portion of all the efforts and talents in the world are employed in merely neutralizing one another. It is the proper end of government to reduce this wretched waste to the smallest possible amount, by taking such measures as shall cause the energies now spent by mankind in injuring one another . . . to be turned to the legitimate employment of human faculties, that of compelling the powers of nature to be more and more subservient to physical and moral good. □

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Notes

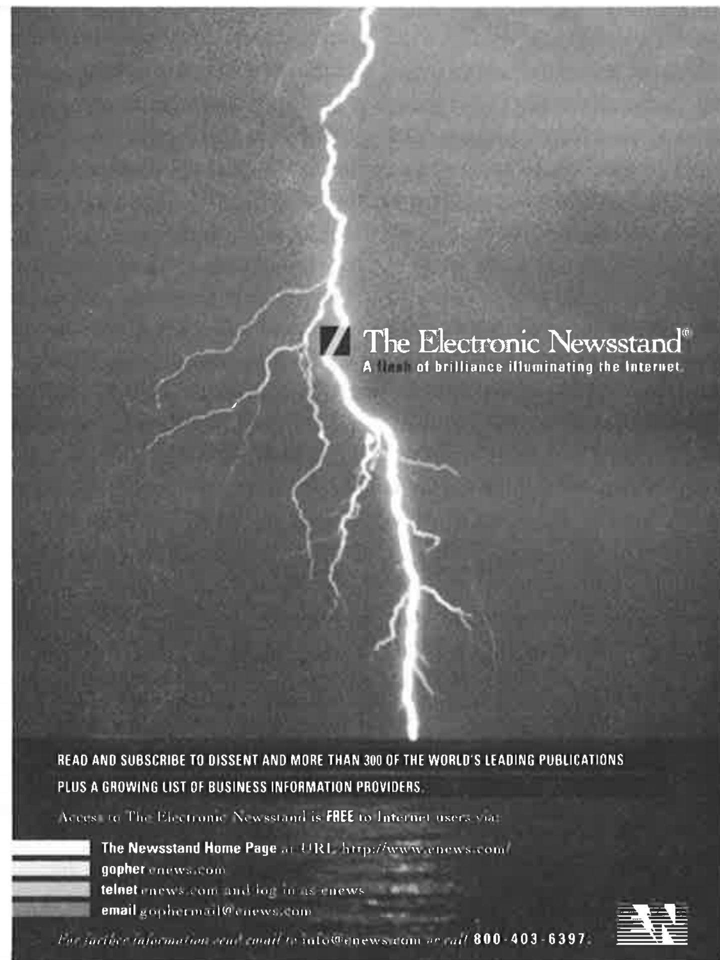
[1] Elinor Langer, "The Women of the Telephone Company," *New York Review of Books*, March 12, 1970, p. 16.

[2] Thomas A. Kochan, Harry C. Katz, and Robert B. McKersie, *The Transformation of American Industrial Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell ILR Press, 1994), p. 47.

[3] Robert H. Hayes and Steven C. Wheelwright, *Restoring Our Competitive Edge: Competing Through Manufacturing* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1984), pp. 62-63.

[4] David Card and Alan B. Krueger, *Myth and Measurement: The New Economics of the Minimum Wage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

[5] John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy* [1848] (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1920), p. 979. I am grateful to Maurizio Franzini and Samuel Bowles for bringing this quote to my attention.



Thomas Carothers

PROMOTING DEMOCRACY IN A POSTMODERN WORLD

I was in Kazakhstan not long ago, on a project funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development to assist the Kazakh Parliament with its drafting of an electoral law. The trip was going smoothly until a critical moment occurred. I was working closely with a senior member of the Parliament, a wise and patient man who approached his work with great seriousness. I had just reviewed a number of provisions of the draft law and highlighted some choices open to his drafting committee. He looked at me gravely, pushing slowly aside with one hand the raft of possibilities I had been outlining, and stated with quiet firmness, "We want our Parliament to be just like your Congress." Our eyes met for a meaningful moment as I tried to think of something to say other than the three words that had immediately come screaming into my mind: "No, you don't!" I mumbled something to the effect that our Congress was in fact not perfect, that there was much value in exploring a range of ways to organize legislatures and draft laws. My host's eyes narrowed as he listened to my words, words that I knew sounded like evasion. The American expert has come all this way to say he has no model?

Among those Americans involved in the business of promoting democracy abroad—a minor growth industry populated by people from non-governmental organizations, consulting firms, think tanks, universities, and the U.S. government itself, who careen around the world helping to draft constitutions, observe elections, reform judiciaries, strengthen parliaments, build civil societies, empower local governments, and train journalists—the relation between the proffered ideal and the actual state of democracy at home is rarely much discussed. As a result, little attention has been given to the surprising and in some ways paradoxical fact that the United States, and to a lesser extent Western Europe, have moved into a particularly active phase of promoting democracy in other countries precisely at a time when the health of their own democratic systems is clouded with doubt.

