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Editor's Note

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Editor's Note

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Few who witnessed the event can forget the twilight evening on February 11, 1990 when Nelson Mandela walked out of Victor Verster Prison, a free man, after twenty-seven years of imprisonment, eighteen of which were spent on Robben Island, the notorious prison for the elite of the African National Congress (ANC) after their conviction to life sentences for plotting to overthrow the government in the Rivonia Trial in 1963.

Mandela had become a global icon, the human embodiment of opposition to apartheid. His invisibility added to the myth. The Nelson Mandela 70th Birthday Tribute concert at Wembley Stadium, London in June 1988, was broadcast into sixty countries to an audience of 600 million.

He was released into a South Africa awash in violence: conflict between government security forces and activists bent on making the townships ungovernable, between ANC activists and Zulu supporters of Gatsha Buthelezi's Inkatha Freedom Party, which, in KwaZulu-Natal had all the hallmarks of an incipient civil war. In addition there were the fears of the White minority, that once the restrictions of apartheid were lifted, Black people would turn on them in a war of unmitigated vengeance.

The groundwork for meeting these challenges and providing a path for negotiating a future apartheid-free South Africa was laid in the National Peace Accord, signed on September 14, 1991 by President de Klerk, Mandela, Buthelezi, and twenty other party and union leaders at a National Peace Convention in Johannesburg.

"The Accord," Liz Carmichael writes in "Peacemaking and Peacebuilding in a Divided Society: South Africa's National Peace Accord in the Transition from Apartheid to Democracy," a meticulous recounting of how the agreement was hammered out, "freed a political logjam, allowing constitutional talks to commence, and its peace structures then carried out a nationwide process of peacemaking and peacebuilding. This included the popularization of peace, and the new activity of peace monitoring, to implement the Accord's provisions on the ground in localities and at mass events. This peace process has lessons to offer and is one key to understanding the remarkable peacefulness of the first democratic election in April 1994."

I was privileged to be among the 18,000 peace monitors/election observers monitoring the election. To this day I can vividly recall driving through a deserted township at 4:30 a.m., the sun not yet on the horizon, up a bumpy road and over a hill to behold the polling station some distance off, a line of Black voters, all dressed in their Sunday best, lined up as far as the eye could see, waiting in the dignified silence the occasion demanded for the polling station to open to cast their first ever vote as free men and women. Throughout the long day the line never seemed to get shorter.

The 1990s were rich in peacemaking. In addition to the National Peace Accord, the Oslo Accords (1993) was the first step to establishing a Palestinian state, the Dayton Accords (1995), brought an end to the Bosnian war, and the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), ended the 30-year conflict in Northern Ireland between Irish nationalists who wanted to become part of a united Ireland and British Unionists who wished to maintain the union with Britain.

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In addition to establishing governance and institutional structures to address three relationships—between the political parties in Northern Ireland, North and South, and the Republic of Ireland and the UK—the GFA has a provision for when a secretary of state for Northern Ireland should call a referendum on Northern Ireland’s constitutional status, to determine whether a majority of those voting wish to remain part of a united Ireland or remain in the UK. Majority consent is defined as 50 percent + 1.

The language of the consent formulation bristles with ambiguity. It states that the secretary of state “...shall call a border poll ‘if at any time it appears likely to him that a majority of those voting would express a wish that Northern Ireland should cease to be part of the United Kingdom and form part of a united Ireland.’”

What does ‘appears likely’ mean? A gut feeling on the part of the secretary of state? What verifiable, empirical evidence would be required to back it up? With whom should the secretary of state consult beforehand? What kind of notice will be given to parties that a poll is under consideration?

In “Referendum Metrics: the numbers game,” an extract from *Perils and Prospects of a United Ireland* (Lilliput Press), I examine the metrics a secretary of state might draw on suggesting there is a majority for unity. None meet the required threshold. My conclusion: “Across the board, political party interviewees accept 50 percent + 1 as a democratic outcome in a referendum. But whereas nationalists and republicans believe the same metric should be used to convince the Secretary of State to call a poll, unionists argue for a much higher threshold. Voters, North and South, would also like to see a higher threshold. They fear that violence would accompany a referendum poll that passes with a narrow margin. If a referendum resulted in a very slender pro-unity outcome, there would be loyalist violence; if a very slender pro-staying in the union, there would be dissident republican violence. Loyalists are most concerned about republican violence but suggest there might be an uptick in loyalist violence too.”

