Is Democracy a Universal Value?
Whose Democracy?

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In an op-ed article written for the New York Times (March 17, 2004), Ian Buruma writes: “One year later, most of the stated reasons for invading Iraq have been discredited. But advocates of the war still have one compelling argument: our troops are not there to impose American values or even Western values, but universal ones. The underlying assumption is that the United States represents these universal values.” The main universal value that the United States put forward in what it euphemistically called “regime change” was “democracy.” Democracy, for the United States clearly means “liberal democracy,” a particular hybrid of liberalism and democracy, of which much more will said later. What I want to do in this paper is consider first whether democracy as such is a universal value? I will then discuss liberal democracy as a specific contender for the mantle of universality. Finally, I shall return to the question of whether it is ever legitimate to export or impose democracy.

Challenges to Democracy’s Universal Status

Samuel Huntington has suggested that since the cold war has ended, the main global conflicts will no longer be ideological or economic but cultural. Since, for Huntington, the highest level of a culture is a civilization, the main conflicts in the world will be between civilizations, specifically between Western civilization on the one hand and Confucian and Islamic civilizations on the other. Since each of these civilization has its own unique cluster of values, the West should “abandon the illusion of universality” and do what is necessary to promote its own interests and unique values. “The principle responsibility of Western leaders is not to attempt to reshape other civilizations in the image of the West...but to preserve and renew the unique qualities of Western civilization.”

Huntington’s claim about the uniqueness of Western values echoes corresponding claims in both Asia and the Islamic world. What has been called the “Asian values argument” claims that Confucian values are incompatible with the values of democracy and, therefore, that democracy is inappropriate for Asian societies. A similar problem is said to exist within Islamic societies. Islam, it is claimed, can recognize only the sovereignty of Allah. Therefore, it cannot accept the sovereignty of the demos, since that is merely human sovereignty. The upshot of these claims is that democracy is a value specific to Western civilization and incompatible with Asian and Islamic societies. Thus, democracy as a value has no universal validity.

The Asian Values Argument

I shall begin with the Asian values argument. In April 1993, China, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore signed the Bangkok Declaration which insists that Asian values and the specific historical circumstance justify a different way of understanding human rights and democracy. Lee Kuan Yew, former ruler of Singapore, has become an eloquent proponent of this position. Lee argues that while there is no Asian model as such, Asian societies -- he makes it clear that he is referring specifically to East Asian societies -- are significantly different than other societies. Specifically, he argues that, as Confucian cultures, they de-emphasize the idea of individual rights and democracy in favor of community and social stability. Lee is also an advocate for a model of “soft” or paternalistic authoritarian government, a model which he developed in Singapore and which he also claims is better able to foster economic development in East Asian societies. Although these are two analytically separable arguments, it is clear that Lee conjoins them. I do not take him to be denying that democracy may have aided economic
development in the West. Rather, I think his argument is that given the Confucian heritage and the economic needs of East Asian societies, democracy, at least as it is understood in the West, is inapplicable.

Amartya Sen, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for economics in 1998, has challenged the economic assumptions behind Lee’s position. Sen argues that systematic empirical studies show no clear causal correlation between economic growth and democracy in either direction, and that the major factors conducive to economic growth are not inconsistent with democracy. More important, since only democracy can force the rulers to take account of public needs, economic well being is protected and enhanced by democracy. Sen notes, for example, that no substantial famine has ever occurred in a democratic country. Sen also offers several rejoinders to the claim that Confucian values and cultures are incompatible with democracy. First, he points out that Confucian values are not the only values that exist in these cultures. Japan, China, and Korea are also influenced by Buddhist values. Second, on Sen’s account, Confucianism does not advocate a worship of order over freedom or of blind allegiance to the State. Finally, he points out that authoritarian themes can also be found in the Western philosophical classics and that this has not prevented democracy from developing in the West.

