

**REFLECTIONS
ON THE
TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY ***

JOHN KEANE

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Systematic reflection on the transitions to democracy - on the problem of how democratic institutions can be built and sustained - came relatively late in the history of democracy. Beginning with Plato, Thucydides and others, most intellectual energy was invested in attacking democracy by demonstrating its self-paralyzing and politically destructive effects. The outlines of an alternative approach first appeared in the nineteenth-century, when democratic theory becomes self-reflexive, for instance in the work of Alexis de Tocqueville, whose wide-ranging interests - in America, Algeria, Switzerland – pointed to some of the preconditions of institutionalizing the ideals of power-sharing forms of government. During the past half-generation, spurred on by the resistance to dictatorship and the collapse of the Soviet Union, a whole new field of ‘transitology’ (Philippe Schmitter) has sprung up. So much research has been conducted, and so many books and commentaries have been published that for the first time in the history of democracy awareness of the precious contingency of democracy has become systematic.

Few if any of the champions of ‘transitology’ could have anticipated that its themes would be taken up and promulgated in the strangest of places : in the Oval Office of the President of the United States. Since September 11th 2001, President G.W. Bush has joined a distinguished group of transition-to-democracy experts to develop his own version of the global importance of democracy and how to achieve it, by force of arms if necessary. The first hints of his interest in the subject appeared in a speech given at the Lima Army Tank Plant, in Lima Ohio on April 24, 2003. ‘The path to freedom may not always be neat and orderly’, he told his audience, ‘but it is the right of every person and every nation’. He then made a promise : ‘Iraq must be democratic...One thing is certain : We will not impose a government on Iraq. We will help that nation build a government of, by, and for the Iraqi people [Applause].’ Six months later, in the widely-quoted address to the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment to Democracy in Washington (November 6th 2003), this type of impromptu reasoning had matured into something like a full-blown ideology of the transition to democracy. President Bush said that democracy ‘is both the plan of Heaven for humanity, and the best hope for progress here on Earth’. He spoke of ‘the world democratic movement’ and spent some time working his way through a democracy assessment check list, awarding points to : Afghanistan +, China -, Cuba -, Saudi Arabia +, Morocco +, Palestine -, Qatar +. He went on to concentrate on

the Middle East, where ‘the global wave of democracy has...hardly reached the Arab states’. Then came another promise : ‘The establishment of a free Iraq at the heart of the Middle East will be a watershed event in the global democratic revolution [Applause]’..Iraqi democracy will succeed – and that success will send forth the news, from Damascus to Tehran – that freedom can be the future of every nation [More Applause]’.

The speeches by President Bush provide an important clue not only to a rhetorical turn in recent Middle East policy of the United States. They reveal as well a fundamental structural feature of our times : that our world has fallen politically under the shadow of a dominant power defined by two novel features. Unlike (say) *Pax Britannica* or the Habsburg empire, the United States is the first genuinely global dominant power capable of operating in all four corners of the earth. It is also the first-ever such power that prides itself on its own democracy and wields the language of democracy as an ideology to justify what it is doing in the eyes of others. Hence the importance of carefully analyzing American claims about what it thinks it is doing in the world. In more detail, there seem to be at least four reasons for re-considering America’s new-found commitment to democracy at home and abroad :

a. To begin with, there is arguably a wide discrepancy between its claims and the actual outcomes of its actions as a dominant power : for instance, a recent study commissioned by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace showed that out of 18 forced regime changes to which US ground troops have been committed – Haiti and Iraq are not included in the study - only five resulted in sustained democratic rule. Of this minority, 3 cases seem clear-cut – Germany, Japan, Italy – but considerable doubt hangs over the other two (Grenada and Panama).

b. The American talk of the global transition to democracy seems to involve a sleight of hand, in the form of a deeply reductionist understanding of democracy. The core criterion of democracy is seen to be whether or not elections for governmental office are held or not. Elections are held periodically in such countries as Iran, Russia, China and

Singapore, but it is to say the least rather doubtful that these polities measure up to textbook definitions of democracy and its spirit.

c. If one looks at the present controversy about whether direct elections or caucuses will shape the first post-intervention government in Iraq one sees the terrible shrinkage of the norm of democracy, and this observation in turn arouses another suspicion : that the political language of democracy is being used *ideologically* – as a grand narrative that tells us which way is up, which way is down, and how to walk a straight line to an optimal destination. It could be that the American talk of democracy is *maquillage* : a mask for (violent) power manoeuvres that may have little or nothing to do with democracy and much or everything to do with the perceived material interests of the dominant power.

