On June 5, 2001, Lord Ralf Dahrendorf inaugurated the annual Gerd Bucerius Lecture at the GHI. The lecture is made possible by a generous grant from the DIE ZEIT foundation, which was represented by the foundation’s program director, Markus Baumanns. He and Christof Mauch, the GHI’s acting director, provided the introduction: Baumanns outlined the goals and programs of the foundation, whereas Mauch turned the spotlight on the life and work of both Bucerius and Lord Dahrendorf.

Lord Dahrendorf spoke on “Democracy Under Pressure: The European Experience,” analyzing developments after 1989. The full text of his lecture is reproduced below.

DEMOCRACY UNDER PRESSURE: THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

Ralf Dahrendorf

West Germany after 1945 was a fortunate country. Without much deliberate effort, it found the leadership to take it forward to democracy and prosperity. Some of the protagonists, politicians in particular, were not new to the scene. Men such as Konrad Adenauer, Kurt Schumacher, and Theodor Heuss had been members of the Weimar elite. Their emergence testified to the forever astonishing brevity of the murderous episode of Nazi rule. One tends to forget that Adolf Hitler’s hold on power lasted about as long as Margaret Thatcher’s in Britain and was significantly shorter than, say, François Mitterand’s two presidential terms in France or indeed Helmut Kohl’s eighteen years as German federal chancellor. Some postwar German leaders were of course new, among them the “father of the economic miracle,” Ludwig Erhard. And as Wolfgang Zapf has shown in his groundbreaking study of “changes of the German elite,” all operated in a political climate auspicious for sustainable liberty.¹ This climate had something to do with a particularly striking group of homines novi, the founders of influential media, notably newspapers. Axel Springer had already been a small-scale publisher but began to build up his newspaper empire, ranging from tabloids to broadsheets. Rudolf Augstein of Der Spiegel was certainly new. They (and a score of others) owed their power—and their fortunes—to a
unique process; they were given “licenses” to publish by the Allied occupation authorities. Much of Germany’s print-media scene—including a strong regional press—is based on the remarkable success of such licensees or “license-bearers” (Lizenzträger). Postwar German democracy owes them a lot.

One of the most notable among the “license-bearers” was the man to whose memory this series of lectures is dedicated, Gerd Bucerius. He was twenty-seven years old when the Nazis came to power in 1933. The young lawyer had always shown a slightly contrary streak and shocked his parents, especially his reactionary father, by marrying a Jewish woman in 1932. After Hitler’s seizure of power this fact put paid to his judicial career, although not to his work as a lawyer in his father’s firm. Bucerius was remembered after the war for his courageous defense of Jewish clients who sought to leave the country when that was still possible. In 1938 he took his wife to England, where she survived the war, and he steadfastly refused to give in to demands by the Nazi authorities to divorce her—although after the war the marriage failed. When the British occupied Hamburg, where Bucerius lived, he was soon picked out as a lawyer with a clean political record. He was put in charge of various tasks until, within days, in February 1946, he was appointed a senator, that is, a member of Hamburg’s city government, and given the license for the weekly DIE ZEIT, one of democratic Germany’s great success stories. When Bucerius died in 1995 he bequeathed a handsome fortune to the foundation that was established in his (and his wife’s) name and that of his weekly.

While writing the biography of Gerd Bucerius, I was struck above all by his political stance. In 1949 Bucerius was elected to the first federal parliament (Bundestag) for the governing Christian Democrats; re-elected three times, he remained a member of the parliament until he resigned his seat in 1962. He was never a minister, although he supported Adenauer for many years and always encouraged Erhard, in both cases with his peculiar mixture of loyalty and critical candor. His political stance can best be described as that of a center–right liberal. Lucky the democracy that has staunch liberals to the right of center! This was, at any rate, one of my conclusions, although I would not describe my own position in these terms.

Bucerius combined a strong sense of Germany’s national interest with insistence on the virtues of the market economy, even without the epithet “social,” and the ever-alert defense of civil and human rights. He surprised some when he paid the legal and medical bills for Rudi Dutschke, that hero and victim of 1968 in Germany, on the grounds that, for the rule of law to be real, the most vulnerable also need the most help. Whereas he often disagreed with the line taken by the somewhat left–liberal DIE ZEIT and at times gave vent to his views in outspoken articles, he never interfered with the independence of his editors. When he resigned as a member of parlia-
ment, one major reason was that he refused to repudiate the author of an article in another magazine of his, Der Stern, which his party had found highly offensive.

