studies, what we argue for is the need to rethink democracy before we decide to keep it as it is, reform it, or even to throw it out of the window altogether. We hope readers agree that in reading these articles we have found convincing reasons for the urgent need to redefine democracy, as ultimately, it must be a means to an end; not an end in itself.

Note 1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occupy_movement, accessed 2 June 2015.

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