



# Misunderstanding the maladies of liberal democracy promotion

RICHARD YOUNGS

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# Misunderstanding the maladies of liberal democracy promotion

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»» Democracy promotion has lost traction around the world. This atrophy has myriad causes and a range of consequences. One of its results is that calls have become more audible for a fundamental rethink of what type of ‘democracy’ should be supported in different regions. Many now chorus the view that the ‘democracy’ in ‘democracy promotion’ requires re-examination. Most critics of international policies berate Western governments for an inflexible and inappropriate adherence to a specific form of ‘liberal democracy’. They are right to take democracy promoters to task for the many unduly narrow ways in which they conceive political reform. But it is not convincing to argue that democracy promotion’s most serious problem today is its excessive adherence to a ‘liberal’ form of democracy. This critique fails to grasp the way in which democracy support policies have evolved and confuses what is entailed in meeting local demands for reform in non-democratic states.

The routine admonishments cast at Western governments under the now standard critique of liberal democracy do not weather the scrutiny of empirical evidence. They risk becoming widely accepted myths that have little grounding in reality. Democracy promoters do not overwhelmingly prioritise the procedural over the social and substantive elements of reform; they do not seek deliberately to hollow out the state; they do not conflate economic with political liberalisation; they are not brow-beaten into backing façade democracy by multinational companies; they are not fixated with elections; and they are not completely unreceptive to alternative forms of representation.

The problem with democracy promotion lies not in its unbending and overly zealous imposition of liberal norms. Rather, its most serious pathology is governments’ failure to defend core liberal norms in a way that would allow local variations in and choices over democratic reform - along with genuine civic empowerment and emancipation - to flourish. Current criticisms of the democracy agenda risk pushing policy deliberations in exactly the opposite direction to their required improvement.

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\* This working paper is a modified version of a chapter due to appear in C. Hobson and M. Kurki (eds), *The Conceptual Politics of Democracy Promotion* (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2011)

# The roots of misunderstanding

» Doubts are growing over liberal democracy. The constituent parts of the preoccupying panorama are now well known. The number of democracies worldwide has ceased to augment. Non-democratic, emerging powers appear to be on the front foot. Many commentators now assert that the appeal of democracy as a universal value lies in tattered shreds.

Of more particular significance, the ‘liberal’ in liberal democracy attracts increasingly critical attention. As democracy finds itself on the defensive, the notion gains currency that these travails owe much to its unduly narrow conceptualisation - especially on the part of Western powers and international institutions. The liberal form of democracy is widely seen as restrictive, unhelpfully value-laden and out of tune with citizens’ demands in different regions of the world. Its Western sponsorship is increasingly seen as insular and solipsistic. The crisis that besets the democracy support agenda today extends as far as many suggesting that the whole concept of ‘democracy’ in democracy promotion needs to be recast. The financial crisis has compounded the sense that a general crisis now afflicts liberalism, in both its economic and political guises.

The liberal strand of democratic theory has increasingly taken a conceptual beating, and from the stature of expert that demands serious attention. A vast array of writings now takes the core liberal agenda to task, and largely consigns it to the dustbin of history.<sup>1</sup> The whole notion that weakly democratic states stand at a stage of immaturity on their way to something more ‘advanced’ is increasingly questioned. Many analysts’ prognosis is of a rise of ‘state-’ and ‘authoritarian-capitalism’ as viable and, indeed, welcome alternatives to liberal democracy.<sup>2</sup> Cosmopolitanism, it is suggested, will in the future need to make space for the emergence of a demand for less liberal types of political regime.<sup>3</sup> The political consequences of the economic crisis are widely judged also to be illiberal. History shows that hard times can be fertile ground for the rise of values that give priority to order over individual liberties.

The severest critics deride the whole democracy agenda as a straight-jacket of power-driven liberal norms.<sup>4</sup> The strongest attack on liberal democracy promotion has come from neo-Gramscian writers. They dismiss democracy promotion as an elite-driven project designed to legitimise the prevention of far-reaching reform to the capitalist economy.<sup>5</sup>

1. J. Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (London: Penguin, 2008); R. Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams* (London: Atlantic Books, 2008); J. R. Saul, *The Collapse of Globalism and the Reinvention of the World* (London: Atlantic Books, 2005); and to a more measured extent, A. Hurrell, *On Global Order: Power, Values and the Constitution of International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)
2. I. Bremmer, ‘State Capitalism Comes of Age: The End of the Free Market?’ *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2009 and A. Gat, ‘The Return of Authoritarian Great Powers’, *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2007
3. R. Fine, *Cosmopolitanism* (London: Routledge, 2007)
4. J. Habermas, *The Divided West* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006); M. Duffield, *Development, Security and Unending War: Governing the World of Peoples* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007)
5. W. Robinson, *Promoting Polyarchy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); B. Gills, J. Rocamora and R. Wilson (eds), *Low Intensity Democracy* (London: Pluto Press, 1993)

There are many eloquent critiques that have added much of value to debates over democracy's international trajectory. But what is now the mainstream general critique tends rather easily to assume many things that in fact require more careful interrogation. Is it really the case that to recover legitimacy, the democracy support agenda requires a whole new concept of democracy? Is the problem really that democracy promoters have insisted upon an unduly narrow form of either electoral or liberal democracy? Is liberal democracy really quite the demon that many now suggest it is?