It would be too much to say that democracy is in a state of crisis in the United States or Western Europe. But it is unquestionably troubled. Leaving aside the many serious social problems in the United States and the continuing inability of Western European economies to create jobs, one can point to a set of interrelated political problems in many well-established democracies. Political parties command increasingly feeble loyalty from citizens. The ruling politicians seem in most Western democracies either to be a stagnant gang of old faces or a series of one-term leaders who go rapidly from incoming boom to outgoing bust. Political participation has weakened and taken on superficial, commercialized forms. In general, the political sphere is often no longer much respected or valued. Antipolitical personalities and ideas have growing appeal, with the underside of antipolitics often not far from antidemocracy.

Very little of this vague but troubling situation appears in the world of U.S. democracy promotion programs abroad. What gets presented in such programs is generally a high school civics version of democracy. Democracy is portrayed as a gleaming edifice made up of larger-than-life institutions and structures. It is also characterized as a self-evident truth, with the resulting assumption that democratic values,

once properly introduced, will take hold naturally and cement into perpetuity the proper institutional system. This view admits that a few problems may be found in the practice of democracy in the United States, but such problems are only wrinkles around the edges that do not raise questions about the core.

In U.S. assistance programs on political party development, for example, I have gotten used to watching the visiting American experts diagnose the shortcomings of the party systems of the host countries. They shake their heads smilingly but sadly at the proliferation of parties that has followed the initial ascent into democracy. They devise strategies to reduce those unworkable proliferations into two- or three-party systems, in which parties are to be defined by mild ideological shadings rather than along potentially explosive religious, ethnic, or regional lines. Yet I never hear the American experts seriously explore the waning legitimacy and significance of political parties in the well-established two- or three-party systems in the West. The juxtaposition of the absolute confidence with which the U.S. party model is presented and the parlous state of our own parties is remarkable. Similarly, I have observed many parliamentary assistance programs in which U.S. experts help foreign parliamentarians revise their committee systems, train their staff, improve their information services, or even hold mock congressional hearings, all to help mold their legislatures in the form of the U.S. Congress. Yet I have never witnessed a detailed presentation on why the U.S. Congress has performed so poorly over the past ten years, why it is held in such low regard by many Americans, and how parliaments in transitional societies might avoid its shortcomings.

I do not mean to say that we have nothing to offer the world, that the deficiencies of our own democracy disqualify us from venturing out into the world to help others make their societies more democratic. But it does seem that we are promoting democracy in ways that are habitually two-dimensional and even disingenuous. This may in part be due to our understandable desire to be positive. One hates to disembark in a newly democratizing country and immediately disgorge a heavy load of bad news about all the difficulties that lie ahead. It also probably reflects the fact that those directly involved in promoting democracy tend to be a relatively homogeneous group of people who have done fairly well by democracy in the United States and are less immediately aware of or affected by its shortcomings than many others might be.

But the main cause of the persistent disjunction between realities at home and ideals abroad is something else. To the extent that democracy promoters concern themselves with the fact that all is not well with democracy in America and Western Europe, they assume that such problems are the symptoms of "mature democracies" and that prior to the current malaise in Western politics there was a long, golden period in which democracy enjoyed its fruition. Their related assumption is that the many newly democratizing countries around the world will experience a similar pattern of development. First these countries will build the basic institutions of democracy, then they will live out their own golden periods, and only after they are far down the democratic road will the various elements of the democratic malaise affecting the West be relevant to them. Stated in more conceptual terms, the view is that Western political life is in a transition to some ill-defined postmodern state and that its strains are characteristic features of this emergent postmodernism. The newly democratizing countries, in contrast, are at a prior stage—they are striving to become modern. They must grapple with modernism before they need worry about postmodernism. They must learn to walk, in other words, before they need worry about stumbling.

One obvious criticism of this outlook is that there never was a golden period of democracy in the United States or in other Western countries; all periods of Western democracy have been fraught with problems. Yet although it is true that democracy has always been highly imperfect, the problems outlined above do appear to reflect a distinct syndrome of postmodern fatigue with democracy—and perhaps with politics itself.

The deeper flaw of this outlook lies with the notion that the postmodern fatigue is a narrow political phenomenon based on the experience of life in developed Western democracies. In fact the symptoms of postmodern fatigue are just one part of a much broader social, intellectual, and political trend that has penetrated societies in different stages of political development in many parts of the world, particularly Latin America and the formerly communist world. The core psychological components of the shift from modernism to postmodernism—the movement from alienation to detachment, from irony to cynicism, and from the loss of meaning to the loss of interest in meaning—are hardly limited to Western democracies. Nor are the basic sociopolitical elements: the technologically fueled evolution of individualism, the growing fascination with putatively apolitical solutions to political problems, and the tendency to view political choices as a derivative of economic frameworks rather than the reverse.