Moreover, a very slender majority in favor unity might flip the conflict—once between a Catholic nationalist minority opposed to being in a Protestant unionist majority Northern Ireland, to a Protestant unionist minority in a Catholic nationalist majority all-Ireland state. Which raises the question: Would the Republic of Ireland want to “inherit” close to one million recalcitrant Protestants opposed to everything the republic stands for? On one question, however, there was widespread agreement among the ninety-seven interviewees who are the backbone of *Perils and Prospects of a United Ireland*. None want a Brexit-type question on a referendum. None want a choice between staying in the UK—a tangible, concrete experience in which voters live and work—and a united Ireland, intangible and anything voters might wish it to be.

In a previous issue of the journal we published articles cataloging the erosion of liberal democracy, the rise of right wing authoritarian autocracy, and the slow disintegration of the rules-based international order put in place after World War II, with its emphasis on ensuring political stability.¹ The Russo-Ukrainian War, now well into its second year, may yet pose a threat to political stability in Europe. However, more immediately, this international order is under threat from several other challenges. The political elites and the institutions and think tanks tasked with finding solutions have been slow to do so.

Dariusz Karłowicz argues in “Reset or Revolution? Contemporary Problems of Political Stability and Some Ancient Solutions,” that because *stability itself* is the core of the problem, the undesirable side effects of lasting stability have reached a critical mass, as evident, for example, with the rise of populism on the right and left. “Through the tendency to permanent, often

hereditary, marginalization of large groups of the population,” he writes, “a stable political system calls into question the ideals of equality, freedom, and political agency.”

One of the promises of democracy is that each generation is better off than the previous one. But for large segments of the population this is no longer the case. Another is that the rule of law and social justice will narrow the income wealth differentials between those in the lower income population groups and those in the higher rungs. This, too, is no longer the case. On the contrary, across many countries in Europe and in the United States, the rich have gotten richer, the poor poorer; burdened by debt, they struggle to meet the exigencies of everyday life. The present system entrenches these inequalities. When the Great Recession (2007–08) ended, the poor were a lot poorer, the rich a lot richer. Systemic inequality on a range of economic and social yardsticks of well-being is a characteristic of many democracies and is intergenerational, making it more difficult to eradicate. Born poor, you are likely to die poor.² The paraphernalia of democracy, especially elections where parties promise tweaks of the status quo, change but not radical change that might change the system itself, do little to rectify the situation. Polls across Europe in 2019 showed that “almost 40 percent of people in France, 20 percent of Germans, and 14 percent of Poles,” Karłowicz writes, “think that the only way to the betterment of their lives is revolution. It is not about being critical or distrustful toward the system, but its total rejection. It is a hope for some kind of brutal reset.”

In “Toward a New Political Project: Resetting by Reconceptualizing,” Scherto Gill poses the question: “Given the failures of contemporary liberal democracy, we must return to a theoretical context, and ask ‘How should we re-envisage democracy in the twenty-first century that can overcome these types of malaise?’” Representative democracy is not working and while some countries have tried various reforms—proportional representation, citizens assemblies, preferential voting—she concludes that “[her] review of a few so-called alternatives to representative democracy suggests that they are not alternatives per se. On the one hand, currently proposed reforms, such as preference voting, are simply amendments to the existing system rather than a change or challenge to the underlying structural relations between institutions. In other words, they do not go far enough. On the other hand, the few proposed alternatives, e.g., lottocracy, epistocracy, or political meritocracy, take us further away from democracy. Although these non-democratic alternatives tend to use democratic language to frame their practices, in reality, they are heading in the completely wrong direction.” Hence her framework for a new order grounded in four core principles: “(1) equal primary, non-derivative value of all persons; (2) non-instrumentalization of persons; (3) well-being of all as a common good and the end of the political project; and (4) non-antagonistic positive peacefulness as a characterizing feature of political processes. In doing so, this article systematically re-envisages what constitutes good governance, provides a normative basis for advocating participatory democracy, and suggests ways to evaluate the processes and practices of institutions in the new political project.”

