



# The Contingent Nature of Democracy Promotion

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The set of works reviewed here suggest that the problems inherent in post-Cold War democracy promotion cannot be explained solely by policy failures. Attempts to push for democracy have been met with resistance, whether in response to the imposition of democracy or to 'softer' approaches. Collectively, the research in these volumes suggests that if democratization efforts are to succeed, those who hope to promote them must be more reflective about their own role in the process and cognizant of the fact that democracy promotion efforts are subject to political forces at the domestic, global and intermestic levels.

Bridoux, J. (2011) *American Foreign Policy and Postwar Reconstruction: Comparing Japan and Iraq*. Abingdon: Routledge.  
Burnell, P. and Schlumberger, O. (eds) (2012) *International Politics and National Political Regimes: Promoting Democracy: Promoting Autocracy*. Abingdon: Routledge.  
Zanotti, L. (2011) *Governing Disorder: UN Peace Operations, International Security, and Democratization in the Post-Cold War Era*. University Park PA: Penn State University Press.

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During the period immediately following the end of the Cold War, optimism about prospects for the advancement of global democracy reached a high-water mark. In the 1990s, Nils Petter Gleditsch described a collective sense in the field of international relations that the world was entering a 'liberal moment' centered on three liberal bastions: democracy, trade and international organization (Gleditsch, 2007, p. 691). The 1990s will always be known for Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), which helped pave the way for a bevy of academic articles and books on the topics of democracy and capitalism. Much of the language of the time referred to the idea of newly democratizing countries as being in the midst of some sort of 'transitional' period, referring to the fact that these polities appeared to be destined for some sort of democratic, capitalistic end point. While democratic consolidation was not seen as inevitable, many of the weaknesses we have seen with democracy promotion strategies themselves were not foreseen. Democracy proponents held high hopes for the possibility of promoting regime change – either via direct force or by 'soft' means such as aid, sanctions, trade and support for democracy NGOs.

Fast forward more than twenty years. We have, both practically and academically speaking, moved on quite a bit from Gleditsch's 'liberal moment', and it is clear that a good deal of resistance has emerged – much of it from unexpected sources. By the same token, a good deal of learning has also occurred, and democracy scholars have had time to reflect on the events of the past twenty-plus years. Our understanding of democratization processes during the 1990s was heavily influenced by the recent successes of southern Europe and Latin America as well as the early evidence from a number of

post-communist ‘transitions’. By 2013, however, we have seen a broad range of countries attempting democratic transitions – everything from Color and Jasmine revolutions to stable transitions in Mexico and Taiwan. As a result, democratization scholars are much more conscious that democratization is not a linear or uniform process. The fact that two countries take a first step toward democratization does not necessarily mean that they will end up in a similar place in the long term.

Promoting democracy in countries unfamiliar with it is certainly proving to be challenging. But to complicate matters, alternatives to American- or Western European-style (or styled) liberal democracies are springing up – from China and Russia to Latin America. Apparently, the End of History has not arrived yet. Even Fukuyama has recently established a ‘Governance Project’, operating with the underlying rationale that ‘democracy is not always a necessary ingredient for good governance and in some cases authoritarian countries govern more effectively than their democratic counterparts’.<sup>1</sup>

The three books reviewed all focus on the difficulties of promoting democracy, and each one examines a different variant of that strategy, namely, ‘soft’ democracy promotion, peacekeeping efforts and reconstruction after direct military intervention. Each work sheds light on the question of why so many attempts to push for democracy from the outside seem to fail, stall or even reverse. The reality is that democratization is a contingent process, subject to power relations at different levels – the global, the domestic and intermestic (the intersection of international politics and the domestic politics of the target country). All three volumes remind us that because of their inherently political nature, democracy promotion attempts can take on a life of their own and have consequences that are not foreseen in advance. Thus it is unrealistic to predict success at the onset of democracy promotion efforts. However, it is important to be aware that the outcome of these attempts will inevitably be different from what was anticipated at the outset.

### **Successful Post-war Reconstruction Must Account for the Contemporary Global Power Structure**

In *American Foreign Policy and Postwar Reconstruction* (2011) Jeff Bridoux illustrates that military intervention and reconstruction strategies must take the global configuration of power into consideration if they are to be successful in the long term. Using two cases of a particular democratization strategy, the American effort to install a post-war liberal democratic order via military occupation, Bridoux contrasts the successful reconstruction of Japan after the Second World War with the not-yet-successful case of Iraq after the Iraq War.