It has been said that one of the reasons for the failure of the Weimar Republic lay in the fact that it was a democracy without democrats. If post-war Germany has been—and by all appearances will be—spared the same fate, this is owed in no small measure to Gerd Bucerius and others like him who were good democrats, untiring in their defense of pluralism and the rule of law.

These descriptions of a man of stature and influence may explain why I felt honored to be asked to give this first Bucerius Lecture and also why I chose the subject of democracy at risk. I remember my parental hometown of Hamburg in 1946, when Bucerius became a senator and newspaper publisher, and I grew up in the new climate he helped create. My own family, of course, had a different background—Social Democratic politically and involved in active resistance against the Nazi regime. Our commitment to liberty, democracy, and the rule of law was as strong as anyone’s. My father and Bucerius were both members of the forerunner of the Bundestag, the Economic Council. Accompanying my father to this indirectly elected pre-parliament of which he was vice president, I had my first parliamentary experience and was enthralled. Later, the vicarious experience was followed by actuality. At various points in the kaleidoscope of my life I was an elected member of the state diet of Baden-Württemberg and later of the Bundestag; I held a seat in the European Parliament as a commissioner, and am now a member of the Parliament of Westminster, albeit not at the elected but at the appointed end, the House of Lords. Even today, after eight years in the Upper House, I feel a thrill every time I enter the chamber to take part in the scrutiny of legislation or in one of the great debates for which the House is renowned.

I mention this to make it clear that in some ways this lecture gives me little pleasure. Its main thesis is that today, and at least in Europe, democracy is under serious pressure. Indeed, I recently spent six days with a well-known Italian journalist, Antonio Polito, discussing democracy at the beginning of the new century, and the result will be published as a little book under the title Dopo democrazia, “after democracy.” The pressure most notably on representative or parliamentary democracy is such that we will have to rethink the constitution of liberty. Moreover, this pressure comes from two sides at the same time. Within countries, several developments conspire to set in motion a kind of creeping authoritarianism. Beyond the boundaries of countries this is reinforced by what is crudely called globalization, that is, the emigration of important decisions to spaces for which democratic processes and institutions do not exist.
I refer, as I said, to Europe. Americans will no doubt recognize some of the problems, but for a number of reasons the American position is different. Like Larry Siedentop in his influential book *Democracy in Europe*, I am concerned both with the countries of Europe and with the European Union. Also, I refer to Europe after 1989. Many of us still remember with joy those months twelve years ago when country after country east of the crumbling Iron Curtain emerged from nomenclature rule into the first halting steps toward democracy. As a Popperian I never subscribed to the view that threats to liberty were forever dispelled and Hegel’s (or Kojève’s) final synthesis had arrived. At the same time I did not anticipate that within little more than a decade the risks to democracy would become quite so powerful.

In recent weeks two of the major countries of Europe, Italy and the United Kingdom, have undergone—and survived—national election campaigns. In both cases these campaigns were in fact expressions of what might be called antipolitics. This was especially evident in Italy: The winning candidate used all his experience with—as well as ownership of—the media to project the image of a leader who is different, a star, a celebrity, an entrepreneur who knows what his customers want. It is worth remembering what happened on the other side of the Italian political spectrum. Giuliano Amato, a prime minister who, by common consent, had done his job exceptionally well, was considered insufficiently telegenic to lead the center–left into the election. Someone more attractive to viewers had to be and was found in the person of Francesco Rutelli. Rutelli did turn out to be a very serious candidate, but the reasons for his choice tell the relevant story. Some would argue that something similar happened in Britain because the “real prime minister” is the chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, whereas Tony Blair, who likes to surround himself with stars from anywhere but politics, is needed to get the votes. However that may be, Blair is a leader who likes to bypass political institutions like party and parliament and turn directly to the people or, better still, to “focus groups” selected as representatives of the people.