This working paper offers a modest, but hopefully distinctive contribution to these debates by focusing on the nexus between conceptual debate and policy practice. Amelioration of this link is sorely needed. At present, academics' and diplomats' perceptions of each other are hardly positive. Academics dismiss policy-makers as hopelessly reductionist in their understanding of democracy. Policy-makers see academics as self-absorbed, abstract and behind-the-curve.

It is argued here that the stance required is a nuanced one. Some of the key aspects common to critical perspectives are sound and have made an important contribution to debates over democracy promotion. The concept of democracy does indeed need to be opened up to a wider range of ideas. However, this paper questions how far the scepticism heaped on liberalism's shoulders captures what is most seriously wrong with real world policy developments.

Two commonly-made assumptions rest on empirical ground that is not firm. The first of these is that Western powers are in essence *over*-promoting liberal democracy. The facts suggest instead that they are not doing much to promote democracy of any type, whether liberal or otherwise. This is the most notable policy trend of recent years, under-stressed if not entirely ignored by arguments that derive from critical theory.

Second is the supposition that where they *are* active in democracy support, Western powers follow a rigidly liberal template that is inappropriate and inattentive to local demands and specificities. Of course, in places some such concerns are well founded and injustices are undoubtedly committed in the pursuit of political change. But this argument is far too sweeping when forwarded as a general meta-critique of democracy promotion. Real life policy formulation is much more ad hoc and varied in its conceptual bases. This is evident if one takes the trouble to look at the nitty-gritty substance of what democracy promoters are doing on the ground.

In some cases Western powers assertively promote liberal democracy. But other combinations are also adopted. Sometimes policy favours illiberal democracy; sometimes it seeks advances in liberal rights without democracy; and sometimes it is active in supporting neither the 'liberal' nor the 'democracy' strand of liberal democracy. The precise nature and balance of such policy options varies across different democracy promoters, different 'target' states and over different moments in time. Critical theory inspired approaches risk seeing a uniformity that simply does not exist in concrete democracy support strategies. They are if anything more straight-jacketed than the policy-makers they mock as rigidly simplistic in their conceptual understanding of democracy. This is not to suggest that all is well in the democracy promoters' house; but the renovations needed are more subtle in nature.

# Democracy, economic interests and development

»» A first, frequent criticism is that Western powers limit themselves to supporting a form of liberal political reform that excludes any interest in social democracy. The evidence demonstrates that this is not a convincing line of argument. The routinely made suggestion is that a key problem with the democracy support agenda is that donors do not realise that ‘democracy must deliver for economic development’ and help reduce poverty and inequality. Western governments can be criticised for many things, but this now standard accusation is wide of the mark. The argument that donors place such absolute priority on political liberty in their foreign policies that they are blind to economic development challenges and possibly alternative means of achieving these is not one that bears any close resemblance to reality.

At the level of concrete funding initiatives the balance of priorities appears to be the very inverse. Donors give significantly more resources for social development and efforts to reduce inequality than they channel to political aid aimed at ‘imposing’ liberal democracy. By far the largest slices of funding are managed by development agencies, most of which remain reluctant to let any engagement on political reform divert attention from core social development aims.

Of course, it would be fair to argue that on such issues still not enough is being done, and that trade policies often cut across the stated aims of enhancing social democracy. However, this is a problem related to the prioritisation of commercial self-interest and broader structural constraints of the international system more than to a conceptual understanding of reform that negates social democracy. What requires improvement is the linkage between democracy promotion policies and other aspects of Western foreign and commercial policies that relate to structural impediments and injustices at the global level. Conceptually, European governments would categorically question the suggestion that there is a trade-off between core liberal democracy and the goals of social democracy. President Obama’s discourse also now focuses routinely on linking democracy to social justice – as, for example, in his September 2010 speech to the United Nations General Assembly.<sup>6</sup>

Theoretically, there is resonance here with the later work of John Stuart Mill that pointed to the mutually reinforcing links between liberal political rights and social democratic ends.<sup>7</sup> Yet, as one commentator observes, many self-styled progressives have come to believe that these are largely mutually-exclusive policy choices – and that concerns over the restriction of civic rights are little more than a middle class diversion from the pursuit of systemic socio-economic change.<sup>8</sup>

The impact on democracy of structural conditionality aimed at reducing the economic role of the state continues to be problematic in many countries. But even here the financial crisis has hastened a shift away from the use of structural adjustment conditionality

6. Speech delivered by President Barack Obama to the UN General Assembly, 23 September 2010.

7. P. Ginsborg, *Democracy: Crisis and Renewal* (London: Profile Books, 2008), p. 42.

8. J. Kampfner, *Freedom for Sale* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2009), chapter 7.

(if only for the self-serving reason that many Western governments are now borrowers from the international financial institutions). In broad diplomatic terms, most countries pursuing socialistic paths to development have been rewarded more than castigated. Think of the way in which Spain and France have deepened relations with Hugo Chávez' Venezuela or the generous amounts of European aid channelled to Vietnam.