There are several issues here than need to be teased apart. First, to what extent are Confucian values incompatible with democratic values? Second, to what extent are Confucian values hegemonic within Asian societies? Third, to what extent are other Asian values -- e.g., Buddhist and Taoist -- compatible with democratic values? Finally, even if there is an incompatibility between Asian values and democracy, can democratic values develop a significant footing in Asian societies? A fully developed answer to each of these questions would require much more space than I can provide in this article. What I want to do then is make some tentative suggestions about each of them.

There are certainly elements within Confucianism which can be interpreted as anti-democratic. Chengyang Li has offered just such an interpretation with reference to China. Using Mencius as his paradigm example, Li argues that the Confucian idea of the paternalistic governmental leaves little room for the values of liberty and equality. He argues that when Confucianism indicates concern for the individual, it focuses on duties not on rights and that, in fact, it has no place for the concept of individual rights. Furthermore, Li contends that Confucianism demands a sense of loyalty which requires that the individual be bound to others, whereas democratic politics require a lack of loyalty to particular elected officials. Such a sense of loyalty, Li argues, is also incompatible with the value of autonomy imbedded in the democratic ideal. Finally, Confucianism sees people as unequal because of their different social roles and puts a high value on unity, whereas democracy is committed to equality and pluralism.

Such an anti-democratic interpretation of Confucianism has been contested by a number of other scholars. Francis Fukayama has argued that there are a variety of ways in which Confucianism is compatible with democracy. First, its meritocratic idea and emphasis on education has egalitarian implications, since it allows for an equality of opportunity. Second, Confucianism as a personal ethic gives the family a precedence over other social relations, thus allowing a space which can provide a bulwark against the power of the State. David Hall and Roger Ames have argued that the Confucian tradition in China is amenable to the development a communitarian form of democracy. While such a form of democracy may be incompatible with liberal democracy as it is traditionally conceived, it is not incompatible with democracy as such. I shall have more to say about this shortly.

Interestingly enough, Chenyang Li believes that even though Confucianism is incompatible with the values of democracy, it can coexist with those values. Positioning himself between those who believe that democracy must clash with Confucian values (which means that one or the other must give way) and those who would revise Confucianism by eliminating the undemocratic elements, he suggests that the best alternative for China is to allow democracy and Confucianism to coexist as independent value
systems. In other words, Confucianism and democracy are incompatible only if we attempt to integrate
them into one system. As long as we keep them external to one other, there is no problem. Just as
Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism can coexist within China, and even within the same individual,
so can democratic values coexist with the other three. The goal is to allow each system its integrity in
a dialogue with the other systems. “In a society where Confucianism and democracy exist as
independent value systems, a person who subscribes to both Confucianism and democracy will hear
these two voices.” Sometimes these voices will oppose each other, which will allow each value
system to temper the excesses of the other. Sometimes they will complement each other. While there
will always be a tension between them, this tension can be creative rather than destructive.

I do not think we need to decide whether Li’s interpretation of the compatibility of Confucianism with
democracy is correct in order to answer the question: is democracy a universal value. What Chenyang
Li’s analysis of the coexistence of different value system suggests is that any culture is complex and
provides room for several value systems which can coexist constructively. What it specifically makes
clear is that even if Confucianism is incompatible with democratic values, this is not an ultimate barrier
to the development of democracy within Asian societies. However, it does suggest that such
development may take a very different form than it does in the West. It also suggests something else.
The binary opposition between Western and Eastern values is misleading at best. To quote Edward
Friedman, “democrats in Asia, such as Aung San Suu Kyi and Kim Dae Jung have pointed out that all
cultures are replete with strands that can be woven into a democratic fabric. Buddhist and Confucian
cultures may actually have more democratic elements than did Greco-Christian culture.”