Celebrity politics often is also snapshot politics. Somehow, continuity has left the democratic process. What counts is the view of the moment—and this is highly volatile. A week after the election the voters are just as likely to turn against their choices. The chosen leader (if that is the term) for his part is quite happy to abandon his projects if what he regards as the people want something different. Throwaway politics is another notion that comes to mind: Like Coca-Cola cans, indeed like cameras, radios, and soon mobile phones, policies are chosen, used, and discarded. What has disappeared from our democracies is extended debate and the patient pursuit of objectives through periods of popular support as well as those of popular doubt.
Institutionally speaking, what has disappeared is the pivotal role of parliament. Blair’s first act after his election in 1997 was to reduce “Prime Minister’s Questions” in the House of Commons from two days to one—a symbolic yet significant act. Perhaps the British Parliament has always been more malleable than those of countries with a clear separation of powers, but the tendency to strengthen the executive and weaken parliament is widespread. I am a member of a committee of the Upper House that scrutinizes bills in order to prevent government from using legislation to delegate powers to the executive. In recent years there has been a massive increase in such attempts. Elsewhere in Europe, especially in the European Union, secondary legislation remains largely outside parliamentary control. Government by what we call “Henry VIII clauses,” that is, provisions in primary legislation that enable the executive to alter the very purpose of an act or even revoke it, is widespread.

It is no accident that the instrument of referendum is more widely used. There is also another side to the picture. Turnout in elections is still high in Europe, at least when compared to the United States. Nevertheless, observers find widespread apathy, if not cynicism, with regard to politics. People do not care, and although they do not trust anyone in power, they cannot be bothered to do anything about it. This is how the authoritarian syndrome emerges. Contrary to totalitarianism, authoritarianism is founded not on the permanent mobilization of all subjects but on their disinterest. People—citizens indeed!—can do what they want as long as they do not interfere with the smooth exercise of power. This in turn is increasingly concentrated in the executive. Such creeping authoritarianism may not quite work. In France there is a well-established tradition of 100,000 teachers or farmers or nurses descending on Paris and forcing the government to mend its ways. Last year a number of European countries reacted to blockades by truck drivers demanding lower taxes on fuel. None of this is democracy as James Madison or John Stuart Mill envisaged it. “Strengthening Parliament,” to quote the title of a recent report by British Conservatives, has become an uphill task.

This is all the more so in view of the other half of the somewhat somber picture that I paint here—globalization. Democracy, as I understand it, means three things: change is possible without violence; there are checks and balances to the exercise of power; and the people have a decisive say in the process. Representative or parliamentary democracy links these elements through the election of representatives who, in and through parliament, can change policies and, if necessary, government, as well as scrutinize and control the exercise of power. Such institutions were historically developed in the nation-state and indeed in many cases alongside the formation of nation-states. Both Madison and Mill (and many others) offered
important reflections on the size and nature—or rather, the culture—of the communities in which democratic institutions work; Madison spoke of a space in which there are “chords of allegiance,” Mill of “nationality.”

However we define or describe the traditional political space for democratic institutions, from a European perspective at least it is rapidly losing relevance for important decisions. Whether and when interest rates are changed is decided by an unaccountable European Central Bank. Aerial attacks on Baghdad are planned and initiated by NATO. Whether Russia receives further help from the international community, despite the halting repayment of its debt, is a matter for the International Monetary Fund. Although in these cases one can at least point to institutions, other decisions of great significance issue from less defined agencies, as when a Japanese company decides to invest in Wales rather than in Normandy or an American speculator grabs an auspicious moment to drive the pound sterling out of the European Monetary System and billions of dollars into his own accounts. Sometimes it is just the wholly anonymous “markets” that seem to call the tune.

So what happens to democracy? Change without violence? This is hard to bring about if one does not even know who does what, when, and how. It could be argued, however, that all international agencies should apply the equivalent of the 22nd Amendment to the United States Constitution and impose strict limits on their leaders’ terms of office. Checks and balances? This arguably is the area on which we should concentrate in the years to come. There are ways of controlling the exercise of power in a globalized environment. In part they are judicial in the widest sense of the term, including regulators and arbitrators. In part, and at an earlier stage in the process, auditing international decision makers is a prerequisite of control. Information technology helps bring to light relevant facts and figures. In some cases national parliaments could gear themselves up to scrutinize international decisions without jeopardizing the advantages of global spaces in the process.