To some extent, it might even be said that the imbalance tips the other way. The problem is not so much that the European governments limit themselves to liberal democracy without supporting measures of social democracy, rather that they support measures of social democracy without aiming their policy instruments at the core tenets of liberal democracy. Asked to list the most important elements of his country's democracy policies, the reply of one senior Nordic diplomat reveals this confusion: 'support for health and education', which is 'much more legitimate than free elections'. In practice, policy aims (rightly, it might be felt) at the end goals associated with social democracy, but without prioritising its democratic procedural components: the 'social' without the 'democracy' of 'social democracy'.

A second critique is that democracy promoters neglect the necessary role of the state, the flip side to their belief in unbridled liberalism. In fact, donors' aid programmes exhibit a notable state orientation, with the aim of building states' social and economic competences - to such an extent that citizens often complain that such statist approaches neglect the civic sphere. Development agencies such as the UK's Department for International Development (DfID) have developed some impressively sophisticated concepts of 'building coalitions for change'. But local actors complain that such approaches are invariably out-weighted by political-level diplomacy. European governments have allowed regimes to neuter reform dynamics in their (perfectly desirable) efforts to include state bodies in their projects. Donors are correct to insist that the democracy agenda is as much about strengthening state as civic capacity. But the way this is being done tilts the balance too far away from the latter.

Local stakeholders are highly critical of the fact that European Commission projects on judicial and administrative reform are agreed with governments and include mainly regime-backed partners. In the Middle East people talk of a 'legal complex' – judges working with civil society activists and party reformists to broaden out the hitherto very statist approach to legal reform favoured by the international community. Fieldwork reveals civil society organisations' complaints that they are pushed by donors into 'coalitions' with ministries – the new box to be ticked on donor check lists - when the problem for social development is the illiberal repression wrought by this very same state.<sup>9</sup> Among European policy-makers there is indeed growing recognition that it is this imbalance that requires attention. The Commission's 'political economy' approach to governance reform has uncovered concern that millions of euros of budget support given straight to non-democratic regimes for social development purposes is simply empowering autocratic state structures that evade local accountability over the way in which such funds are used.

Third, central to critical perspectives is the contention that liberal democracy is joined at the hip with economic liberalism, of a type that works against the interests of non-Western states. This is the essence of the increasingly popular neo-Gramscian line. This would claim that all the discourse on supporting social justice and accepting other models of democracy is entirely disingenuous - a feint to hide what is in fact a self-interested, narrow preference for liberal democracy. The financial crisis has also nourished a resurgent



9. Fride project on 'Revitalising democracy assistance: the view of local stakeholders', available at [www.fride.org](http://www.fride.org)

Marxist critique. Slavoj Žižek sees in this crisis proof that not only is market liberalism the flip side of political liberalism, but that tension between the two is inherent to liberalism itself. He contends that the financial crisis shows that the political economy of class is back as the prime shaper of struggle, negating the notion that liberal norms are universal. This influential thinker advocates that the left return to the Hegelian notion of a strong state and move away from support for liberal individual empowerment.<sup>10</sup>

It is absolutely true, and vital to highlight, that many injustices are carried out in the name of democracy support, and that the latter can easily be used as a cloak for self-centred Western economic interest in a way that militates against high quality political pluralism. However, the detailed policy record once again shows a more varied picture than is often painted. In most cases, Western states are more than happy to delink the commercial and democracy agendas. The EU is currently negotiating a large number of trade deals with autocratic regimes, without any apparent worries over the absence of democracy in these states. And conversely, the main post-financial crisis trend is that the West is pulling back from support for trade liberalisation. The Doha round is stuck; most bilateral trade deals are in fact 'trade light'. Another point of relevance in response to the 'elitist democracy', Marxian critique is that the one sector rarely included in democracy initiatives is the business sector – trade unions get far more support from Western democracy promotion agencies.

None of this is to argue that neo-imperial dynamics do not exist. But it *is* a plea for greater forensic rigour in determining what kind of policy outcomes can be attributed to such dynamics. Western governments are often admonished for striking commercial deals with autocrats, but then also for 'democratic imperialism' when they *do* emphasise liberal norms in their foreign relations – damned if we do, damned if we don't, some diplomats might feel. A good dose of imperialism could be said to lie in the convenient sidelining of democracy more than any pernicious liberal understanding of political reform. Research suggests that people in autocratic states see 'imperialism' in Western double-standards – sometimes supporting, sometimes deferring democracy – more than in any adherence to a particular conceptual model of democratic reform.<sup>11</sup>

Many critical points raised are important and valid. They certainly offer a welcome complement to the focus of constructivism on identities: it is important to redress the dominance of purely identity-centred debates and recognise that the potential for and blockages to democracy continue to be rooted in material interests and social structures. But there is much, perhaps wilful over-conflating of the criticism of neo-liberal economics with criticism of liberal democracy.

It is not true to say that Western powers neglect the economic dimension of democratisation in favour of a narrow focus on elections and political activists. Again, in the case of European policy exactly the reverse is the case: efforts aimed at the dispersal of economic power are given clear priority. The problem is more subtle: not so much a narrow exclusion of the economic dimension from the 'conceptual politics of democracy' as a failure to articulate more symbiotic linkages between economic and political change. For economic change to unleash pro-democratic potential is not automatic but path-dependent on parallel change in political rights, if the benefits of economic democratisation are not to be captured by incumbent autocratic regimes.

