

Democracy, Global Exchanges, and the Youth. Interview with Ellyn Toscano

edited by Claudius Wagemann

Ellyn Toscano is Executive Director of New York University Florence. She is the founder of La Pietra Dialogues and the producer of The Season, a summer festival which assembles artists, writers, musicians and public intellectuals to produce new works or reinterpretations of classics. Before arriving at New York University Florence, Ms. Toscano served as Chief of Staff and Counsel to Congressman Jose Serrano of New York for two decades, was his chief policy advisor on legislative, political and media concerns and directed his work on the Appropriations Committee. Ms. Toscano also served as counsel to the New York State Assembly Committee on Education for nine years and served on the boards of several prominent arts and cultural institutions in New York City. She is currently on the board of trustees of the International School of Florence, Italy. A lawyer by training, Ms. Toscano earned an LLM in International Law from New York University School of Law.

If we look at the protests which are currently characterizing the political reality, we observe that they seem to be a global phenomenon. Indeed, the “occupy” protests which have their origins in New York City combined with the huge protest wave in Europe during the ongoing Euro crisis. Is it really the same phenomenon? Do you think that the situation in the US and Europe are comparable?

They are comparable in spirit and form. These movements arose from a deep sense of disillusionment and generalized dissatisfaction with political and economic leadership. They are comparable in what they are against but also in their insistence that public policy privilege moral over economic priorities. Clearly, in the MENA region, representative democracy is a rallying point around which political mobilization has coalesced, and likewise in Europe and Occupy, protesters feel that they are not represented in economic and political decisions. In form, they are comparable in their insistence on participatory, leaderless decision-making. By eschewing leadership and the formation of agenda, these “movements” risk being simply mobilizations; expressions of anger and not campaigns for change. Social media is very effective in giving instant, unmediated expression to impulses, in organizing and mobilizing people but its utility is less clear with respect to sustainable policy campaigns.

As tempting as it is to view all of these different movements as a single global phenomenon, we can't understand the potential and power of each of these movements if we are unable to isolate what makes each unique. This deeper, more nuanced analysis is really necessary.

The current events in Europe and the Mediterranean world suggest that contemporary political institutions are in crisis. However, there is no serious threat to democracy as a form of government. Rather the contrary: Europe even faces a plea for a revived democracy, and the 'Arab Spring' (although certainly being a sign of the political crisis) is often interpreted as a first step towards democratization. What are your thoughts about this? Do you think that democracy will be strengthened in this phase? Will it have to be transformed?

I am not that pessimistic. I do not think democracy, institutionally, is in crisis though we are clearly facing serious challenges. I think it is too easy and ultimately unsatisfactory to say that democratic institutions are inadequate for contemporary challenges. Fragmentation in the public space is good; choice among genuinely different options is contemplated. Maybe it is more accurate to say that we are facing a crisis in leadership and in participation. The current "economic crisis" is difficult for most people to understand. These are highly technical issues around which there is significant debate among experts. While the debate continues, people are suffering, unable to understand the problem or determine the solution. Tony Judt, on whom we could have relied to help us make sense of these movements, said that democracies corrode because people don't care about them. At least in the United States, the political context with which I am most familiar, there is clearly a crisis of confidence in elected leadership but the leadership is elected. As always, we need to be more attentive to participation and the quality of the debate.

The so-called Arab Spring has hardly been visibly influenced by anti-American tendencies, after a long period of serious problem which the US had to face in that area. Has this surprised you? Why do you think this has been the case?

I do not think that American values are the enemy in these struggles, which are much more inward looking. The protest movements are focused on the transformations of their own societies and not yet focused on the role that America has played or is playing. Since 9/11, the US has put significant effort into providing support to the development of a strong civil society and the building of a democratic consensus in the region, alongside its substantially more problematic military efforts. This civil support is not always obvious and it is difficult to assess its effect. As long as the US is active on the side of capacity building in the region, it need not be seen as a bad actor.

Do you think that there can be an "Arab" form of democracy? In how far do you think

that socio-cultural conditions in the Arab world could favor or hinder the development of such an area-specific model of democracy?

I think we have to expect that there can be an Arab form of democracy or at least a form of democracy that arises from organic democratic expression in the Arab world. Forces for democratic change in the Arab world will have to figure out how to reconcile Arab traditions and legal culture with democratic institutions. This is a creative and ultimately positive exercise. Without this work, the government will never feel authentic to those governed. It does seem evident after the Arab Spring that elections are the non-negotiable demand of the protests and Islamist parties are participating. However a disturbing range of issues remain unresolved, from the role of Sharia law, to the social and legal status of women in the Arab world, and civil liberties generally. These issues need to be addressed for democracy to be consolidated.