This is a list of items on the agenda for a democratic response to the emigration of decisions from traditional political spaces, but it fails to address the remaining and fundamental issue: How can the people have a say in processes for which there are no appropriate institutions? The large and at times violent demonstrations in Seattle, Washington, D.C., Prague, and London are clearly not the answer, although they do underline the question. They show that people want a say—indeed that they resent the removal of important decisions from their grasp. I say this not so much because of the slogan of demonstrators convened over the Internet but because of the quiet support they receive from many who would not dream of setting cars on fire or smashing shop windows, although they do enjoy reading the anticapital-
ist diatribes by Viviane Forrester and others. As a result, the “politics of cultural despair” is once again with us and with it the political dangers that prompted Fritz Stern to write his book with this title about antimodernism in Imperial Germany.4

It is hard to escape the conclusion that democracy and the nation-state are tied to each other. The weakening of the nation-state by a process of internationalization is, by the same token, a weakening of democracy. So far, we have not been able to apply the principles of democracy to political spaces beyond the nation-state.

This is a strong statement in a piece on democracy in Europe. What about the European Union? Is it not an example, even a successful example, of democracy beyond the nation-state? It is true that recent years have seen a shift in the arguments advanced for Europe to form an ever-closer union. Few now argue that the motive should be to prevent war or even to keep Germany under control. Some think that the main purpose of European integration today is to enable Europe to hold its own vis-à-vis the United States. Anti-American sentiment creeps into such views at times, but more often the belief is espoused that a “European model,” notably of economic and social policy, is worth defending. Many of a more liberal persuasion, however, see the institutionalization of Europe as a step in the right direction in terms of coping with globalization by democratic means. If we cannot have global democracy just yet, we can at least begin the journey toward that goal by creating a large region, Europe, along democratic principles.

I appreciate the intention, but—alas!—it is far from the reality of the European Union. The EU has laid down quite serious tests of democratic virtue for so-called accession countries. If, however, it applied these tests to itself, the result would be dismal. It is not a joke to say that if the EU itself applied for accession to the EU, it would not be admitted because it is insufficiently democratic. The EU was, of course, set up as a common market, later extended by its greatest leader so far, Jacques Delors, into a single market. For this purpose the very French—indeed Cartesian—construction of its institutions may well have been appropriate. The right to propose rests with a commission constructed to embody the common European interest; the right to dispose, to decide, remains with a council of ministers that assembles the various national interests. A court of justice makes sure that both institutions remain on the straight and narrow.

And democracy? I am convinced that the European Assembly (as it was then called) was an afterthought when the Treaty of Rome was drafted in 1956. It had no real function and since that time has only gradually acquired further rights, although even now these do not include the right to determine its own seat or to raise funds for its own budget, or indeed to
pass legislation as the sovereign representative of the people. It is directly elected, but sovereignty remains elsewhere—in nation-states, in the executives, in elusive spaces beyond the grasp of the people. In any case, what people are we talking about? There now is a lively debate of such issues among both speech-making politicians and among puzzled academics. My own conclusion remains that there is no such thing as a European demos on which to build a European democracy. Public opinion, even published opinion, is fragmented into national segments at best (for many are regional within the countries). European elections leave most voters uninterested; turnout in many countries is under 50 percent. Those who vote in fact vote on national issues, notably on the popularity of their own government at the time. The resulting parliamentary assembly is similarly fragmented. More than fifty of its members never turn up; those who do frequently are people who failed to get into national parliaments or have retired from more important national positions.

As a result, the European Union's decision-making process is an insult to democracy. This is all the more important at a time when the EU is trying to venture out of the constraints of the single market into all sorts of new areas, notably into foreign and security policy, and into the justice and domestic affairs fields. (At the same time it is useful to remember that, in budgetary terms, Europe remains a rather minor power, disposing as it does of less than 1.2 percent of the gross domestic product of countries that themselves give their parliaments and governments control over 40 percent or more of their GDP.) It would be possible, and perhaps rewarding, to look in more detail at the decision-making processes of the European Union, but I doubt whether such a closer look would dispel the conclusion that Europe's institutions fail the democracy test. Far from being a successful step in the direction of applying democracy beyond the nation-state, Europe proves that this is all but impossible to achieve.

