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Art Director/Production	Long's Graphic Design, Inc.
Copy Editor	Lisa Boone-Berry
Formatting	Long's Graphic Design, Inc.
Illustrations	Carol Vollet

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KETTERING
REVIEW

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For more than three decades, this journal of democratic thought has been edited by Robert J. Kingston, a senior associate of the Kettering Foundation. Sadly, Bob passed away on August 20 of this year at the age of 87, leaving his wife, Carol Vollet Kingston, his children, colleagues, friends, and neighbors grieving his loss.

Bob left England for America in 1954 to teach Shakespeare; he stayed to work on democracy. He was an extraordinary person, raising the level of conversation wherever he went, curious about everything and everyone he met, and capable of discerning the course of democratic thought as it developed in a forum and in the country.

After teaching English literature at a number of colleges and universities in the United States, Bob joined the National Endowment for the Humanities as director of planning and analysis. He moved up to serve as deputy chairman and acting chairman during the administrations of former Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Carter. In the late 1970s, he left government service to become president of the College Board, then joined the Kettering Foundation's longtime research partner Public Agenda as executive director.

As a senior associate of the Kettering Foundation, in the 1980s Bob became the *Review's* editor and for many years, he also helped produce the tapes for A Public Voice, Kettering's annual meeting in Washington, DC.

In his tenure as editor of the *Kettering Review*, he explored some of the most important issues facing democracy of the past 30-some years. Our next issue of the *Review*, through essays and interviews, will follow and develop the arc of Bob's thought about democracy. With a heavy heart, this issue is dedicated to his memory.

In Memoriam
Robert J. Kingston
1929-2016

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The Right to Politics

By Albena Azmanova

The current breakdown of democracy has brought to light a right that we come to realize we've had at the very moment when we are about to lose it: the right to politics.

In their May 2011 protest movements that set off a mass revolt against austerity policies, the Spanish Indignados were ingenious at coining slogans that captured the political exasperation of our time. “We have a vote, but not a voice,” “We are not against the system, the system is against us.” The former outcry speaks of the injustice of political impotence; the latter of the tragedy of giving up the fight.

Why has it become impossible to be heard, even as the voice of protest has become louder and more articulate? We are often told that, in the clash between neoliberal austerity and popular democracy, democracy has fallen victim to global capitalism. Even much before the global financial meltdown inaugurated the politics of austerity, much before the governance of Greece and Spain was taken over by the technocracies of Brussels, it had become clear that in a globalized, bureaucratized, technologized world, the opportunities for ordinary citizens to participate in decision making have become nonexistent. As Stuart Hall aptly put it already in 1979 when discussing the Thatcherite commitment to free market economics and autocratic political rule, “Under this regime, the market is to be free; the people are to be disciplined.” Since then, now for 35 years, politics has taken the shape of the dictum There Is No Alternative (known by the abbreviation “TINA”) which Margaret Thatcher made famous, borrowing Herbert Spenser’s formulation of social Darwinism, with its “survival of the fittest” logic, in the mid-19th century. Under TINA’s dominium, it is *raison d’economie* that assumes the role of *raison d’etat*. Thus, it seems that behind the demise of democracy stands the demise of the political.

In a 2010 piece titled “The Political,” Jürgen Habermas, joining other pronouncements of the death of the political, describes in the following way the sorry state of politics: “In the latter half of the 20th century politics was still able to wield a steering influence on the diverging subsystems. . . . Today, as economic globalization progresses . . . ‘the political’ has been transformed into the code of self-maintaining administrative system.” Our societies seem to be trapped in the limbo that systems theory sketched of social modernization—autopoietic functional systems operate by default, holding us equally far from the heaven of democratic self-rule as from the hell of an economic, moral, and cultural crisis. Convincingly, though unsurprisingly, the solution Habermas advances is to revive democracy.

Yet, democracy is not really dead. Something more tragic has happened to it: rather than disabling it, neoliberal managerialism has hijacked it, putting it to the service of its economistic libido. In order to break free of the state of limbo, we need to sharpen the diagnosis of the “death of democracy through the death of the political.” There is something amiss, not with democracy, but with the process of *politicization*—the process through which social grievances get translated into matters of political concern and become an object of policymaking.

Significantly, in the midst of the financial meltdown, voters in Europe massively brought back to power center-right parties whose neoliberal economic policies admittedly

caused the trouble. Yet even political parties that openly challenge the hegemonic discourse of austerity and structural adjustment, like Syriza in Greece, do not offer a viable alternative. They are stuck in a crisis management mode:

For 35 years, politics has taken the shape of the dictum, There Is No Alternative.

the TINA policy doctrine wrecks our societies as rising unemployment, economic precariousness, and increased work pressures are the combined social costs of the TINA policy dictum. All that its political rivals can do is engage in humanitarian crisis management. This is by no means a revival of contestatory politics in which the very rules of the game are challenged and alternatives compete for public endorsement.