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10. S. Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2010), p. 5, p. 37, p. 157 and p. 200.

11. Fride project on 'Revitalising democracy assistance', *op. cit.*

A fourth contention is that approaches to democracy promotion are largely determined by pressure from multinational companies for shallow rather than emancipatory reform. This view fails to weather scrutiny. Empirical research has found that business views and actions vary enormously. Some firms in some markets have indeed played a role in pushing for a curtailed form of low intensity democracy. But on other occasions, other firms – especially bigger natural resources companies – prefer autocracy to low intensity democracy. For example, some Middle Eastern regimes are now setting up business courts, that are more efficient and predictable, but act outside the purview of normal courts - and investors declare themselves happy with this situation. Companies' actions in this sense might help explain the lack of commitment to democracy promotion but not a limited liberal form of democracy. In still other cases, international companies have arrived at more enlightened conclusions that their own interests depend on high quality democracy, with active citizen participation, high education and social welfare provision, and improving Gini coefficients of equality.

Not only is there much diversity in the positions adopted by international capital. Much uncertainty also exists among executives over how their narrowly defined commercial interests are affected by political structures. Most look for a lead on issues of politics from diplomats rather than attempting to push the latter into a particularly detailed line on democracy promotion. It is simply unconvincing to posit international capital as the prime actor in herding Western states towards a uniform focus on a particular form of limited liberal democracy everywhere in the world. Its actions are far more reactive than this suggests, and more varied – sometimes worse and sometimes better.<sup>12</sup>

The book that did most to engender the neo-Gramscian take on democracy promotion is unsatisfactory in generalising from an account centred on US policy in Latin America at one particular historical moment.<sup>13</sup> Many states where a neo-Gramscian approach is alleged represent such small markets it is doubtful that they represent major interests for international capital: if the neo-Gramscian account were correct we might expect the most assertive promotion of limited democracy to be found not in Ecuador or Niger but in China – precisely where we see an accommodation with the authoritarian regime. Moreover, the Gramscian framework must struggle with the fact that much low intensity democracy today is of a leftist variety, certainly not falling over itself to meet the requirements of international capital.

It is worth pointing out that John Locke's now much-maligned focus on private property (as a constituent of political freedom) was part of his campaign against serfdom – a progressive product of its time, now pilloried as conservative dogma. A focus on property rights may not always be as regressive to substantive democracy as many critics assume: in many countries a major social concern of lower income groups is the impunity with which the government is able to grab land from them. Often civil society organisations themselves push for a stronger focus on private property rights within donor policies. Moreover, whether one thinks economic liberalisation is a good or bad thing, the fact that property rights have been extended around the world is hardly the result of a particular conceptualisation of democracy support policies.

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12. R. Youngs, *International Democracy and the West: The Role of Governments, Civil Society, and Multinational Business* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), chapter 3.

13. Robinson, *op. cit.*

# Forms of representation

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»» In one of the most eloquent of recent analyses, John Dunn asserts that democracy today enjoys only a ‘reluctant deference’ because it has lost its original sense of popular participation in decision-making but is seen more narrowly as a population bestowing legitimacy upon the state through the principle of representation. There is no genuine democratisation of life, but victory of the (classically-rooted) notion of a ‘partially elective aristocracy’. This is valuable in setting limits on the state but carries none of the stirring pretensions of democracy’s origins. Democracy endures, Dunn argues, as ‘a recipe for nurturing the order of egoism’.<sup>14</sup> The relevant implication here is that the West has failed to find a way of promoting a really vibrant form of democratic representation that extends beyond formalistic institutional change – a failure in some ways reflective of its own internal political travails.

Flowing from this, fifth in our list of key strands to the critique of liberal democracy is the ubiquitous criticism that Western democracy promoters reduce democracy to the holding of free and fair, competitive elections. While this admonishment continues, it is not convincing today to accuse democracy promoters of this ‘electoral fallacy’. No-one seriously involved in democracy support today argues that ‘democracy equals elections’. The issue is how much effort is invested into pushing for free, multiparty elections compared to other components of high quality democracy. Here it is simply not the case that Western democracy promoters over-concentrate their political capital or resources on elections to the detriment of more ‘substantive’ reforms.

Indeed, if anything, policy has shifted to the other extreme: the importance of elections is rather under-estimated. Western governments prioritise social projects, civil society initiatives, good governance and many other reforms in countries where they happily accept autocratically manipulated elections. Neither the US nor European governments adopt punitive measures in response to unfree elections with any significant degree of frequency. Countries routinely win policy upgrades from the European Union in the aftermath of unfree elections: Ethiopia, Rwanda, Armenia, Egypt, Azerbaijan, Tunisia and Morocco are just a few recent examples of this happening. The European Parliament is in battle with member state governments that fail to act in any way upon criticisms made by observer missions of flawed elections. The percentage of democracy aid that goes to electoral projects is no longer disproportionately high. In China, European donors have switched funding from village election projects to supporting the Chinese regime to build a social security system – exactly the opposite of the standard charges made against democracy promoters.