“These four principles,” she argues “can convey inclusive, collaborative, and participatory processes of political engagement that should be nonviolent, relationally enriching, and caring. They can serve as a conceptual framework for understanding and evaluating good governance. In contrast to the use of the ballot box, at a minimum level, participatory democracy ought to involve the creation of various types of public spaces for political inquiry and consensus-building. In these public spaces, the political agent will learn to practice the arts of dialogue, such as deep listening, openness to the other and to difference, personal sharing, and mutual understanding. In doing so, people can feel that their voice matters, their well-being is part of the collective concern, and their

dignity as a social and political agent is recognized. The aims of the political project and the process to achieve them converge in our collective well-being as the common good.”

Two further articles round out the issue. Yasmin Merali uses the Polish *Solidarność* movement to illustrate how art and artifacts were “implicated” in the evolution of the movement as it transformed itself from local labor union to national nonviolent revolutionary movement for civil rights calling for an end to communist rule. Although the *Solidarność* movement was banned between 1982 and 1989, it reemerged to win the Poland’s first free and fair election, ending communist rule.

Art and artifacts were part of the “Complex Adaptive Systems,” she writes in “The Art and Artifacts of Solidarity,” the “self-organizing open systems that interact selectively with their environment” that embodied *Solidarność*’s transformation. Their behavior can “shape and be shaped by environmental changes over time.” She draws on artwork from the exhibition *Lost Treasures of Revolution: The Graphics of Solidarity 1980-89* from the Victoria and Albert Museum, London’s collection to show how art was woven into the fabric of *Solidarność*, the kind and type evolving as *Solidarność* itself evolved: “The evolution from its origins in the Gdansk shipyard to the fully-fledged political party went through successive rounds of engagement with the communist government, with each encounter reinforcing and stabilizing the relational network anchored in the grassroots commitment to action. Art was entwined with this trajectory. Like the appeals of rhetoric in the Aristotelian tradition, the art of *Solidarność* engaged emotional, logical, and ethical sensibilities, and its physicality carried the realization and extension of individual identity into the collective space.”

She explains that “The creation, display, and dissemination of artwork was an integral component in the realization of the ideological, social, and political commitment that united the movement: every investment in making and bearing artifacts constituted an exercise of positive liberty under an authoritarian regime.”

Finally, in “Seeing Race as We Are: Avoiding, Arguing, Aspiring,” Michael Cowan draws on his experience as a White man of interracial community organizing in New Orleans, a majority Black city to catalog “seven groups with different background understandings, interpretations, and habits of action in matters of race.”

However, he cautions, that “Whatever another’s nationality, race, religion, or ideology may be, when we meet, my life experiences make possible only a partial understanding of their circumstances, aspirations, interests, and sacred values.” He writes, “Your comprehension of me is likewise possible and limited. The ‘you’ I meet is never complete. It is always my apprehension of you, you-as-perceived-through-my-life-experience-filters. Even the you that you meet and the I that I meet are self-interpretations. I do not have unmediated knowing of myself and neither do you. Public actors may or may not be paying attention to interpretation, but it is paying attention to them. There is always more to others and their circumstances than I can perceive.”

With this caveat, he identifies the groups: White racists, Black bigots, the minimally engaged, antiracists, individualists, Black separatists, and pragmatists. “Possible futures for race in the United States are continually forming and reforming in the interaction of the groups above with each other and the larger society,” he argues. “Ongoing differences notwithstanding, even modest gains lower the racial temperature, allowing groups in conflict to re-balance, re-align, and build an infrastructure of public bridges founded on a mutual grasp of others’ interests that facilitates joint peacebuilding efforts in the future. Bridges built in classes and workshops on racism and white guilt cannot match the enduring strength of those constructed with allies in the public arena as they pursue common goods.”

There is no better ending to this editor's note than Cowan's inspirational quote from a former African slave who lived in ancient Rome: "Nothing human can be alien to me."

Notes

¹ Padraig O'Malley, "Editor's Note," *New England Journal of Public Policy* 34, no. 2 (2022): 1–5.

² David Simon and Edward Burns, *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998).