What about the other value systems in Asian societies? Taoism has so clear an anti-authoritarian stance
that one anarchist theorist has called “the Lao Tzu one of the great anarchist classics.” The Dalai
Lama has written, “As a Buddhist monk, I do not find alien the concept and practice of
democracy....Like Buddhism, modern democracy is based on the principle that all human beings are
essentially equal...” Aung San Suu Kyi, who is inspired by Buddhism and leads a courageous struggle
for democracy in a society which is predominantly Buddhist, writes, “when democracy and human
rights are said to run counter to non-Western culture, such culture is usually defined narrowly and
presented as monolithic....Human beings the world over need freedom and security that they may
realize their full potential.”

What we really see in Asian cultures is a conflict between authoritarian and democratic tendencies. The
texts can be interpreted to make the case for either one. South Korea, which is one of the most
Confucian Society developed a democratic movement that toppled authoritarian rule. As Kim Dae Jung
declared, A The biggest obstacle [to democracy] is not its [Asia’s] cultural heritage but the resistance
of the authoritarian rulers and their apologists.” The Asian values argument, in the mouths of these
apologists, is an ideology which serve the interests of the powerful . To quote Aung San Suu Kyi again,
“it is often in the name of cultural integrity as well as social stability and national security that
democratic reforms based on human rights are resisted by authoritarian governments.” I shall return
to the problem of ideology shortly.

Is an Islamic Democracy Possible?

I turn now to the second challenge to the universal status of democracy -- the challenge from the
Islamic world. This challenge is posed by a variety of Muslim thinkers who in the 20th century
attempted to develop religious arguments against democracy -- e.g., Sayyid Qutb in Egypt and
Ayotollah Ruhollah Khomeini in Iran. There are several assumptions behind these arguments: that
while democracy insists that the people are sovereign, Islam insists that only God is Sovereign; that, as
Mohamed Elhachmi puts it, “no Islamic State can be legitimate in the eyes of its subjects without
obeying the main teachings of Shari`a;” that however the State be organized, religious authority must
have the final veto.
In a recent discussion, Kaled Abou El Fadl has offered a challenge to these assumptions from within Islamic tradition. In discussing the assumption that only God is Sovereign, Abou El Fadl argues that, for Islam, we cannot have perfect access to God’s will, and there is no reason to assume that God would wish to regulate all human interactions. Abou El Fadl also offers his own version of Plato’s conundrum in the Euthypro. “Does divine law define justice, or does justice define divine law. If the former, then whatever one concludes is the divine law therein is justice. If the latter, then whatever justice demands is, in fact, the demand of the divine.” However, since we cannot claim to know divine law perfectly, we must take justice as primary. Thus, on Abou El Fadl’s interpretation, Islam requires the duty to foster justice, and democracy, he believes, can be shown to be derived from the value of justice. As for Shari’a, it relies on interpretive acts of human agents. Therefore, the meaning derived from the key texts of Islam must always be interpreted. The question, then, is who should do the interpreting, and for Abou El Fadl, the answer is the community of believers. Furthermore, he argues that democracy is a necessary corollary of Islam’s concern for the well of being of each individual. “Democracy is an appropriate system for Islam, because it expresses the special worth of human beings...and at the same time deprives the state of any pretense of divinity by locating the ultimate authority in the hands of the people rather than the ulema.”

Abou El Fadl’s discussion is followed by a number of commentators. One of them, M.a.Muqtedar Khan, asks who will determine what democratically passed law is in violation of Shari’a? If it is the Muslim jurists, then we will have a dictatorship of jurists. This problem is in the forefront of the struggles within Iran between the reformers and the conservative Imams. It is important to note, however, that the reformers are still committed to the idea of an Islamic democracy. What they claim to want is for the Guardian council to be confined to its juristic functions, which means that it should not interfere with electoral competition. However, there is an inherent tension in the position of these reformers, since if the Guardian council can overrule certain laws as inconsistent with Islam, we are still faced with the possibility of a dictatorship of jurists.