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14. J. Dunn, *Setting the People Free: The Story of Democracy* (London: Atlantic Books, 2005), p. 17, p. 158, p. 176

Western powers are not imposing a form of democracy inappropriately based on or limited to elections. Indeed, the demand for freer elections is higher than the supply of support for free and fair elections from the international community. Moreover, it is a myth that donors do not accept electoral results they do not like. In most cases they do: Viktor Yanukovich's victory in Ukraine and the AKP's dominance in Turkey are two examples. Not every case is like the Hamas victory in 2006. Today the danger must be that the liberating role of elections is given insufficient due. Donors commonly argue now that free elections should only come after all other kinds of reforms have been implemented. However, in many cases it is free elections that provide the breakthrough for other gains in political and social rights; a lack of free and fair elections is a block to other reforms, they are not just the end of a process. Moreover, Western powers often presume people will wait more than they actually want to for an independent voice in the choice of their government.<sup>15</sup>

Ironically, in their concern not to be foisting 'Western-style elections' on other states, Western governments fall into the trap of thinking that reforms should everywhere follow the same path as European history, which saw fully free and inclusive plebiscites come at the end of centuries of gradual reform. In this sense, withholding support for free elections could be said to be rather more Eurocentric than trying to temper non-democratic regimes' control of voting. A much repeated line is that (a softer) democracy policy support should be guided primarily by recognition that 'democratisation in Europe took 300 years'. But this seems to underplay the fact that this drawn out process witnessed untold bloodshed and upheaval – hardly an appropriate model for today's democrats.

A sixth point: the associated criticism that Western democracy promoters are resistant to 'alternative' forms of representation. This accusation is also less than fully seized of the facts. Development agencies and political foundations have increasingly engaged with tribal leaders and village level courts in the developing world. Debates over conflict stabilisation initiatives have tilted strongly towards 'vernacular' understandings of democracy based on informal and patronage-based distributions of power.<sup>16</sup> The EU talks of 'specificities' even in places like Georgia where democrats themselves reject the framing of debates in such terms. And most democracy aid projects are today about bridge-building and mediation, not replicating Western institutions.

From Afghanistan to Central Africa, from Nepal to Guatemala, the new leitmotif is support for 'indigenous forms of reconciliation'. Several European governments have supported projects designed to organise representation around indigenous rights in Bolivia; the US has been tougher on Evo Morales' drugs policy but has also sought to work in cooperation with his government's alternative concept of representation. European governments have backed the African Union Panel of the Wise, which includes tribal elders. In general, policy shows evidence of becoming more pragmatic. It is simply untrue to say that donors are intent on imposing liberal democracy in a way that overrides local participatory dynamics. In fact, under the Accra and Paris development agendas, the focus is now on supporting village level monitoring bodies overseeing municipal level budgets. >>>

15. M. McFaul, *Advancing Democracy Abroad: Why we should and how we can* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), p. 66.

16. ODI-Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Development, security and transitions in fragile states*, Meeting report, February 2010, p. 17.

The problem lies not so much with a blind refusal to consider other forms of representation – indeed all the official discourse insists on quite the opposite – but rather in understanding what this really means in practice. For example, exactly how should donors respond to and engage with disparate social movements that do not fit the Western model of representative bodies? All donors espouse ‘country-specific approaches’. But this risks becoming an empty, if mellifluous cliché. This author has certainly not heard any democracy promoter advocate ‘country-blind approaches’. When one probes what ‘country specific’ really means, it appears bereft of clear operational guidance in many contexts. On the ground, donor coordination is identified as the big challenge; this is lacking precisely because a multiplicity of programmes and approaches are offered.

In fact, the debate has already moved into a subsequent phase: donors that had recently been supporting traditional structures have now become more circumspect due to their less than favourable experiences on the ground. For example, the EU supported Gacaca traditional courts in Rwanda, as these were seen as a quicker, paperless track for genocide cases not serious enough to be sent to the Arusha-based International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. But these courts have been dogged by complaints of witch-hunts, controversial and often delayed rulings. Likewise, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the early 2000s the international community supported customary justice in some instances, but then stopped. This was because of a series of controversial decisions, for example involving rape cases in which tribal chiefs often ruled that the rapist and the victim should be forced to marry. Land ownership systems managed by chiefdoms have proven a barrier to ‘democratising’ citizenship rights over land. The situation now among donors is one of great uncertainty about how to engage with customary justice. The drift is towards, rather, looking at ‘transitional justice’, which aims to provide redress for moments of egregious rights abuses, but often appears delinked from the longer-term reform agenda.

Neither is it quite true to accuse Western governments of adhering to a liberal democratic model that allows no room for religiously-based representation, as some critics now do. Western governments have long provided fulsome support for Lebanon’s confessional-based democracy. Progress has been halting on engaging Islamists, and this remains an area of concern in Western policies. But, this is not primarily a problem of a narrow liberal form of democracy. In recent years, Western democracy promoters have taken a step away from equating democracy with pure secularism. Hundreds of Western funded projects now facilitate religious dialogue. Many, many deliberative forums are funded on identity questions – all very Habermasian in nature. The West is not good at engaging with Islamists. But shortcomings in such engagement are not because it is working to a conceptual model of democracy that excludes religiosity. The liberal tendency has actually been towards ‘understanding religious differences’ much more than towards pressing liberal political norms as an antidote to the root causes of radicalism.

