

On Democratic Reason

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Dear Friends, especially dear Helmut. It is a great privilege to participate in this evening's discussion about the future of policy school education and to salute the exceptional leader of this school, a person of commitment and daring who has guided the development of the Hertie School of Governance with a remarkable combination of thinking and doing.

It is humbling, moreover, to reflect on our responsibilities to policy knowledge and democratic governance in the center of Berlin, now the center of democratic Europe, and thus a pivotal location in the quest for democratic hope.

Having watched the Hertie School mainly from the outside but recently as a co-teacher of a class on popular sovereignty, I have come ever more to appreciate the value to democracy of this institution's devotion to the independent and probing craft of governance, to high quality public argument, and to reasoned abilities that can inform choices among policy alternatives.

The School's orientation is much like that announced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the opening pages of his *Social Contract*. Rousseau declared that "my purpose is to consider if, in political society, there can be any legitimate and sure principle of government, taking men as they are and laws as they might be. In this inquiry," he continued, "I shall try always to bring together what right permits with what interest prescribes so that justice and utility are in no way divided." At a moment of turbulence and growing uncertainty, it is impossible not to feel pressure to bolster democracy and defend

reason by seeking “to bring together what right permits with what interest prescribes so that justice and utility are in no way divided.”

In that spirit, my remarks are premised on the idea that the intelligence of democratic decision-making depends on the pursuit of policy knowledge that is more than technical, policy knowledge that can guide and guard liberal democracy. For this, we continue to require what Alexis de Tocqueville famously insisted we need: “a new political science...for a world itself quite new.” The democratization of society and politics, he believed, had become irresistible. But key aspects of its future nonetheless were unclear. Would democracy be embedded within a liberal frame or would it induce new and more dangerous forms of illiberal despotism?

Nearly two centuries later, we have learned painfully that these are not mutually exclusive options. This puzzle must be at the center of meaningful policy education. Its first task, in my view, is to probe, with an institutional and conceptual imagination, the central aspects of the liberal tradition that are indispensable to decent democracy, including the strengths and vulnerabilities of the rule of law, individual rights, and a free civil society. Such reason must navigate boundaries dividing political theory from empirical studies, all the while being mindful of historical and geographic variation and the need to answer the most urgent empirical question posed by the social sciences: the ‘under what conditions’ question. Which circumstances, which institutions, which ideas, and which values are most likely to make the constellation of law, consent, rights, representation, pluralism, and toleration combine and succeed as foundations for vibrant democratic politics?

Within the ambit of liberal democracy different visions of a good politics and society vie with each other, each offering an account of desired connections across the spheres of a differentiated world. Here is where the balance of market and state is adjudicated. Here is where the kind of authority and surveillance Michel Foucault called governmentality vies with the mobilization of active citizens. Vibrant politics within liberal democracies must reflectively debate just such fundamental questions. But what, we must ask as students of governance, are the conditions—human, institutional, ethical—that can sustain such vibrancy?

This is no simple task. At the verges of liberal democracy lie difficult questions where ugly possibilities loom. I am thinking, in particular, about three enormously vexing matters—religion, membership, and security. Separately and together, these issues stalk and plague liberal democracy, certainly German democracy and American democracy. We badly require ideas grounded in democratic policy reason that is willing to grapple with issues of belief, exclusion, and exception with rigor and imagination.

In early 1939, a terrible year when democracy seemed unable to deal as effectively as the dictatorships with just these matters, Ludwig Wittgenstein lectured on the philosophical foundations of mathematics at the University of Cambridge. Speaking about the freedom to journey from one logical and empirical world to another, he observed how mathematics offers the conceivable and the imaginable, but not the real. Yet even within mathematics, he argued, the prospects for imagination are inflected by the real; conditions that advance the ability to discover and invent, he wrote, “lie in the surrounding circumstances.”

If such is the case for as abstruse and abstract a craft as mathematics, how much more so for policy studies? As Wittgenstein was speaking, it was not Goya's sleep of reason but a fusion of social utility with political purity was making democratic reason and the institutions that sustain open *wissenschaft* seem incapable, sapped of sufficient vitality. Though world affairs, social science, and policy studies were not Wittgenstein's subjects, it is worth reflecting on his caution that we can become "so used to the criteria for certain facts that we [can] completely forget what the criteria are."

As it turned out, the unremitting pressures of the 1930s and 1940s made it impossible for the supporters of liberal democracy to become unreflective in this way. The manifest pressure of that time's challenges made it imperative to recall and defend liberal democratic criteria for judging and acting. There was no escape from that responsibility.

Today, once again, we have become unsure whether democracy has the capacity to do necessary things. We find it difficult to calculate the degree of risk faced by liberal democracy because we are uncertain about the character and meaning of our circumstances. Those of us whose first political commitment is to democracy—a free constitutional democracy of inclusive citizenship—often find ourselves confused, dispirited, anxious. The good and the just seem elusive; cruelty trumps decency.

Tonight, as we mark rich institutional and personal achievement, we are reminded how hard work is required to thicken our defenses against despotism and deepen our capacity to guard our most precious and most decent political assets by advancing social knowledge that at once is ethical, theoretical, and empirical—in the best sense political—an orientation to policy studies that, as Rousseau urged, can join together justice and utility.

Early in his Introduction to *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville confidently asked, “Does anyone imagine that democracy, which has destroyed the feudal system and vanquished kings, will...stop now, when it has grown so strong and its adversaries so weak?” I wish we could be so confident. Our responsibilities for democracy are sharper, more demanding than at any time since my childhood. If we are to renew democracy and secure knowledge, institutions like the Hertie School must advance democratic policy reason with clarity, dedication, and purpose. I know we must. I believe we can.