

Lars Müller Publishers

Democracy: An Ongoing Challenge

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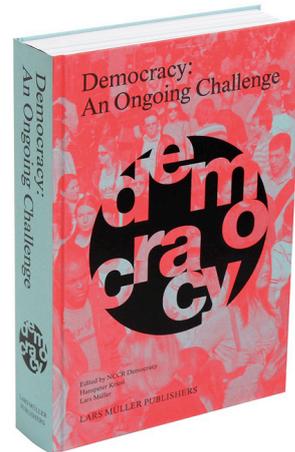
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Democracy: An Ongoing Challenge

A new visual text book dares a different look on the history and current debates around democracy

When Winston Churchill declared democracy to be “[...] the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time,” he was probably aware of its problems but seemingly more convinced by its qualities. Swiss publishing house Lars Müller Publishers and Zurich University’s research group “NCCR Democracy” have now dedicated an impressive “visual reader” to democracy and the new challenges it faces today.

The book seems to cover all relevant dimensions of the topic. Starting with democracy’s history and definition, the title further discusses the prerequisites and performance of democracy when compared to other forms of government—questions that are on the agenda today. Further chapters discuss differing forms of democracy, its expression in everyday life and the current medialization of political life. A text by Colin Crouch on what he calls “post-democracy” and a chapter on democratization and globalization in the 21st century give a forecast of further challenges democracy is facing today.

Nevertheless, the specific quality of this book resides not in its texts. With its 50:50 ratio of text and images, *Democracy: An Ongoing Challenge* offers an additional reading level. Similar to previous visual readers by the same publisher (*The Face of Human Rights*, *Who Owns the Water?*, *For Climate’s Sake*), images here are not only used to illustrate texts, but unfold with their own rhetoric. They tell us a different, alternative story, adding to the texts a level of visual reflection, sometimes surprising, sometimes provocative. By doing so, they prove that it’s possible to think about democracy beyond the stereotypes of politicians’ portraits and protesting masses. It’s not astonishing that motifs of the latter kind also appear in the book. A free Nelson Mandela and the fall of the Berlin wall certainly could not have been missing in such a volume. But the visuals go beyond this level of the obvious here. What does a large American road cruiser in front of a giant poster of a beef steak have to do with democracy? And those schoolchildren on the play-

ground? Indeed, more than you would think in the first place. We learn that economic prosperity is an important factor for people to approve of democratic government and that equal education opportunities are one of the democracy's major foundations.

The volume concludes with the words of Swiss writer Max Frisch: "Democracy means getting involved in one's own affairs." And indeed, the book offers the tools to do so. Not only by providing the essential facts and figures. But also by provoking an interested and also a younger readership to look, through well-chosen visuals, beyond the everyday cliché.