To make matters worse, the typical neoliberal tactic of offloading the public authority’s social responsibility onto society is now being invoked in the name of democracy. Telling in this regard is the recent call of (self-identified) British radical left intellectuals, published in the *Guardian*, for “empowerment of everybody” via the state’s “giving away power and resources directly to the people.” Not only is the left failing to mount an opposition and propose a macro alternative, but



it is compounding the problem with positions that strangely echo a neoliberal discourse of anti-statism, thus further absolving political elites and public authority of obligations to rule in the public interest. Under neoliberalism, “democracy” comes to mean something handled by the people and markets outside of any political process. As a result, the discourse for more democracy has become part of the problem. Calling on democracy to save itself would be akin to telling a drowning person: “You have the right to life, so swim on; you can do it, we believe in you, attagirl!”

The current breakdown of democracy and substitution of administration for politics has brought to light a right that we come to realize we’ve had at the very moment when we are about to lose it: the right to politics. This concept expresses the intuition that the people have a right that politics be the process that decides their collective fate—if politics is to be understood not just as a matter of power struggle among competing actors for *occupying* the highest political office but also doing so for the sake of *affecting* the rules, and thus, the direction, of our collective existence, thereby enabling some control of the processes that shape our way of life. If we are to reclaim democracy as a practice of collective self-rule, we need to begin by articulating and reclaiming this right to politics. Without it, other rights we hold dear—the right to have rights, the right to democracy, the right to justification—become void of their political potency even as they remain valid normative benchmarks of our collective existence.

I interpret the right to politics as having three interrelated elements that are intrinsic to



the republican model of self-rule. One element is democracy as experimentation, the second is democracy as self-authorship, and the third is democratic agency.

Within the republican philosophical tradition, democracy has often been described as an experiment. And this is important. Thomas Jefferson’s pledge to democracy comes easily to mind: “I have no fear that the result of our experiment will be that men may be trusted to govern themselves without a master.” The centrality of experimental reason we find also in Tocqueville’s description of the young democracy in America—an open, experimental society with a dynamic, though fragile, political order: “In that land the great experiment was to be made, by civilized man, of the attempt to construct society upon a new basis.” The agonistic self-correction that democracy incessantly performs engages the dynamics of what Kant has described as reason making experiments with itself. Democracy’s ultimate power is to play, to experiment, with its own power.

Experimentation implies availability of choices, risk-taking, bold, even reckless thinking, and living in uncertainty of the outcomes of this experimentation. It would not be fair to burden democracy with the expectation that it

will always get things right. Democracy's penchant for experimentation makes it faulty and incoherent, and we can neither object to this fragility nor despise it. Experimentation is the *modus operandi* of democracy, its operative principle, and therefore protestations against democracy's fallibility (and endorsing instead the

Behind the demise of democracy stands the demise of the political.

security of expert rule, even if based on popular consent) means rejecting democracy altogether. From this experimental character of democracy issues the right to politics—the right that binding political rules be designed in a dynamic process of uncertain, open-ended *bricolage*, rather than expert political engineering.

The second element in the constitutive story of democracy is an account of self-rule not as a matter of correctly representing the collective self, but rather of actively authoring societal rules. In order to engage the right to politics in an open-ended experimentation, it would not do to invoke democracy as representation of the popular will, as per the original republican vision, as this would negate the very nature of open-ended, ateleological experimentation. Neither would it suffice, however, to equate self-rule with autonomy, as per the intuitions of philosophical liberalism. We are currently held hostage by the notion of political autonomy, of independence as self-sufficiency. In the neoliberal condition, self-reliance (individual responsabilization) has

become a tool of domination. “Get people off of dependency and on to lives of self-sufficiency,” is the typical call of neoliberal hegemony, urged in the name of democracy. Reformulating the freedom of citizens as individual self-reliance, in the name of democracy, amounts to granting them the freedom of blaming themselves for their failures.