d. Finally, the possible discrepancy or outright contradiction between democratic norms and authoritarian realities can – as Amitai Etzioni has pointed out recently – lead to the ‘muddying’ of democracy’s name. Worse may be in store than de-legitimation : at home and abroad, the smell of hypocrisy coming from the house of democracy may well incite (as it is presently doing in various fundamentalist circles) a radical, active rejection of democracy, even efforts to blow up the house of democracy wherever it has been (or is being) built. The radical rejection of democracy because of its hypocrisy is a recurrent feature of the history of democracy, especially from the last quarter of the nineteenth century (e.g. the biographies of figures like Robert Michels). The same dynamic has today again come into play, this time on a global scale.

So : these four considerations suggest that the first-ever global defence of democracy by the first-ever global dominant power makes it mandatory to reflect more carefully upon the preconditions and meaning of democracy. The body of literature (to which I referred above) on the transition to democracy is large and of variable quality. Time prevents me from looking at it in detail, so I shall concentrate upon what I consider to be among the very best studies : Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan’s pathbreaking comparative study of the defeat of various forms of political despotism and of the preconditions of a successful

transition to democracy, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation : Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (1996).

Linz and Stepan emphasize that democratization is a tender plant. Democracy has no metahistorical guarantees. It is certainly not written into the nature of things. Employing a variety of methods – typological, content and survey analyses; neo-institutional and path-dependent approaches; game theory; and extensive interviews with key actors – they show that most episodes of political change away from once-stable non-democratic regimes never result in ‘completed democratic transitions’. Fewer still become what they call ‘consolidated democracies’. And even then some consolidated democracies can and do break down.

From their perspective, this fragility of the democratization process is important to understand and to explain. They acknowledge the critical importance of the character – totalitarian; post-totalitarian; authoritarian; or sultanistic – of the regime that predated the attempted democratic transition, which leads them to argue for a modified ‘path-dependent’ approach in understanding the process of democratization. Linz and Stepan also acknowledge the unpredictable effects of contingencies like prudent leadership. They emphasize as well variables like timing and the element of surprise – ‘the specificities of history’ – and they also insist that the existence of a ‘sovereign state’ is an essential prerequisite for democracy. They argue – here they are explicitly critical of a well-known work by Guillermo O’Donnell, Philippe Schmitter and Laurence Whitehead, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule* (1986) – that in many countries the crisis of the non-democratic *ancien régime* is also intermixed with profound political differences about what should actually count as the polity or political community, and which *demos* or *demoi* should be members of that political community.

When there are profound differences both about the territorial boundaries of the political community’s state and about who is entitled to be included as citizens of that state, there is what they call a problem of ‘stateness’. Where it exists, the ‘stateness’ problem is not easily resolved, exactly because every attempted transition to a consolidated democracy

faces a conundrum. Here is the problem : unless an organization with state-like attributes exists in a territory, a government, not even one which is 'democratically elected', is unable effectively to exercise its claim to the monopoly of the legitimate use of force in the territory. It cannot collect taxes (and thus provide any public services), and it also cannot secure a judicial system. And yet this indispensable political prerequisite of democratic government cannot be decided democratically. The democratic process *presupposes* the rightfulness of the political unit itself. If the political unit is not from the outset considered legitimate by the population which votes, then democratic procedures cannot make it legitimate. Agreements about stateness are logically prior to the creation of democratic institutions.

Linz and Stepan proceed from these arguments to specify the preconditions of the successful consolidation of democracy. They point to five variables that must be in place within any geographic context in order for democratic institutions to survive, and even to thrive. The persistence through time of a stable territorial state with an effective bureaucracy has already been mentioned (although a point to develop here is that Linz and Stepan's approach cannot adequately comprehend the current struggle to establish and to consolidate democratic institutions within 'pillared', post-territorial state institutions, such as those comprising the *condominio* of the emerging European Union). Secondly, democratic consolidation in their view also requires all significant actors, especially governments and state institutions, to respect and to uphold the rule of law. A spirit of constitutionalism requires more than majority rule, they insist. It also entails a relatively strong consensus about the constitution, an independent judicial system, a clear sense of the hierarchy of laws, a strong legal culture, and a commitment to not changing the laws unless so favoured by a large majority of voters.