In Gramscian terms, the *problématique* such occupiers face is ‘how to reconstruct the hegemonic apparatus of the ruling group, an apparatus which disintegrated as a result of the war’ (Bridoux, 2011, p. 85). More than a series of technical steps to install a new regime, nation building in the Gramscian sense involves the creation of a new political and social system that reflects the interests of the dominant power. Success or failure in post-war reconstruction thus largely hinges upon, first, whether the occupying actor can use a proper ‘mix of coercive and consensual instruments of power’ and, second, ‘the efficiency of the ideological message intended to generate consent to the new order’ (p. 68).

Bridoux argues that US policy managed to achieve a workable balance between coercion and consensus in the case of post-war Japan. An important key to this success was the establishment of a capitalist and democratic historical bloc that led to a state structure capable of maintaining a stable polity over the long run. Creating this structure involved successfully accomplishing two tasks: the purging of many existing elements and the subsequent installation of many new ones. The Japanese were forced to reject war as an instrument of policy, and militaristic elements of the society were purged. The *zaibatsu* were also destroyed and the Japanese economy was forced to open up, to be replaced with something externally like a capitalist, American model, with an ideology that would fit in with (if not be identical to) the American one.

However, post-war Japan was also notable for some of the features that were maintained. In fact, Bridoux argues, the pre-existing state structure was also left reasonably intact, which helps to explain the high level of continuity and stability that was exhibited by the newly reconstructed Japanese state.

In the case of Iraq, Bridoux argues, the United States relied so much on coercion that it left little room for developing consensus among elites, leaving it short of its goal of establishing a neo-liberal historical bloc. He agrees that, given the ideological nature of the Hussein regime, a high degree of initial coercion was justified (p. 99). However, as the United States attempted to cleanse remnants of Saddam's allies, it eliminated members of the Ba'athist Party – which included many of the very individuals most likely to have the skills to govern the new Iraq (p. 96). The subsequent fragmentation of power meant that the structure of the new Iraqi regime would not allow for the provision of greater security and stability (p. 108). Because of the lack of security and ability to manage the economy (particularly the crucial oil production sector), the economy failed to provide basic outputs for its citizens, which further damaged legitimacy. The US thus had to divert valuable resources toward fighting the growing insurgency rather than to help the new Iraqi government to deliver material outputs and economic performance. This put a further strain on the legitimacy of the newly imposed regime.

Bridoux's commentary thus suggests that powerful states must consider the current global political context during reconstruction efforts. Awareness that states are coercive entities that need to develop some sort of internal domestic consensus (what he calls 'political society') was almost completely absent during much of the Iraqi occupation, although Bridoux points out that domestic politics has belatedly received some attention. It follows from Bridoux's argument that consensus generation which builds on domestic elements that can fit in with the global power structure is essential for successful reconstruction.

One wonders whether it is necessary to invoke Gramsci in order to underscore the fact that the US intervention in Japan occurred under more propitious global conditions, in a less coercive manner, and in a way that better suited the long-term geopolitical interests of the United States and its allies than did the Iraq intervention. The fragmentation of the Iraqi government and the resulting policy dysfunction that resulted from de-Ba'athification policies is not a novel finding (see Diamond, 2004).

In addition, instead of offering just two cases from different time periods, Bridoux might have selected from a number of more current cases of intervention. He claims that

no two cases are directly comparable due to different global political and social conditions. While he is of course correct, if Gramscian analyses are indeed so valuable, why should we not look for more recent (and thus potentially more relevant) cases? A useful counter-example in which coercion and consensus were used to good effect in a more recent case (if there is such a case) would be more relevant to those studying democracy promotion in the current context.

And it is difficult to say exactly how practical Bridoux's work is. Is it possible for powerful liberal actors or coalitions to possess the foresight to know that it is not wise to intervene in the first place because there is little hope of achieving the proper mix of coercion and consensus? Can they ultimately know when they should intervene and when they should refrain from doing so, and exactly how a powerful state should balance coercion and consensus in a given situation, given that each situation is unique? No potential target of intervention in the near future is likely to be nearly as prepared for being part of a new capitalist and democratic historical bloc as Japan was in 1945. For instance, Japanese criminal codes and economic structures were much easier to reform into a Western-style model than was the case in Iraq (or Afghanistan, for that matter). So which potential cases would be promising examples of future intervention?

Analyzing the course of events in hindsight is easy, but is Bridoux's analytical approach capable of predicting whether future interventions will succeed? He argues that Iraq has gradually found a better balance of coercion and consensus since the initiation in 2007 of the New Way Forward program, which focuses on stability and basic service provision as well as installing greater cohesiveness and coercive power for the state. Bridoux claims that 'the prospect for a peaceful Iraq is ... gradually appearing' (Bridoux, 2011, p. 186). Yet with the luxury of a few years of hindsight, one might question whether this new strategy has really had a significant impact on the country's prospects for stability.