Although the participants in the protests in the Arab world (who often enough also risk their lives) are socially very heterogeneous, the driving forces seem to be young people and students, with a high share of young women who hope in better life conditions. You have been working for a long time on women's issues. How do you explain that this new involvement of Arab women occurs right now? What are their chances? Is the 'Arab Spring' more female than is often reported?

Maybe women and young people have the most to gain from a transformation of these societies. Again, these movements are seeking inclusive and participatory governments and formal means of expressing the aspirations of society, free from the stranglehold of autocratic regimes. These are expressions of hope, for societies in which everybody can participate equally. Women were full partners in protest in the Middle East and North Africa: marching, tweeting, and risking harm. Now they struggle for their right to participate as equal partners in governing and there is real cause for concern. Shirin Ebadi, winner of the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize and a leading human rights activist in Iran, insists that there is no necessary conflict between Sharia law and equal gender rights. We can look to Turkey for an example of the development of a secular democracy in an Islamic context, however imperfect. This is a difficult debate but we must be clear that the democratic opening in the Arab world will not succeed if half of the population remains without equality at the end of the day.

It is certainly not appropriate if we only discuss the women's role in the Arab world. Do you think that occidental democracies have implemented gender equality sufficiently enough? There has never been a female American president or a female Italian prime minister....

In more established democracies, women have achieved a high level of formal rights. Actual equality is much more complicated and success is far

less secure. Especially in the areas of economic opportunity – access to finance and credit, removal of barriers to market participation and ownership of businesses - much more attention is required. The Economist Intelligence Unit produces an annual report that analyzes countries based upon a series of factors identified as impacting women's access to economic opportunity. Worldwide, almost one half of women of working age do not participate in the global economy, an extraordinary loss of productivity that no national economy can afford. Also in the participation of women in parliaments, the news is equally bleak as revealed by the recently published 2012 Map on Women in Politics. On the hopeful side, though there has never been a female American president, we have three women on the Supreme Court, something we should celebrate.

Often we hear that there is no future without education and that, more specifically, there cannot be a real democracy without education. New York University seems to be very active in combining these two dimensions of democracy and education. What are the basics of the NYU educational project, above all with regard to the Florence site?

New York University has created campuses in 13 cities throughout the world, in addition to New York City, and is committed to the dynamic participation of students and faculty throughout this global network. This is an extraordinary commitment on the part of the President, whose vision is at its core, to educate students with the understanding that the challenges and opportunities they will face are global and require a deeper understanding of the world beyond the United States. Over 40% of NYU students study abroad at some point in their career. We hope that our students, while studying in Florence will gain an understanding of Italy not only from texts and classes (which they can do in NY) but through productive, mutually beneficial encounters with Florentines or Italians more generally. We want our students to be productive, contributing members of this community even for the brief time they are here and we try to create encounters through classes, community service and collaborations with other institutions in the city. We organize talks, conferences and meetings to put our students and New York University at large in dialogue with the academic, cultural and political communities in Florence and Italy and we are gratified that so many people participate in these dialogues, from scholars and students to the broader public.

What can higher education institutions, such as universities, contribute to the further development of democracy? Can they be arenas for democratic renewal?

Democracy is refreshed by the questions and confrontations that young people present. With any luck, we are giving young people the tools and confidence to assume leadership and challenge the status quo, to not take for

granted all of the things we have complacently come to accept. La Pietra Dialogues recently organized a conference entitled Democracy and Dissent, to examine the Arab Spring, the Occupy protests and the protests in Europe and the Middle East, to think about what they had in common with each other and with protest movements historically. We were privileged to have Professor Alessandro Pizzorno with us who said that hope is what distinguishes democracy from every other form of government: democracy implies something for the future. This is what characterizes the enterprise of a university as well.

How do your American students look to the future? Are they scared or hopeful? How does this compare to Italian students, in your view?

This is a difficult question. Thankfully, I think that students, and young people in general, whether American or Italian, are hopeful and forward looking, notwithstanding all of the challenges they know they face in the future. American students may see more tangible evidence of opportunity than Italian students, who are confronted with unbelievably high unemployment. When former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown came to NYU Florence, he had a private breakfast with 20 students in the dining room of Villa La Pietra. He started the breakfast by asking students to tell him one thing they were hopeful about, especially as he knew that students are bombarded with messages of hopelessness and defeat. Most students were hopeful about their education, about their ability to create a future for themselves. With all of the problems in the world, this hope is inspiring.