The consolidation of democracy also necessitates, thirdly, 'a free and lively civil society'. Linz and Stepan argue against those politicians and party-supporting intellectuals who insist that civil society, having played its historic role in contesting political despotism, should be *demobilized* so as to allow for the development of stable democratic government. 'A robust civil society', they comment, has 'the capacity to generate

political alternatives and to monitor government and state'. It can help 'transitions get started, help resist reversals, help push transitions to their completion, help consolidate, and help deepen democracy. At all stages of the democratization process,' they write, 'a lively and independent civil society is invaluable.' Linz and Stepan go on to conclude that the vital role played by civil society in securing democracy must in turn be backed up by the existence of two other, closely related sets of institutions. A democratically organized civil society requires a 'political society' : that is, mechanisms such as political parties and inter-party alliances, elections and electoral rules, political leaders and legislatures, through which the citizens of a civil society constitute themselves as citizens and select and monitor democratically elected governments. Linz and Stepan then add a fifth and final condition of democratic consolidation : an institutionalized 'economic society', by which they do not mean pure – dog-eat-dog - market competition, but a mixed system of legally crafted and regulated non-state forms of property, production, exchange and consumption. According to Linz and Stepan, state-directed command economies are incompatible with democracy. Not only do they squeeze the life out of political societies. State-directed production and exchange also robs civil society of a vital support. A non-trivial degree of ownership diversity and market economy, in short, is necessary 'to produce the independence and liveliness of civil society so that it can make its contribution to a democracy'.

The type of research presented by Linz and Stepan is admirable. Much can be learned from it, including the need to be suspicious of blithe talk of bringing democracy to the world. Their research nevertheless suffers weaknesses, two of which - concerning the reasons why democratic self-government is to be regarded as desirable, and the geopolitical preconditions of democracy – I should like to highlight.

First of all, democracy is a strangely elusive ideal. Within the history of different types of earthly regimes, democracy is utterly unique. Exactly because it means, minimally, the self-government of equals – their freedom from bossing, violence, and injustice – it demands more than humans seem willing to give, or are capable of giving. What we call democracy is never 'pure' or 'authentic'. There is never enough of it, whether in the

bedroom, or in the boardroom or cabinet meeting, or on the battlefield. We are always chasing it around corners, through halls of mirrors, across uncharted landscapes, up into blue skies. Improvement, perfectibility – and failure – is inscribed within the very ideal of democracy.

So why bother with it given that it consistently disappoints because it demands much more than humans could ever give? What is so good about democracy, after all? We are living in times in which the standard answers of the past no longer work. The presumptions, for instance, that Nations are naturally democratic or that the Christian God gave the people the power to govern themselves at the expense of others, or that the Principle of Utility is an incontrovertible First Principle of democracy, are worn out. Three-quarters of a century ago, the English writer E.M. Forster was on the right track : ‘So two cheers for Democracy’, he wrote. ‘One because it admits variety and two because it permits criticism. Two cheers are quite enough : there is no occasion to give three.’ In fact, there is a third : the cheer that should be given for democratic power-sharing as the best human weapon ever invented for countering the hubris that always comes with concentrations of power. The struggle against blind arrogance and stupidity caused by power is never ultimately winnable, yet it is among the struggles that we human beings abandon at our own peril. We could put it like this : it is the all-too-human limitations that make democracy desirable, human capacities (like speech and interaction and judgement) that make it possible, and the attraction of human equality that makes it necessary. Democracy is a powerful remedy for hubris. Democracy should not be thought of in simple-minded ways as ‘the rule of the people’. That traditional definition wrongly supposed that ‘the people’, undivided and indivisible, could enter the kingdom of perfect self-representation. It was always unworkable, self-paralyzing and constantly prone to misuse, as it is again today being misused, for instance by political figures like Berlusconi, who has remarked that ‘there is something divine in having been chosen by the people’. It is much better - as I have tried to argue philosophically elsewhere – to understand democracy as a form of self-government based on the rule that nobody should rule. In contrast, say, to monarchy or totalitarianism of the Maoist kind, no *body* rules. Democracy is a uniquely ‘disembodied’ type of *government* in which ‘ruling’ (from Latin

: *regulare* : to stretch or force into a straight length) is illegitimate. It refuses to accept that those who make decisions can draw their legitimacy from gods and goddesses, or tradition, or Reason, or brute power. Democracy is a way of institutionalizing and protecting, with a minimum of violence and coercion, a plurality of morals and different ways of life. Irony and a sense of humour are key components of the spirit of democracy. Because it is the *historical* form of decision making *par excellence*, in other words one that is deeply sensitive to contingency, to its own contingency, democracy is a solution to the problem (noted by Wittgenstein) of coming to terms with ‘the groundlessness of our believing’. Democracy provides mobile homes for mortals humbled by a strong sense of their own mortality. Democracy is a way of life and a mode of governing in which those who try to rule are removable, in which power is publicly accountable, in which sitting on thrones and making decisions behind the backs of others are deeply problematic.

Not only does most of the transition to democracy literature of the past half-decade neglect questions about why democracy is desirable – despite the fact that the act of clarifying the normative status of democracy is as politically important as public efforts to convince others of its plausibility. There is something else missing from the present-day talk of transitions to democracy. Put simply, no account of ‘the transition to democracy’ can be complete, or at least plausible, unless the geopolitical preconditions of democracy are taken into account. The species of plant life called democratic government requires ecosystems and – under pressure from global forces – ultimately a biosphere that can enable it to flourish. The cases of Japan and Germany are instructive : the plant called democracy took root only within a wider supporting ecosystem of institutional processes protected and nurtured by a major power, the United States, in co-operation with more minor powers. Here I return to my opening remarks about the historically unprecedented circumstances in which democratic institutions and ideals today find themselves. The first-ever dominant power, itself a power-sharing democracy, is committed to the language of universal democracy. The story it wants to tell is summed up in President Bush’s National Endowment for Democracy speech : ‘We’ve witnessed, in little over a generation, the swiftest advance of freedom in the 2,500 year story of democracy. Historians in the future will offer their own explanations for why this happened. Yet we

already know some of the reasons they will cite. It is no accident that the rise of so many democracies took place in a time when the world's most influential nation was itself a democracy.'

Future historians may (not) agree, but they will no doubt ask : if democracy means at a minimum keeping watch on exercises of power and keeping hubris in check, then who kept watch over the leading democracy, that 'most influential nation' in the world? The question is vital, for the world of democracy is now faced with a brand new global challenge : to recognize that a democratic dominant power is a contradiction in terms, and in fact. 'Every young democracy needs the help of friends', said President Bush in an address to the UN General Assembly (23 September 2003). True, but the inverse also holds : lending others a helping hand requires practising the art of letting go. Democracy requires the democratization of the democratizer. Democracy cannot be expected to thrive in the world when the dominant power consistently exerts its dominance, behaves arrogantly, or like a frightened bull in a many-sided, fragile china shop. In a study of the global settlements of 1815, 1919 and 1945, G. John Ikenberry has pointed to a striking paradox in the rise of American power during the past two centuries : 'When American power holders bridle at the restraints and commitments that international institutions often entail, they might be reminded that these features of institutions are precisely what has made American power as durable and acceptable as it is today.'

Careful reconsideration of the delicate relationship between the growth of American power and the growth of democratic institutions suggests – especially after 1989, when for the first time America became **the** dominant power – that its polity should engage in strategic restraint, that it should understand that 'low returns to power' are a vital condition of democracy, that self-limiting power, the democratic power to bind and restrain oneself, in a word, humility, can be a highly effective form of power. Since democracy cannot be built either by force of arms or within one country alone, the dominant power that is championing democracy must learn that a repeat version of the Woodrow Wilson strategy of avoiding both direct involvement and active management of a global system of governing institutions – preaching (as Wilson did) for a worldwide

democratic revolution and leaving the rest to the ill-fated League of Nations – is in our times bound to fail. So too is the President Bush package of aggressive military power, shadowy bilateral negotiations, a la carte multilateralism, coalitions of the willing – and scrapping joined-up government arrangements (as happened during the first eight months of 2002, when the United States government publicly repudiated the ABM Treaty, the Kyoto Protocol, the Rome statute of the International Criminal Court, a convention covering the sale and transfer of small arms, and a protocol to the Biological Weapons Convention). That package – to repeat Joseph Conrad’s reaction to Rudyard Kipling’s ‘The White Man’s Burden’, a justification for armed British intervention in South Africa - is enough to make one die laughing. Making publicly accountable the existing multi-layered system of global governing institutions – the cosmocracy, as I have named it in *Global Civil Society?* – is a vital priority of democratization everywhere. So too is cutting out or reforming the most destructive dynamics within this cosmocracy – for instance, restructuring the ailing United Nations, breathing life into the new International Criminal Court, declaring a moratorium on the global production and use of nuclear and biochemical weapons. Yet none of this can be done without the co-operation of the United States. Hence a fundamental political question of our time : can the most powerful democracy in the world itself be democratized? Can the United States be made to see that it has a material interest in behaving itself in relation to its neighbours? Is something like a *global* transition to democracy possible – one that ensures that American power is made less threatening, more restrained, and more accessible to the opinions and sanctions of others?