The upshot of all this is that Islam, like any religion, and like Confucianism has a multiplicity of elements which can provide support for a number of interpretations. As Nader A. Hashemi, who is also one of the commentators on Abou El Fadl’s discussion, insists, “the real focus should not be on what Islam is but rather on what Muslims want. If Muslims genuinely seek to construct a democratic society...then it is up to them to invoke the necessary arguments...and engage in the interpretation of their religion that can turn this vision into a reality.”

Is Democracy a Universal Value?

From the discussion of the Asian values argument and the possibility of an Islamic democracy, I conclude that there is no specific impediment to the possibility of democracy as a universal value. However, that there is no necessary impediment does not in itself mean that democracy is such a value. What we need now is an argument in favor of its universality. In fact, we need to ask what it means for something to have a universal value. It cannot be consensus, since there is hardly an existing consensus on any value. Amtrya Sen has offered the following definition: “the claim of a universal value is that people everywhere may have reason to see it as valuable....Understood in this way, any claim that something is a universal value involves some counterfactual analysis -- in particular, whether people might see some value in a claim that they have not yet considered adequately.” Sen goes on to suggest that when applied to democracy, this criteria means that people would approve of it once it becomes a reality. However, this implication has a number of problems. First, in many places of the world, there is a disillusionment with democracy precisely within countries that have democratic forms. For example, according to an article in the New York Times (April 22, 2004), in Latin America “fifty-five percent of the people polled said that they would support the replacement of a democratic government with an authoritarian one.” Second, it is not clear how one can base a value on a
counterfactual. The empirical test that democracy is a universal is that people who have it approve of it. On what empirical basis can we decide that they would approve of what they do not now have. Finally, such a criteria sounds suspiciously circular. We can claim that they would approve of it were they in a position to appreciate it only if we assume that people ought to have such a value. But this can only mean that they would have good reasons to find it valuable. And whether people in general would accept those reasons is yet to be established. We can, however, modify Sen’s criteria in order to make it more plausible. If there were some clear empirical evidence or compelling reasons that democracy was valuable, then we might argue that if people were made aware of this evidence and were reasonable, they would come to find democracy valuable.

One kind of evidence is the kind that I have mentioned earlier when discussing Sen’s critique of Lee Kuan Yew -- that there has never been a famine in a democratic country, because democracy forces those in power to attend to social needs. This argument could be extended further as a variation of a classical argument developed by John Stuart Mill. Using the example of working class exclusion from suffrage in Britain, Mill argued that even if employers had the best of intentions toward workers, they could not see things from the workers’ perspective. From this he extrapolated the more general conclusion that we can only protect our interests if we can participate in the process of voting for the members of the representative assembly.

Another kind of argument for democracy appeals to an idea of human nature, arguing that democratic participation is essential for the development of our human capacities. Theorists like John Dewey have defended this position. This kind of argument echoes assumptions made by the classical theory of democracy. As Peter Bachrach points out, “classical theory...is based on the supposition that man’s dignity, and indeed his growth and development as a functioning and responsible individual in a free society, is dependent upon the opportunity to participate actively in decisions that significantly effect him.”

Although I am sympathetic to both these arguments, they are far from universally accepted among philosophers and social scientists. They both rely on empirical assumptions that have yet to be definitively demonstrated. What we can say at this historical juncture is that if these assumptions are true, they would constitute good reasons to say that democracy is instrumentally valuable. We might then be justified in assuming that if people were made aware fully aware of these arguments (and were reasonable) they would come to find democracy valuable.

There is a third argument kind of argument which has been advanced by C. Douglas Lummis. Lummis argues that people should be understood as the source of political power in the sense that without their at least tacit cooperation political power would be ineffective. This does not, however, mean that they have power, which is for him, the essence of democracy. To explain this distinction, Lummis uses as an analogy Marx’s labor theory of value. That workers are the source of all economic value does not mean that they control the wealth of the society. Thus, just as, for Marx, the workers may seek to control the wealth which they create, so, for Lummis, those who are the source of political power may come to demand that they have it. From this point of view, democracy needs no justification. It is the most natural state, and an ever present possibility. Thus, in each culture, people may come to demand democracy. “Democratic discourse,” writes Lummis, “is grounded in the faith that each culture must contain a democratic version of itself.” On this argument, democracy is not just an instrumental value. It is an intrinsic value.