Western powers self-evidently often go too far in confusing a pluralism of models with relativism: think of the European ministerial visits to Equatorial Guinea praising president Obiang for his ‘democracy, African style’ as just one example. Many such assertions are plainly laughable and self-serving; even the less ridiculous often stretch the conceptual parameters of what is ‘democracy’ beyond anything that is at all convincing. Definition stretching is at least as great a risk as conceptual narrowing in democracy support.

A seventh and final line of attack is the routine assertion that local demand is always for something other than liberal democracy. The reality is more mixed. Traditional local forms are themselves highly contested. There are undoubtedly concerns with Western forms being inappropriately implemented. But there are also concerns that the West patronises many local civic groups, assuming they hanker after some kind of tribally based identity when what they really want is external help with the basic protection of liberal rights. Many local groups complain that donors have become far too indulgent of traditional forms that are deeply undemocratic, for example in their treatment of women. The international community's attempt to 'bring in the Taliban' may seem perfectly sensible and desirable, but it has also unleashed howls of protest from the 'democratic' opposition to the Karzai government. Asked the very question about 'the need for alternative models of democracy', the replies of civic actors in the target states of democracy support are often thought-provoking. 'Traditional forums must continue, yes; but a different model of democracy, no', replies one Nepalese student activist. 'Just word games', sighs one African NGO leader.

The positive view now taken by policy-makers towards 'traditional structures' may have extremely welcome elements. But – right or wrong - it is the very antithesis of the philosophical roots of political liberalism in the conceptual war on ossified tradition. Interestingly, Marxists are now in the forefront of critiquing this support for traditional forms: in their idiom, this 'organic lifeworld' is replete with forms of domination. The Marxist line is that the liberal tolerance for such alternative forms is now so great it will form part of liberalism's self-destruction – as a creed tolerant of its antitheses. Bernard-Henri Lévy maintains that imperialism was the negation of, not the insistence on, the universality of standard liberal politics.<sup>17</sup> Of course, the latter years of British imperialism represented the defeat, not the apogee, of Gladstonian liberalism.

Strategies need to look forwards. Where a new 'conceptual politics of democracy promotion' is required is in pre-empting qualitative shifts in the forms of citizen accountability. Cyber-activism is the big new focus, especially among younger sectors of the population. Donors still struggle to build this into their democracy support profiles. The problem is not an overdose of outside support for liberal individual empowerment but a preference for state-controlled limited governance reform *against* such new forms of civic organisation. The international community supported the Equity and Reconciliation Commission in Morocco, which most observers saw as an effort to pre-empt democratic breakthrough; at the same time, clampdowns against social networks and new media in Morocco elicit no critical international response. Similarly in Egypt, most genuine civil society activists now register as law firms or civil companies to get around regime restrictions on civil society, but neither the US nor the EU have responded to this in their funding rules, for fear of upsetting the Mubarak regime.

In short, debate over different forms of democracy is needed; but the West does little to advance the core liberal freedoms of thought and expression that would enable such preferences to be freely deliberated.

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17. B-H. Lévy, *Left in Dark Times: A stand against the new barbarism*, (New York: Random House, 2009), p. 194.

# Reflections on liberalism's future

»» Current international political trends are complex and still in flux. History shows that there are no iron laws of democratisation, and dominant political dynamics can prove strikingly changeable. The easy triumphalism of the liberal democracy agenda in the 1990s was misplaced. However, much criticism now risks over-shooting.<sup>18</sup> The Bush administration provided an easy dog to kick. But its excessive awfulness skewed the nature of conceptual debate: critical theory has become as lacking in self-reflexivity as the 'liberal imperialism' it everywhere sees and excoriates.

A nuanced view is warranted of the 'democracy backlash'.<sup>19</sup> We should be attentive to a lack of flexibility in the conceptualisation of democracy. The consideration of a variety of models is necessary and desirable. However, the evidence does not sustain the suggestion that the most serious problem with democracy promotion today is an excess of the 'liberal' in liberal democracy.

Indeed, in many places quite the reverse is true. The most worrying problem is not practitioners' lack of willingness to consider varieties of democratic institutions, but the lack of priority attached to advancing core liberal rights. As Western powers decline, this trend is likely to deepen in the future. Liberalism will increasingly be on the back foot. In this sense, those that assume that liberalism is dominant risk lagging behind the policy curve. Dahl's definition of democracy may be partial and narrow, but can we really not say with confidence that it is better than the authoritarianism that the West is still propping up under the guise of respect for 'local values'? Moreover, the 'liberal overdose' argument is curious to the extent that since the end of the 1990s a central thrust of debate common to development, security and governance circles has been 'the rediscovery of the state'.

The stress on core liberal political norms is today under- not over-played. It continues to be the centrally important area where local reformers look to the international community for support – most commonly, in vain. Deliberations over precise institutional configurations and second-generation reforms are of a lesser order of importance. Michael McFaul observes that some debates about the intricate sequencing of reform and different varieties of institutional pathways look incongruous, as the US can today do little to influence such details, but rather simply back core democratic values.<sup>20</sup> Yet it still hesitates to do so, for all the standard commentary on US 'liberal imperialism'. Liberal internationalism is still de-legitimised by the pervasive assumption that it is concerned primarily with mobilising military force in support of democratic values; it must be made clearer that military power is simply anathema to the standard day-to-day agenda of democracy support.

