

# On Promoting Democracy

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The first question that we have to ask about promoting democracy is the question of agency: Who are the promoters? Most of the recent arguments have focused on the state, that is, on the already democratic states and, particularly, the United States. Regime change, it is commonly thought, is a state project, and so we need to think about the means that states might use for the sake of this project. Crucially, when can they use force? My own view is that they can never rightly use force to create a democratic regime in someone else's country. The old arguments for "nonintervention," first made by John Stuart Mill, still hold. But once states have used force for some other legitimate purpose, to defeat the Nazis, for example, or (hypothetically, since we did not do it) to stop a massacre in Rwanda, they can continue to use it; they may even be obligated to continue to use it, for political reconstruction. Absent some such overriding purpose, I do not believe that sending an army across the border is a good democratic move; nor is it likely to be an effective way to promote democracy.

Even if a morally necessary humanitarian intervention produces a change of regime and opens the way for democratization, we need to be realistic about what kinds of politics are possible after an extended period of ethnic cleansing and mass murder. A devastated country in which the killers and the people they tried to kill (and whose relatives they did kill) live side by side is not a likely setting for democratic deliberation, popular engagement, and nonviolent opposition. Sometimes all that we can demand in replacing a murderous regime is a nonmurderous regime. Democratization will have to wait for the (slow) development of peaceful coexistence and mutual trust. An occupying army may aid that development, but it is not itself, and should not try to be, an agent of political transformation.

States can also encourage democratization without using military force—through diplomacy, say, or ideological argument. But I suspect that they are more effective in protesting and perhaps restraining the worst abuses of non-democratic, authoritarian regimes. The heavy hand of state bureaucracy, working

at a distance, probably does better with negative than with positive ends-in-view. States are less likely to inspire resentment if they are minimalists abroad. Steady pressure on behalf of political decency and a sustained critique of brutality and repression are what we should expect from democratic states, and, except in humanitarian emergencies, not much more. Let them defend human rights by advocacy and example. The old biblical idea about being “a light unto the nations,” which implies that you just have to sit still and shine, is not the whole story of democratization but it is a good beginning.

In any case, states are not the only or the most important agents of regime change. I want to consider other agents, starting with individual men and women. As we will see, individuals have much wider rights to “interfere” in the politics of other people’s countries than states do. They have these rights because their interference is noncoercive, dependent on persuasion, and slow enough in its effects to allow the “other people” time to consider and reconsider what they are doing.

So let us imagine a cosmopolitan professor, a political theorist, say, who is frequently invited (as I am not) to give lectures in countries with authoritarian regimes. He is a committed democrat—he believes that democracy is the best regime—but he is also a pluralist and a multiculturalist, who is prepared to think about and even endorse many versions of democratic politics. He is not an apologist for the authoritarian regimes that he encounters on his travels, but he also does not believe in academic boycotts. When he is invited to lecture at a university in Uzbekistan or China or North Korea or Venezuela or Egypt or Zimbabwe, he goes. What should he do when he gets there to promote democracy?

Well, obviously, he should lecture about the value of democratic politics, about the political and legal prerequisites of democracy (free speech, free press, the right of opposition, constitutional limits on executive power, and so on), and about the long history of democratic political struggle. Let us say that this is in fact the lecture he travels with—and that he gives, without any cultural adaptations, wherever he goes. It is his cosmopolitan lecture. But he also needs to talk with his hosts, and listen to what they have to say, about democratic politics. Very often, those of his hosts who are already democrats will be outspoken Western-style democrats, but some perhaps will have invented variations on, or cultural adaptations of, the standard Western model. And some will only be able to talk about democracy in whispers and in oblique, “Aesopian” terms. He should give these local democrats moral support and encouragement, even if he

does not entirely agree with, or entirely understand, what they tell him. Perhaps they need assistance from outside their own country, which he can help provide—expressions of political support (statements signed by global notables), or public criticism of the policies of their government from groups like Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch, or guidance and support from democratic trade unions and political parties, or financial aid for a period of travel abroad or unsupervised study at a foreign university or even R&R for burned-out militants. More important, perhaps, he can put the local democrats in touch with democratic activists in other authoritarian or recently authoritarian countries that he has visited. