

Session 34 « What is the Future of Democracy ? »

Distrust of institutions and political representatives, the rise of authoritarian regimes in Europe and the world: People have never seemed so sceptical about the effectiveness of democratic institutions and processes at the national and international levels. This trend is global: A growing share of the population, especially among young people, shows its lack of attachment to democratic principles and a form of admiration for authoritarian regimes. This is a rather unexpected turnaround: After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the ‘End of History’ seemed to suggest a joint diffusion of democratic and capitalist dogmas. With the economic crisis of 2008 and its consequences, but also because of the supremacy that the Chinese model – proud of its economic success – achieved, this prediction seems today clearly reversed. On the other hand, the fruits of the Internet revolution, which was thought to strengthen democratic deliberation and facilitate consensus, proved bitter: ‘fake news’, conspiracies of all kinds, sterilizing polarization of debates.

What is it really? Is the retreat of liberal democracy a perception or a reality?

It is crucial to make a distinction between the rejection of the democratic principle and the exasperation generated by the real functioning of the institutions supposed to embody these principles: the crisis of representation is above all the trial of representatives. People seem to be saying that democracy has become a sham, but they also seem to aspire more than ever to the expression of their preferences and their identity. The criticisms relate to the impression of capture of power by existing interests, confiscation of crucial decisions by independent authorities (central banks, the European Commission, etc.), an inadequate response to the question of unequal shocks, and finally, an inability to bring about rapid and drastic changes. From this point of view, one can question how to rethink the democratic functioning and reinvent public deliberation: Reform of representation and administrative functioning? New forms of direct democracy? Decentralization of certain decisions (education, taxation etc.) to local levels? The experience of the Great French Debate deserves a review. Moreover, we must look forward to the economic and political impacts of the spread of non-democratic regimes? Is the economic effectiveness of democracy challenged by populist and autocratic experiences?