18. T. Garton-Ash, *Free World* (London: Penguin, 2004); F. Halliday, 'International Relations in a post-hegemonic age', *International Affairs*, 85/1, 2009, 37-51.

19. P. Burnell P and R. Youngs (eds), *Democracy's New Challenges* (London: Routledge, 2009).

20. McFaul, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

There are different levels of critique, which risk elision. One thing is to argue that Western powers should support core liberal democratic principles, then from this base work to build into their policies a concern with social equality, participation, deliberation and religious identity. It would be entirely convincing to argue that, while democracy promoters have advanced, they could and should be doing more in this direction. But it is quite another thing to suggest that such aims should be supported *against* or instead of core liberal norms.

In practice, what many critics appear to advocate is not a cumulative combination, but a dilution of the liberal component in favour of other forms. They betray a core inconsistency: they dislike democracy promotion for being overly intrusive, but then advocate modifications that would make it *more*, not less, intrusive. This is because most suggested ‘alternative forms of democracy’ breach the line between process and substantive policy outputs – they advocate particular ends, not just a type of policy-making means.

The concrete examples of European policies demonstrate that it is hardly credible to ‘accuse’ Brussels of being an unthinking citadel of blinkered liberalism. Indeed, in this author’s experience, conversations with policy-makers reveal this to be akin to an almost unmentionable L-word. When so much doubt and ambivalence now suffuses democracy support strategies, it is unconvincing to admonish the latter for being uniformly, heavily prescriptive. Donors’ tendency to see democracy through the prism of their own political systems still often surfaces. But in terms of the way that the ‘democracy’ in democracy support is defined conceptually it would seem somewhat redundant now to warn donors of the dangers of heavily-prescriptive institutional templates.

There is some evidence of the self-reflexive policy-learning on the part of democracy promotion practitioners that many critics assume is entirely lacking. Indeed, genuine doubt over the most suitable paths forward has reached the point where some actors’ policies are reduced to immobilism. The problem is that while policy-relevant knowledge has accumulated, it has done so in an ad hoc fashion and has not been systematised into common or comprehensive new approaches.<sup>21</sup>

The influences on democracy strategy of academic traditions are eclectic. If we were to trace the philosophical roots of European good governance and democracy support policies, it is simply not the case that Locke prevails over all else. The breadth of democracy assistance programmes goes way beyond the Schumpeterian. The stress on the role of the state and the existential identity-value of the political community found in many current policy initiatives finds resonance (if unconsciously) in thinking that historically stood as the antithesis to political liberalism. Such a line can be traced from Aristotle’s view of the political community as a biological organism; to Rousseau’s insistence that the general will embodies a mystical, spiritual collective identity of the political community above and beyond the will of the majority; through to Hegel’s system centred on the state as the organic embodiment of collective interests and identity, the ‘absolute’ within which the individual finds his very meaning.

This is not to say any such strand of thinking would capture entirely the ideas that inform today’s foreign policies. However, the pertinent point is that the underpinnings of these



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21. T. Carothers, ‘Stepping back from democratic pessimism’, Carnegie Working Paper 99, February 2009.

policies can be seen in writers who were in combat with Lockean liberalism. The standard European discourse on equality being more important than formal political democracy has a direct echo in (politically) anti-liberal Rousseau. Concerns over the ‘tyranny of the majority’ that inform power-sharing strategies in post-conflict situations have a long line of antecedent philosophers who inveighed strongly against the will of the majority, from Aristotle through even to Kant (who was concerned with the republican separation of executive and legislation but certainly not with augmenting popular power against the aristocracy). Even Benthamite radical utilitarianism shines through, in its concern with a strong rule of law to restrain individual freedoms and ensure greater equality in the furtherance of collective interests. If any modern philosopher is the thinker of choice for today’s discerning Eurocrat it is Habermas, not the classic liberals. In general, deliberative democracy has been most widely advocated as a means of situating abstract cosmopolitan universalism within concrete and varied social settings.<sup>22</sup> And all this is quite apart from the more obvious cases of cynical realpolitik that take their cue from the more violent illiberalism of Machiavelli and Hobbes.<sup>23</sup>

It is self-evident that liberal democracy now shares the conceptual field with rivals in a way that it did not in the 1990s. This may provide for vibrant debate and much-needed self-examination. But it does not necessarily mean that alternatives have superior legitimacy. Allowing analytic space for a wider variety of forms and definitions of democracy does not mean that sovereign democracy, Islamic democracy, tribal democracy or Bolivarian democracy are necessarily superior or more in tune with local demands. With the West accused of being overly-prescriptive of a liberal form of democracy, it would be subversive of the critique to jump straight into advocating other pre-cooked forms. It should be remembered that a form such as social democracy is just as ‘Western’ in its origins as liberal democracy: there is no reason a priori to assume that it corresponds more closely to ‘local demands’ in the way that is routinely and rather uncritically suggested (however one oneself desire socially democratic outcomes). If the ascendance of conceptual competitors can add usefully to the parameters of desirable political reform, it is not incompatible with this that they should at the same time sharpen the West’s defence of core liberalism.