However, while I find Lummis analysis appealing, I do not think it is sufficient by itself to ground the universal validity of democracy. While people throughout history have often resisted those in power, it is not until the last several centuries that this resistance took the form of a demand for democracy. In other words, while each culture may contain the possibility of a democratic version of itself, it is not until the modern epoch that democracy was on the agenda as a historical movement. What put
democracy on the historical agenda is a variety of factors which began in Western Europe. What has put it on the agenda as a world historical movement is both globalization and the resistance to globalization. I shall have more to say about this shortly.

What I am claiming is that like all values, the value of democracy needs to be historically grounded. Democracy, then, cannot have transhistorical value. It can, however, have universal value, but its universal value is contingent on the developments within this historical period. In one sense, then, I am reviving Sens’ criteria for a universal value with a twist. Something has universal value if people generally can come to see it as valuable. But what makes them see it as valuable is not, for the most part, a convincing empirical or philosophical argument. What makes them see it as valuable are real historical and political processes. The universality of democracy, then, is not a given but an inference which projects and validates certain historical tendencies from a political vantage point. It says that our struggles for democracy are part of a worldwide struggle. In other words, it is a form of ideology.

Marx, in the German Ideology, observed that “each new class which puts itself in the place of one ruling before it, is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aim, to represent its interests as the common interest...expressed in an ideal form: it has to give its ideas the form of universality...” We can generalize Marx’s observation to political struggles in general. When democratic forces in South Africa, in the Philippines, in the former Soviet Union and in the countries of Eastern Europe, in South Korea, in Burma, in China, in Iran, in Brazil, in Guatemala, and in Mexico have struggled (or are still struggling) against oppressive regimes, they have represented their struggles as having a universal significance. In a globalized world, these struggles are represented as part of a global struggle for democracy. Similarly, the movement for an alternative form of globalization draws on the energies of people in many countries and represents its struggles as a universal struggle from below, that is to say, as a grass roots democratic struggle. To say that the claim of these struggles to universal significance is ideological is not to deny the possible validity of the claim. It is rather to historically situate the claim. The claim that democracy is a universal value must be situated within the hope and even the faith of these struggles. In effect, the democratic forces of the world -- those struggling for democracy within their individual countries and those struggling for a more democratic form of globalization -- are helping to create democracy as a universal value. It will become a universal value if they succeed. It is a universal value in the making.

On the other side of the ideological divide, the Western powers represent their form of democracy as universal and use this representation as a justification for exporting their form of democracy. Is liberal democracy also a universal value in the making? There are good reasons to think that it is not. In fact, there are good reasons to think that the ideology of liberal democracy as universal is antithetical to the claim that democracy is a universal value.

**Is Liberal Democracy a Universal Value?**

Democracy in the broad sense is rule by the people. I define it as any situation where the people have collective power over the social conditions which effects them. It is itself pre-institutional in that it cannot be identified with any particular set of political institutions. It can exist outside political institutions -- in civil society, in educational and professional associations, in the workplace. Specific political institutions which may foster democracy in some situations may hinder it in other situations.

Liberal democracy is, in contrast, a particular set of institutions -- a representative assembly, multiple parties who compete openly for the popular vote, universal suffrage, freedom of expression and association, protection of individual rights, separation of powers, separation between public and private, limitations on state power, etc. The liberal element in liberal democracy often constrains the democratic component. For example, historically, when the classical liberals talked about democratic control, they meant control only by those with property and women were entirely excluded from
citizenship. In general, the liberal element has often been used to defend private property and market relations against demands for substantive equality and to defend patriarchal power in the family. Liberal democracy’s idea of limited government means, in practice, that large scale social and economic agendas cannot be pursued. In these struggles between liberalism and the social agendas of democrats, liberalism tends to win in the long run. In “liberal democracy” as it is understood in the West, liberalism is the dominant element.