Thus the many democratic transitions of recent years in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and the former Soviet Union, and possibly even Africa and Asia, may seem at first glance like efforts by other societies to achieve the plateau of Western political modernism. In fact, however, they are much more complex transitions in which societies already suffused with many of the attitudes and ideas of postmodernism are attempting to develop the structures and processes of liberal democracy. They are, in short, learning to walk while they already know intellectually all about stumbling. The idea that in promoting democracy abroad we should put aside for some much later date consideration of the characteristic problems of "mature democracies" is wrong.

Ideological Certainties

In parallel to their tendency to hold out an idealized version of U.S. democracy to foreigners, Americans abroad tend to read into the many democratic transitions of recent years far too much ideological certainty. They often view such transitions as society-wide epiphanies, large-scale conversions to liberal democratic values. This view is tied to the deeper, seductive idea that late-twentieth-century history is defined by the triumph of liberal democracy. Yet the democratic trend in the world, significant as it is, should be understood as much in terms of failure as of triumph.

In Latin America, for example, the region-wide shift from dictatorial regimes to elected, civilian governments in the 1980s was born from the dual failure of right-wing authoritarians to govern effectively and of left-wing movements to win broad credibility. The shift to democracy can scarcely be described in triumphal terms; rather, a region beset with economic woes, corruption, mismanagement, and profound social inequities turned to democracy as the political lender of last resort. In Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, the engine of political change in the late 1980s was the abject political and economic failure of communism. Similarly, the unexpected democratic trend in Africa of the early 1990s grew out of the prolonged, resounding failure of one-party rule in that continent. Only in East Asia has the democratic trend arisen in societies that have been developing successfully and self-confidently.

With this important but limited exception, therefore, "failure of the alternatives" appears to be a more useful controlling concept than "triumph of an idea" in explaining the widespread democratic trend of recent years. Democracy was certainly a positive choice for many troubled societies, something that some people fought for out of deep conviction. But the democratic trend did not result from a rising ideology outshining an array of vigorous rivals. Instead it was more a process of elimination—as the other ideological choices collapsed, democracy was the only one left standing.

Viewing the democratic trend in this way highlights the fact that the recent political transitions are highly pragmatic, or perhaps more accurately, highly functionalist experiments. People around the world are trying out democracy to see what it can deliver to them. What they want it to deliver depends somewhat on the particular country involved, but material interests usually dominate. They want a life that matches the expectations raised by images of Western prosperity that now circulate so pervasively around the world. They want a government that can accomplish basic tasks with a semblance of competence and honesty. They want to be left alone at the political level but taken care of at the social and economic levels. In supporting democratization they are not so much

hoping for the establishment of a new, participatory, civic-oriented relationship between citizens and the state as for what might be called the professionalization of the state. They do not dream of humanizing politics so much as of obviating the need for politics itself.

The American tendency to read into recent political transitions around the world too much ideological certainty is reflected in, and causes problems for, U.S. assistance programs aimed at democracy promotion. The problems often begin at the early stage of political transitions, when opposition individuals or groups are challenging existing nondemocratic regimes. In such situations, Americans are quick to assume that anyone challenging a dictatorship is a democrat. They project the simple framework of democracy versus dictatorship upon local power struggles, which, though often concerned with political liberalization, are also closely linked with historical conflicts between different regional, ethnic, or religious factions. They are then surprised when the people they support turn out to be primarily interested in gaining and consolidating power rather than building democracy. And they fail to realize how much the United States is perceived in the countries in which it is engaged as taking sides in historical power struggles rather than advancing the abstract principles of democracy.

These problems continue as democratic transitions proceed. Once the old regime is out and a new government comes to power through elections or general affirmation, U.S. assistance organizations undertake civic education throughout the country. Such programs rest on the idea that the common person in a transitional society yearns for democracy but just doesn't know much about what democracy is. Civic educators funded by the United States fan out through the countryside armed with brochures, pamphlets, charts, and books translated into the local language, which explain what political rights are, what voting is, what parliaments do in democracies, what the separation of powers means, and so on.

But much of this heartfelt educational work assumes away the essential task. It assumes that the people in a transitional society want to become democratic and just need to know more about how to do so. In fact, however, in societies currently in the midst of democratic transitions, many citizens feel a strong skepticism about the utility of politics itself and a disinclination to be stirred by any ideological education, particularly one in which political values are presented as self-evident truths rather than correlated with clear individual interests. Civic educators are dismayed when political apathy follows hard on the heels of initially energizing democratic transitions. Rather than question the tenets of their educational approach they simply prescribe larger doses of the same medicine.

