BOOK REVIEWS

Ben Ansell, Why Politics Fails, New York: Public Affairs, 2023, ISBN-13: 978-1-5417-0207-3 , 345 pages

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There is a rich literature on the challenges and dilemmas facing modern democracies. The book briefly analyzed here- *Why Politics Fails*- is part of this literature, illustrating, in a captivating way, how our collective goals, like democracy, equality, solidarity, security and prosperity are undermined by political traps. Its author, Ben Ansell, professor of comparative democratic institutions at the University of Oxford, explores throughout the five chapters of the book, the pitfalls that undermine our common goals and the ways to avoid them or to escape them. Using the arguments and evidence from political economy, a school of thought that examines how individual and society interact starting from the premise that everyone is selfish or at least self-interested, the author shows how the gap between self-interest and collective good occurs. „Democracy, equality, solidarity, security and prosperity are admirable things. But in each case we will face a political trap, triggered by our self-interest, that stop us from reaching our collective goals. These traps are not our tragic destiny. But they are insidious, pervasive and soethimes even enticing" (p. 20).

The book is a meticulous study with a unitary structure, each chapter starting by defining the concept, followed by identifying the trap and then the way to escape it. The first chapter, about democracy, emphasizes that the idea of democracy, having 'rule by the people' at its core, in other words self-government, is a powerful and universal one, a goal most people agree on. But even if democracy is popular and desirable, its outcomes often polarize and divide us (Brexit is just an example). We want democracy in principle, but it's often impossible to deliver in practice. And this is the heart of the democracy trap: "there's no such thing as *the will of the people*" (p. 26). The author looks at the long history of the 'will of the people' concept and the debates on it. The way we define it matters a lot: hyper-inclusive (claiming

that the will of the people only exists when everyone agrees) or hyper-exclusive (when a thin majority constitutes the 'will of the people'). Both approaches are limited and perniciously, history proving this many times. Ben Ansell underlines that democracy work best with shifting majorities, where losers can become winners, and that we can improve democracy through more democracy. So we can escape the democracy trap by encouraging norms of listening and deliberating, learning to express our opinions and to tolerate those of other people as a way to reach consensus rather than antagonism.

The second chapter, on equality, approaches the different meanings that the concept has in the works of diverse thinkers (socialists, libertarians, utilitarians) and compares inequality across countries to show that most wealthy countries have quite high inequality. As an example, in 2018 the top of 0.1 per cent of Americans held almost 20 per cent of total wealth. Politics in prosperous democratic countries seems to have failed. It has underpinned, raher than undercut, inequality. We want equality but one that does not cut from our own wealth. In the author's words, "we have a collective goal of equality- to close the chasm between rich and poor. But we have individual desires to use our equal rights to live our own best life as freely as possible, which push against this common ambition of equal outcomes… Our politics gets caught in the equality trap: equal rights and equal outcomes undermine each other… For politics not to fail we need to balance carefully between equal economic rights and outcomes" (p. 91). Escaping the inequality trap requires, among others, a robust and transparent tax system, focusing on wealth taxes, international cooperation to prevent billionaires simply shifting jurisdictions, as well as an education system that don't simply send half of school-leavers to university and abandon the rest.

In the third chapter the different meanings of the concept of solidarity are analyzed. The solidaristic state had emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century, when public pensions, workers' compensation and sickness insurance were established. If at the beginning of the twentieth century government spending on social services was typically 1 or 2 per cent of national income, by the end of 1960s it was reached around fifth of national income in most rich countries. Today, the Universal Basic Income (UBI) is often seen as a solution to many of twenty-first-century problems, from bouncing back after COVID-19 to the replacement of workers with robots. Political parties claim the value of solidarity but have very

different philosophies about how it should be provided. Even when we agree we want a certain type of solidarity we might differ on who we think should receive it, or whether we really want to pay for it. Our politics fails, says the author, because when we try and look after each other, we quickly run into the solidarity trap: "we only care about solidarity when we need it ourselves" (p. 148). The UBI may help to escape the solidarity trap, but how it combines with existing welfare state schemes need to be addressed carefully and credibly.

The next chapter looks at the issue of security. Without security we are in a state of anarchy in which authority is absent. If we want to maintain order, we risk of losing control of our guardians, but if we remove our guardians we can easily fall into disorder. And here is the security trap: "we can't avoid anarchy without risking tyranny" (p. 202). A well-known quote, often attributed to Thomas Jefferson, says that "the price of liberty is eternal vigilance". The author examines the different levels of security. Most of us live in a world where we are secure in our own homes (personal security) and in our own countries (national security). Things are worse when we look at the third level of security, international security. Nation states still live in a condition of anarchy, as the war in Ukraine and other conflicts demonstrate.

A substantial chapter of the book, the last one, refers to prosperity. Gross domestic product (GDP) is the most common measure of prosperity, but our long-term prosperity depends more on long-term health and education of the population than on short-term national income. We are not the first generation to face the challenges of ballancing short-term temptations and long-term sustainability, the history of economic development is the history of our ancestors wrestling with the prosperity trap: „what makes us richer in the short run makes us poorer over the long haul" (p. 248). Perhaps the best example in this regard is our innability to tackle the climate change crisis. Reducing global carbon emission levels is a collective action problem, but short-term gain outweigh our concern for future generations. „Escaping the prosperity trap requires us to commit to the long term – to tie our hands and prevent ourselves from sucombing to short-term temptations" (p. 281).

In the closing chapter, suggestively entitled *How Politics Can Succeed,* professor Ansell make a plea for the centrality of politics to achieving our collective goals. The traps we face are inevitable and often reinforce each other: polarized democracies can worsen inequality; a rotten social safety system can worsen crime; runaway climate change could treaten global peace. So we live in an uncertain world, where self-interest undermines our ability to deliver collective goals and politics will

not always succeed to offer solutions to our dilemmas. But we need politics, one that protects democratic institutions like the Parliemant, the courts, the independent media from the contamination of authoritarianism and „from the arrows of populist iconoclasts". We need cooperation, at domestic and international levels, to to find solutions to our collective problems. Politics won't end, but it doesn't have to fail