### **Peacekeeping Missions Need to be Aware of Political Interactions between the Internal and External**

Laura Zanotti also addresses the issue of reforming institutions after conflicts, but her focus is on UN peacekeeping and reconstruction in the post-Cold War period (*Governing Disorder*, 2011). Like Bridoux, Zanotti is aware that domestic power structures interact with external forces. Her focus is on the intermestic relationship, that is, the interaction between the domestic politics of the target country and the international community.

Zanotti claims that during earlier eras the goal of such peacekeeping missions was to slay the authoritarian monster and replace it with a non-threatening one. However, borrowing from Foucault's analysis of the French penal system in the nineteenth century, she argues that the triumph of liberal ideals in recent decades means that intervening powers now see themselves as being responsible for rehabilitating or 'normalizing' the monster rather than killing it. This correctional approach is designed to turn 'rogue' states into entities that can 'develop the capacity and assume the responsibility for governing disorder within their borderlands and behave as productive and predictable actors of the international community' (Zanotti, 2011, p. 24).

Beginning with Kofi Annan in the 1990s, UN efforts to promote democracy and human rights have relied on 'good governance' policies, which result in a continuing cycle

of monitoring and reforming the monster rather than in a clear end point for the intervention. The very fact that such policies of ‘governmentality’ are not structured to have end points is one of the major causes of so much resistance to UN reforming missions inside the state being rehabilitated, according to Zanotti.

Zanotti also illustrates how this rehabilitation strategy has bred resistance on the part of domestic actors in post-conflict societies. She chooses two cases of UN intervention that she has witnessed first-hand: the American occupation of Haiti (1994–5) in the aftermath of Operation Uphold Democracy, and efforts to ‘pacify and Europeanize’ Croatia from 1996 to 2003 (p. 23). She argues that the ‘disciplinarity’ at the heart of these rehabilitation efforts seems destined to result in resistance by the governments they are designed to reform.

In the cases of both Haiti and Croatia, Zanotti argues that resistance developed due to the fact that local governments chafed at the post-Cold War strategy of ‘normalizing’ rogue regimes in the post-conflict stage. Attempts to impose rationality and neo-liberal structures on ‘non-western’ targets are based on three ‘normalizing’ functions: disciplinarity (‘mechanisms of control, reward, and punishment’), governmentalization (‘the establishment of standardized ... rules of behavior for national governments’) and biopolitics (‘the increasing focus of international organizations on populations both as a subject of government and knowledge’) (p. 142). These three mechanisms of control, which are reminiscent of those used in modern prisons, lead to ‘resistance and unintended consequences’ (p. 142). In the case of Haiti, such attempts foundered, as these forms of control are not well suited to cases of extreme poverty because they foster ‘disaggregation of the state’ (p. 143). And in the case of Croatia, control mechanisms led not only to resistance from the state, but also to the unintended consequence of oppression of the Serb minority as part of an attempt to ‘disrupt the international agenda’ (p. 138).

Resistance is thus not necessarily an act of liberation, but a contingent factor capable of delivering both ‘benign’ and ‘malignant’ effects (p. 144). Likewise, Zanotti does not believe that we can predict the outcome of this interaction between the forces of ‘normalizing’ actors on the one hand and resistance on the other. Such outcomes are not overdetermined, but are ‘contingent, negotiated, and always part of a continuing process’ (p. 146).

If one is looking to Zanotti for a definitive answer about alternatives to the policies of disciplinarity, one is bound to be disappointed. The fact that the author has a good deal of first-hand experience with each of the two cases of intervention is all the more disheartening to those who might be expecting a ready policy prescription to arise from *Governing Disorder*. What is potentially useful, in Zanotti’s own words, is her attempt to dissect empirical cases of peacekeeping in order to understand ‘the modalities and effects of a liberal rationality of government in the context of peacekeeping’ (p. 146). However, while the author offers insights into how post-conflict peacekeeping efforts can operate under different circumstances, it is ultimately up to policy makers themselves to draw any ultimate conclusions about her study.

## **Democracy Promotion Must Overcome System-Level Forces as Well as Domestic Ones**

*International Politics and National Political Regimes: Promoting Democracy: Promoting Autocracy*, edited by Peter Burnell and Oliver Schlumberger, makes clear that the challenge to

democracy promotion extends beyond overcoming technical difficulties and containing potential backlash to efforts by pro-liberalization forces. Successful democracy promotion depends not only on understanding domestic political factors of the target country. It is also necessary to appreciate the powerful yet under-researched role that global political factors may play in determining possibilities for success.