Now that I have spread almost unmitigated gloom about my subject, it is time to look for more encouraging answers. They will, however, not be simple. Let me offer you three sets of ideas, of hints, about the future of democracy from a European perspective.

First, it is important to remember that the nation-state is still the single most important political space at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It may have lost some of its strength, but it remains the relevant inclusive community for most people. For those who have just escaped from imperial domination, such as the formerly Soviet-ruled countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the nation-state embodies not just sovereignty but freedom. Everywhere in Europe key social policies are decided by national parliaments. The varieties of economic and political culture bear witness to the strength of nation-states.
This means that parliamentary democracy is not a spent force. It has to be, and it can be, defended against all threats. Within countries the main dangers today are, on the one hand, the creeping authoritarianism of which I have written, and on the other, the new regionalism. Although regionalism often appears in the guise of self-determination, it is a very dubious contribution to democracy. Beyond countries, another dubious trend must be resisted, that is, the use of “globalization” as a pretext for decisions that in fact have nothing to do with such trends. Rural post offices do not have to be closed for reasons of globalization. There thus are plenty of reasons for the vigorous defense of parliaments and of representative democracy generally.

Second, as we move beyond the nation-state we must beware the pretense of democracy when in fact the voice of the people does not reach decision makers in any regular and constitutional way. It is quite likely that this central feature of true democracy will for some time remain lacking in international political spaces all the way from the European Union through NATO to the United Nations and its agencies, including the IMF, the World Trade Organization, and the World Bank. This means that for the time being, we must concentrate on setting up effective and transparent checks and balances. There are many ways of going about this task. I have already alluded to the 22nd Amendment and to judicial and auditing institutions. Publicity itself is an instrument of controlling those in power.

This still leaves the third and most difficult task unresolved, which is giving people a voice in matters that are decided beyond the nation-state. I am afraid my conclusion is that this will have to remain unresolved. For some time to come we shall live with a confused and rather uncomfortable mix of highly imperfect attempts to democratize global decision making. I have been rather unkind to the European Parliament but, of course, it documents at least good intentions, as do the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the North Atlantic Assembly, and other similar institutions. There is also the array of nongovernmental organizations. At times they aspire to be more governmental than is good for them; at other times they are more antigovernmental than is good for the rest of us. But in their chaotic way they express the views of many people. The same is true in an even more diffuse fashion for the “Internet debates” that are taking place everywhere. And soon we are back to Seattle and all that, inchoate expressions of frustration by people who have a right to be heard but cannot find a way to give voice to their views. For the moment, I see no way of giving shape to this cacophony.

Except for one final point, perhaps: I have referred to the description of Germany’s Weimar Republic as a democracy without democrats. This was one of the reasons why Weimar democracy could not last. However, the op-
posite condition offers more hope. If we cannot have world or even Euro-
pean democracy, at least we can have democrats. By this I mean people who
are conscious of their rights as citizens and take seriously the responsibility
to actively defend them. Citizens do not just let things happen; they speak
up, and even if they are not always heard, it matters. They use all nonviolent
means to check the untrammeled exercise of power. They support visible
initiatives, like, say, the counter-World Forum at Punto Alegre earlier this
year. They form an invisible network of defenders of freedom, which, in prin-
ciple, spreads all over the world. Democrats without democracy offer a more
hopeful prospect than the reverse. Perhaps this was the secret of postwar
Germany: There were democrats, like Gerd Bucerius, who were prepared to
practice what they believed and thus created a working democracy. For all
we know, something of this kind may one day be achieved beyond the na-
tion-state.

Notes

1Wolfgang Zapf, Wandlungen der deutschen Elite: Ein Zirkulationsmodell deutscher Führungsgruppen
2Ralf Dahrendorf, Liberal und unabhängig: Gerd Bucerius und seine Zeit (Munich, 2000).
4Fritz Stern, The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology (Berkeley,
Calif., 1961).