Critical theorists skate a thin line: they issue pleas for a rethinking of democracy, but scratch beneath the surface and what they really lionise is undemocratic state-led development; theirs is in fact not a genuine concern with reconceptualising democracy so much as a pretty wholesale questioning of the democracy agenda, dressed up in softened discourse. A central pivot of many such critiques is the criticism of liberalism’s teleological arrogance. But this centres too much on one influential book published at one rather distinctive moment in time<sup>24</sup>; liberalism more broadly and properly understood is not teleology. Moreover, many writers argue against teleology and prescription but then in the next breath confidently assert that social democracy must be a superior and more acceptable form of democracy outside the West and one which has a more sustainable long-term future. This may be the case, but they have no philosophical justification for saying so without replicating the very same methodological features they profess to dislike in ‘liberal’ tenets – and thus contradicting themselves.

22. See the contributions to D. K. Chatterjee, *Democracy in a Global World* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008).

23. This mix exists not only at a superficial level, but extends right back to the cleavage in philosophical method that separates liberalism and illiberalism: the deductive positing of a priori ideals, in a line extending from Plato through to Hegel, standing in distinction to the inductive empiricism of the English liberals.

24. F. Fukuyama, *The End of History* (London: Profile Books, 2004).

Clearly, more debate about different forms of political representation would be healthy. Allowing space for a plurality of routes to and types of political reform would sit well with the core spirit of democracy. However, while more flexibility and open mindedness are still required in democracy promotion, there is a risk of being unduly defensive about the virtues of liberal democracy's core tenets. The problem in many places of the world is the absence of liberalism's core values, not their excess. Vigilance in the need for democracy's reconceptualisation is indeed merited. But it would be a muddled reasoning that took this to provide a case for the wholesale pull back from the (already anaemic) support for liberal democracy's notion of fundamental political rights.

We need more fully to understand local demands. But there is an automatic assumption routinely made that such demands are for more diverse, anti-liberal political forms. This may in many places be the case, but the evidence must be assembled. One cannot simply assert this as if it were axiomatic to the emerging world order; there is no reason for supposing a priori that this is a natural outcome of the rebalancing of international order. The evidence that exists points, again, to a more nuanced conclusion: a demand for the essential tenets of liberal universalism, made relevant to and expressed through the language and concepts of local cultures and histories. A growing focus within political philosophy has been on 'capabilities': negative liberal freedoms need to be deepened but also combined with the locally-rooted capabilities that ensure their effective realisation.<sup>25</sup>

The central thrust of Locke's liberalism was anti-dogmatism and prudence. The irony – and, for anyone concerned over democracy's health, the tragedy – is that international support for a supposedly liberal democratic agenda is today associated with exactly the opposite of these values. It is the non-dogmatic spirit that liberalism must work to recover: liberal democracy as a system that (simply) creates space for a variety of different local choices. Advocates and opponents of liberalism are trapped in a circular debate over this matter: while core liberal freedoms are required to make such local choices, critics insist that those very liberal rights are themselves a corruption of local autonomy. The imperative is not for liberalism to cede to other creeds, but to work towards squaring the circle that has always existed at its heart: that is, liberalism is in its very essence the rejection of utopian political design, yet, if not pursued with care, it can appear as an unbending utopia. This defines its challenge: can liberalism stand convincingly as an anti-utopian creed whose own propulsion requires courageous normative conviction? Can it strike the Rawlsian balance of deepening a plurality of values without descent into relativism?

Where it is most convincing to argue that a reconceptualisation is required is in relation to the multilateral dimension. Western powers' strategies of democracy support within particular national contexts take place in complete isolation from their own multilateral diplomacy. It is the fact that the multilateral pursuit of economic liberalism has no counterpart in the sphere of political liberalism that risks leaving the latter devoid of its original, classical idealism.<sup>26</sup> The changing world order and deepening interdependence across many spheres renders this separation prejudicial to the chances for success at both levels. Rectifying this is not a matter of a highly idealist claim in favour of

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25. For a summary of the long-running and complex debates over 'capabilities', see D. K. Chatterjee, *Democracy in a Global World* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008).

26. E. Kienle, 'Global competitiveness, the erosion of checks and balances, and the demise of liberal democracy', *Open Democracy*, [www.opendemocracy.net](http://www.opendemocracy.net), September 2010.

a cosmopolitan democracy, that in light of today's shifting power constellations looks increasingly improbable. Neither is the link simply a matter of getting rising powers signed up to the Western agenda of democracy support; such instrumentality is likely to backfire badly. But, conversely, the opposite extreme must be avoided of presuming that the link must be entirely negative: that any effort in favour of globalism hollows out national-level democratic rights or that advances in democratic rights nationally must undercut support for globalism.

The nature of national-international links is multi-faceted and complex, and thus needs far more careful deliberation. Debate continues between two possible routes: a democratisation of traditional inter-state relations ('a democracy of democracies') versus a more radical and qualitative shift in multilateralism. Certainly, there must be a case for understanding that the pursuit of power-based, state-centric forms of multilateralism risks working against the very kind of local empowerment central to national-level democracy support programmes. Democracy promoters must begin to understand how their macro-multilateral policies affect the systematic constraints and potential relevant to the health, vibrancy and impact of democracy at the national level. In the absence of such a rethink on this question, advances at the level of specific democracy support initiatives are likely to be over-ridden by systemic imbalances that sap the desired 'democratisation of democracy'.

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