In the lead essay, Burnell and Schlumberger argue that existing scholarship has not satisfactorily addressed the role of international politics, which they believe includes both international democracy promotion efforts and other 'unintended' factors such as mass communication, migration or social networks (Burnell and Schlumberger, 2012, p. 5). The authors also focus on the rise of a new set of challenges in the form of non- or semi-democratic regimes.

Nicole J. Jackson argues that one of the key reasons why proponents of democracy promotion have experienced so many disappointing setbacks is that their expectations were often based on a 'preconceived euphoria of wishful thinking' about the supposedly progressive nature of democratization (p. 102). A major weakness among social scientists studying democratization processes, according to Jackson, is our reliance on our current set of labels ('pseudo-democracies, illiberal democracies, arbitrary autocracies, electoral authoritarian states, competitive authoritarian states, delegative democracies, defective democracies') which may reflect preconceived notions of what we believe should happen in the future (p. 102). Using the example of Russia's political influence in Central Asia, Jackson shows that many of the tools of democracy promotion – diffusion of norms and ideas, the exercise of 'soft' and 'hard' power, and the use of regional organizations – can be used by illiberal states as well as liberal ones (p. 101). Challengers are also able to take advantage of the post-9/11 backlash and the fact that many Western democratization efforts have not been tailored to the specifics of local cultures (p. 114).

But surely these autocratic or semi-democratic challengers must struggle to achieve the type of legitimacy that Robert Dahl suggests democracy can deliver via its 'desirable consequences': economic prosperity, human development, political equality and general freedom, to name a few (Dahl, 2000, p. 45). Dahl argues: 'With all these advantages, democracy is, for most of us, a far better gamble than any alternative available to it' (Dahl, 2000, p. 61). André Gerrits argues, however, that legitimacy is actually a rather 'thin' concept, rooted much more in regime performance and less in depth of civil society than most democracy scholars have been willing to admit: 'Economic performance and stability ... are not merely "distractions" from the lack of political legitimacy – they actually meet citizens' demands for national "recognition and respect" that can be received through Russia being perceived as a "strong state"' (Burnell and Schlumberger, 2012, p. 39).

While there is strong public support for democracy in Russia, all things being equal, opinion polls suggest that citizens are willing to tolerate a good deal of suppression of human rights in return for stability (p. 41). Gerrits argues that leaders of illiberal democracies are able to gain legitimacy in part because democratic actors within the country are actually quite unpopular with the public. His point that democracy promotion efforts need to focus on the legitimacy that semi-democratic regimes have managed to amass, as well as on the development of democratic legitimacy, is one that both scholars and practitioners would be wise to heed (p. 43).

Perhaps the timeliest chapter in the volume is the one by Julia Leininger, who argues that democracy assistance in 'aid dependent states' is flawed due to the political nature of the process. Using the cases of Mali and Haiti (both of which have been highly aid dependent on the international community for many years), Leininger posits that democratic assistance is not residual or 'external' to the path that democratization takes. In fact, the nature of democracy in the two countries is inextricably intertwined with the politics surrounding democracy assistance. In the case of Mali, which until recently was seen as one of the poster children for democracy in Africa and in the Muslim world, the recently deposed regime never really emerged from the shadow of international institutions (p. 67). Leininger points out that, despite the fact that the government was seen to be both autonomous and democratic, budgetary planning in Mali was contingent on perpetual negotiations between the government and the European Union. Negotiations were thus an 'informal precondition' that resulted from Mali's 'high aid dependency' (p. 68). As a result, Mali never developed the capacity to handle its own elections, finding it necessary to 'reinvent' its electoral institutions just a short time before each election.

Leininger points to the fact that the politics of EU and UN democracy assistance in Haiti frequently overshadowed domestic political processes. Overwhelming pressure for success led the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the first UN peacekeeping mission (MINUSTAH) to work separately rather than to coordinate efforts on civilian affairs. She argues that the UN created parallel institutions that bypassed existing Haitian ones, offering the example of a UN entity designed to channel aid that bypassed an analogous institution within the Haitian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (p. 70). The provisional and tenuous form of governance that resulted partially as a result of decisions by the international community may indeed help to explain the ultimate failure of democratic regimes to gain legitimacy in Haiti and Mali.

Leininger would do well to offer more illustrations of how the democracy assistance process actually played out in both countries. She offers generalities such as 'the continuous presence of international donors [in Mali] ... creates informal and long-lasting networks' (p. 68) and 'there were organizational failures [in Haiti] that could have been prevented if the UN entities had worked together' (p. 70). Nonetheless, the failure of Malian democracy is not surprising given the fact that politics so frequently interferes with the deepening of democracy in poor states.