Bhikhu Parekh has pointed out that there is no reason in principle why liberalism and democracy might not be combined differently, e.g., giving each element equal importance or making democracy the dominant partner and liberalism the subordinate one. Parekh also argues that there are two kinds of polities in which the relevance of liberal democracy is limited -- cohesive societies with a strong sense of community, e.g., Middle Eastern and African societies (and I would add, many Asian societies); and multi-communal societies, e.g., India. In cohesive societies, the sense of community is strong, and individuals are not seen as separate from their families and other social groups. In short, such societies “do not regard the atomic liberal individual as the basic unit of society.” Therefore, since in these societies people are individuated differently than in Western societies, their ideas of equality, rights, justice, etc. will also be defined differently. For example, the right of property and of trade may be more severely circumscribed in order to preserve the sense of social solidarity and its underlying communal ethic. Freedom of speech will not extend to the right to mock sacred texts and rituals. In multi-communal societies, there are several cohesive communities each of which seeks to preserve its traditional practices. In multi-communal societies, communities as well as individuals may have rights. Thus, for example, in India, while criminal law is uniform, each group is governed by a different form of civil law. From these observations, Parekh draws the conclusion that there is no good reason to deny non-Western societies the right to evolve their own political institutions. “To insist on the universality of liberal democracy is to deny the west’s own historical experience and to betray the liberal principles of mutual respect and love of cultural diversity.”

Liberal democracy is a historically specific form of democracy that developed at a certain historical conjuncture within Western societies. It is a form which may not be applicable to other kinds of societies. Thus, that democracy as such is a universal value does not entail that liberal democracy also has a universal status. Recall how, for Lummis, the claim that democracy is universal entails the claim that “each culture must contain a democratic version of itself.” What follows from this is that the claim that democracy is universal is at odds with the claim that version of democracy. The form of democracy that develops will be shaped by the needs and values of that culture. Paradoxically, then, democracy is universal precisely because it can have a variety of forms no one of which is universal. To return to the Asian values discussion, democracies in cultures that are predominantly Confucian will surely be different from the liberal democracies of the West. So also will democracies that take root in Islamic cultures. In point of fact, we can expect there to be different forms of democracy even within what Huntington calls “Acivilization.” To quote Aung San Suu Kyi again, “no single type of Western democracy exists....With the spread of democracy in Eastern Europe, the variety in the democratic style of government will increase; in each country the democratic system will develop a character that accords with its social, cultural and economic needs.”

Can Democracy Be Exported?

Some months ago, Paul Bremmer, head of the occupying forces in Iraq, was confronted with a significant dilemma. The Shiites, who are 60% of the population of that country, were demanding that the governing body which was to draft the Constitution be directly elected. The Shiites are also overwhelmingly in favor of an Islamic democracy. Bremmer understood that if direct elections were to be held, there would most likely be a majority vote for an Islamic democracy. When asked about this
prospect, Bremmer responded, “that’s not my idea of democracy.”

The intent of Bremmer’s comment was to indicate that the United States would not allow the people of Iraq to choose their form of government if it did not conform to America’s concept of liberal democracy. The underlying problem is not that democracy is conceived as a universal value but that democracy as a universal value is conflated with liberal democracy. It is this mistaken conflation which provides the ideological rational for attempting to export liberal democracy.

I began this essay with the observation that proponents of the invasion of Iraq claimed that they were not trying to impose American or western values but universal ones. What is wrong with this claim should now be clear. Democracy, if it is to be authentic, must reflect the values of the culture within which it arises. To attempt to export or impose a particular form of democracy is, in fact, to deny the universal significance of democracy. To be specific, for the United States to seek to export or to impose its form of democracy on another culture is inherently anti-democratic.