If liberal notions of self-rule as individual self-sufficiency and the old republican visions of a cohesive community governing itself through proper representation will not do, what alternative is there at hand? We need to undertake, as Seyla Benhabib has suggested in this forum, a “retranslation of republicanism” away from these categories, and I will now make a proposal concerning the form of retranslation we need. Such an alternative emerges not inside the solutions offered within republicanism and liberalism as philosophical traditions, but in their very dispute about the notion of autonomy best befitting democracy. Republicans from Rousseau to Tocqueville and Jefferson (but also Dostoyevsky—a liberal socialist) have pointed out that



although liberal autonomy (that is, freedom as noninterference) might be a worthy value, it does not put us in charge of ourselves—it does not allow us to think on the larger conditions of our collective existence, to question and

There is something amiss, not with democracy, but with the process of politicization—the process through which social grievances get translated into matters of political concern and become an object of policymaking.

recraft the framework within which personal autonomy is granted. In this sense choice and individual freedom are perfectly compatible with domination. As we know, the standard answer republicanism offers—of representing the general will of the community rather than the particular and partial preferences of its individual members—contains the risk of sacrificing the individual to the community, of forcing pluralism into uniformity, of instigating intolerance to difference and dissent. However, the two positions find a mutual accommodation once the principle of nondomination as noninterference is translated into a principle of nondomination that refers to the capacity to control the powers that shape our collective existence (the powers of the globally integrated markets in the case

at hand), free of the original republican proviso of representing a purported collective will. Within such a retranslation, conflicts within the pluralism of interests acquire value as catalysts of the disclosure of the structural sources of domination—a point to which I will return later. It is in this sense that a redesigned republican notion of nondomination implies a right to politics—politics as contestation of the very framework of our collective existence, thus submitting democratic experimentation to the goals of nondomination.

And here, I come to the third constitutive element of democracy that contains as its logical presupposition the right to politics—namely the particular notion of agency that democracy as self-rule implies. In unfolding this part of the argument, I will take my cue from the defense of a “fundamental human right to democracy” that Seyla Benhabib has advanced. Benhabib proceeds from a discourse-theoretic account of human rights within which the subjects of rights are not just “rights-bearing” but also “reason-giving”: (1) the rights-bearing person is an agent with a capacity for communicative freedom and (2) citizens address validity claims to one another in recognition of a common and equal capacity for communicative freedom. The very practice



of claims-articulation addressed to others presupposes an active agent who recognizes and honors the active agency of others. Thus, a fundamental right to democracy emerges on grounds that, as Benhabib puts it, “a robust right to self-government is essential for being able to make justifiable claims concerning the valid range of variation in the articulation of human rights at all.” The capacity to formulate goals of action and justify them with reasons to others, which Benhabib makes central to her ontology of the rights-bearing person, allows us to valorize properly the active agency demanded for a viable conception of democracy as experimental self-authorship.

In other words, notions of moral autonomy and mutual respect that are commonly taken to underpin the idea of equal rights are insufficient to engender democracy as the political incarnation of (collectively exercised) moral autonomy. Equality of citizenship (as the political expression

Democracy’s ultimate power is to play, to experiment, with its own power.

of equal moral autonomy) is a necessary but insufficient condition for democracy as self-rule. We need to link the dynamic side of democratic experimentation to the notion of political equality in order to account for the political agency of a self-legislating people. If, as Charles Taylor has argued, for a viable conception of human



rights we need to conceive of people as “active cooperators in establishing and ensuring the respect which is due them,” then for a viable conception of democracy we need to conceive of people as active cooperators in challenging, establishing and ensuring the rules of social coexistence that bind them. This implies that we see others as active rights-deserving and rights-pursuing agents—not subjects who profit from a fair social order, but authors of the social order to which they are subjected. Without recognizing the inherent value of conflict and contestation in the process of democratic policymaking, and the value of citizens’ engaging in conflict (within which consensus might emerge), values such as equality of citizenship and shared prosperity and security become products of political consumerism, best achieved by granting a popular mandate to policy experts.

In the formula adumbrated here, democracy stands as an enterprise in which (often radical) conflicts of interests and values are articulated communicatively. As such, it presupposes that (1) participants are awarded equal agency; (2) they justify to each other their conflicting

pursuits as being merit-worthy; (3) all enact that agency of self-rule—it cannot be delegated, outsourced to experts or professional politicians in the name of assumed public interest. The right to politics is implied in this essential communicative freedom, since the proper political application of this freedom is to engage in the contestation of existing rules of social cooperation in view of actors' particular circumstances and their perceptions of personal and collective interests.

It is in this sense that the right to politics actuates the right to democracy, in the same way that what Arendt named “the right to have rights” actuates human rights. These “meta-rights”

are simultaneously inherent in other concepts of rights as their logical presuppositions and as empirical conditions enabling the practice of rights.

Albena Azmanova is a reader in Social and Political Thought at the University of Kent Brussels School of International Studies. Portions of the article published here as “The Right to Politics” originally appeared in the journal Philosophy and Social Criticism under the title “The Right to Politics and Republican Non-Domination.” This article is published here with the permission of SAGE Publications, Ltd.

Kettering Foundation

200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459; (937) 434-7300

444 North Capitol Street NW, Suite 434, Washington, DC 20001; (201) 393-4478



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