While the record of democracy promotion may be decidedly mixed, Wolfgang Merkel argues that this does not necessarily mean that we are experiencing an 'autocratic rollback'. He points out that despite the claims of Steven Levitsky and Lucas Way (2010) that the survival of autocratic regimes has been enhanced over the past twenty years with the development of institutions (parties, parliaments and partially pluralist elections) which have helped both to fragment power and to increase legitimacy, these same institutions can also have a destabilizing effect (Burnell and Schlumberger, 2012, p. 27). Moreover, Merkel points out that while the Third Wave of democratization may have exhausted itself in the mid-1990s, since that time approximately as many 'partly free' regimes have moved toward democracy as have moved toward autocracy (p. 28). While the evidence he presents indeed suggests that we have no particular reason to expect an autocratic rollback

in the near future, Merkel's arguments that we should not expect a change in the next few years in either direction are not supported with much evidence or argumentation.

## Discussion

It is well to point out that if democracy promotion efforts are contingent, pro-democracy actors should take the role of domestic, global and intermestic factors into consideration. All three works successfully identify criticisms or problems with existing democracy promotion efforts. However, while they serve as good critiques of existing practice, none of them offers help toward concrete lessons for future attempts at democracy promotion. Thus, readers may be left wondering what kernels of truth there may be to help maximize the odds of such actions in the future.

Two related ideas come to mind after reviewing these works. First, it is important to maintain awareness that regardless of the form they take, democracy promotion efforts are always inherently political. It should appear to be no more than common sense that democracy promotion efforts can have unintended consequences. Bridoux argues that one needs craftily to insert one's own political needs into the mix without being too overbearing, while Zanotti argues that the resistance to multilateral democracy efforts can engender unintended forms of resistance. Certainly, Bridoux is right to argue that too much coercive force can be counterproductive, but Zanotti points out that creating political openings as a result of disciplining 'rogue' regimes can also pave the way to resistance. Daniel Levy's 2010 study of the interaction between Argentina and the global human rights regime in the aftermath of the fall of the military junta of 1976–83 suggests that it is important to recognize that global norms can be endogenized in the periphery (what Zanotti refers to as 'borderlands') through the process of what he calls 'recursive cosmopolitanization'. Essentially, Levy argues that global norms are only made relevant to local populations when 'intercrossings' are allowed to develop between the global community and local outposts (Levy, 2010, p. 594). A two-way street of norms emerges as local problems are globalized, and a 'cosmopolitan balance' emerges (Levy, 2010, p. 579). In the Argentinean case, the fact that the form of transitional justice that emerged was deeply embedded in local norms and practices made the international human rights regime more 'politically and socially consequential' (Levy, 2010, p. 584). Thus, minimization of resistance to international norms of democracy and governance is most likely when there is a balance between the local and the global.

Second, these works suggest that it may be necessary to redefine the goals of democracy promotion. Zanotti's finding that 'normalizing', 'risk-minimizing' policies are likely to result in a non-ending correctional cycle of newer policies and re-evaluations should serve as a warning that the road to hell may be paved with good intentions. The liberal community clearly needs to keep in mind during future peacekeeping efforts that power cannot easily be separated from the policies that it enables. In a sense, knowing that some degree of resistance to these attempts to promote democracy is inevitable represents a step forward. Bridoux's work points out that the approach to and expectations of democracy promotion will vary according to the global power arrangements at the time. This realization that international political conditions may dictate how successful democracy promotion can be should not be lost on policy makers or scholars.



In her study of the fragile democracies of Central America, Sabine Kurtenbach argues that the key to instituting reforms is not found in enhancing the 'repressive capacity of the state', but in inclusion and participation (Kurtenbach, 2010, p. 106). She argues that while we have seen a predominance of short-term strategies being pushed by 'external actors looking for exit options and needing to adjust their resources to global necessities or priorities', what is really needed is a long-term, patient approach that will allow reform-oriented 'drivers of change' to align themselves with the global democracy movement (Kurtenbach, 2010, p. 108). Finally, in a globalized world, we must be aware that without a good deal of care, democracy promotion efforts may be overshadowed by the imperatives of the market.

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### Note

- 1 'Stanford's Fukuyama Launches New Project to Measure Governance', Sarina A. Beges, 8 March 2012. Available from: [http://governanceproject.stanford.edu/news/stanfords\\_fukuyama\\_launches\\_new\\_project\\_to\\_measure\\_governance\\_20120308/](http://governanceproject.stanford.edu/news/stanfords_fukuyama_launches_new_project_to_measure_governance_20120308/)

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