It is not surprising that Americans tend to see the recent wave of political transitions in primarily ideological terms. We are a nation that defines itself through ideology, and we are prone to view the world through our own ideological lens. Nonetheless, in failing to see that many of these transitions reflect as much a spirit of antipolitical functionalism as ideological conviction, we are missing an important connection. An essential feature of the troubled condition of democracy in the United States and Western Europe is precisely that of the rise of apolitical or even antipolitical attitudes. Citizens of these countries increasingly view their political systems not as repositories of value but as service mechanisms to be evaluated only in terms of the material goods they deliver. In the established democracies, antipolitical attitudes are eating away at existing systems of liberal democratic governance. In the transitional countries, such attitudes are complicating the efforts to establish democratic systems. In either case, however, the underlying phenomenon is strikingly similar. The fact that Americans tend not to draw this connection highlights the earlier point that they often fail to relate the condition of democracy at home to their understanding of democracy abroad. And the fact that this connection exists means that the political challenges facing democratizing societies are not fundamentally different from those confronted by mature democracies.

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A Place in the World

In a broad, metaphorical sense, the manifold efforts by Americans to promote democracy abroad express a basic perception about America's place in the world. And the disjunctions that mark these assistance efforts reflect a deep division built into the common perception. On the one hand, many Americans believe that the world is becoming or should become more like America, and that it is their job to go out in the world to push that process along. Yet at the same time many Americans believe that there is a tremendous gulf between themselves and the world. They believe that America is fundamentally different from other countries; the mere fact of foreignness seems utterly strange, almost unnatural to them.

This division in our idea of our place in the world is rooted in our own national self-conception. We believe that America is a unique country but, at the same time, a universal model. It is unique as the oldest democracy. The idea of America as the "city on the hill" remains surprisingly strong despite the uncertainties that many Americans have about the country's future and the widespread critical view of the actual functioning of its political system. Americans view their country as the self-made miracle that any person or society can emulate with hard work and the right intentions. That there may well be an inherent contradiction between being simultaneously unique and universal seems to escape our notice. Our self-appointed place in the world rests uneasily on the conscious or unconscious denial of that contradiction. But although it is denied, the contradiction has haunted our entire experience of international engagement. It lies behind the disconcerting condition that we know so well of having been highly engaged politically, economically, militarily, and culturally in the world for generations, yet having remained so much an island nation despite it all.

The current historical juncture affords us an opportunity to change our basic psychological relationship to the world. By "juncture" I am referring not only to the end of the cold war but to the full set of transitional features of the international sphere, including the trend toward democracy in many countries, the increasing internationalization of economic systems, and the overly hyped but nonetheless significant "information revolution." We have engaged in much talk about the implications of the end of the cold war and of the other distinctive features of this new period. But the changes we have made in our international outlook have been surprisingly few and generally limited to the level of formal policy modifications. It is the psychological underpinnings of our relationship to the world that must change. Democracy promotion, as a defining metaphor for that relationship, is one place to start.

Within American political culture, pride in the unique stability of America's democratic system has hardened over the generations into a tendency to equate the particular forms of our political institutions with democracy itself. Missing from our political life is much real debate about how our crucial political values, such as representation and pluralism, might be better served by different institutional forms or configurations. In fact, we maintain a remarkable attachment to the particular institutional forms of our democracy, such as our highly flawed Congress, even as the underlying principles upon which they were built atrophy from ill service.

We have been carrying this over-attachment to forms and under-attachment to principles with us when we go abroad promoting

democracy. We need to concentrate less on helping to reproduce certain institutional forms in other countries and more on fostering the underlying values and principles of democracy. For example, when faced with a dysfunctional parliament in a transitional society we should not immediately think in terms of a checklist of institutional modifications needed to make that parliament resemble our Congress—such as increasing the number of staff, expanding the library, changing the rules of procedure, or strengthening the committee system. Instead, we need to help empower those people and organizations who wish to fight to change the patterns of representation, and let them work out their precise institutional objectives. Or, if we are trying to assist the development of political parties in another country, we should refrain from our habitual tendency to send American political consultants to teach those parties to be U.S.-style political machines replete with media expertise, a penchant for polls, and a winning-is-all approach. Instead, we should try to help stimulate debate and inquiry into the full range of possible types of political association, on the assumption that we do not have the final answer with respect to the forms and functions of political parties.

In short, the challenge of promoting democracy abroad turns out to bear important similarities to the challenge of reinvigorating democracy at home. If we have been falling short in our approaches abroad it is perhaps because we have not been seriously engaged in the task at home. Reconfiguring our relationship to the world in this new international era can only follow from a reconfiguring of our own relationship to the democratic principles and values we espouse. □

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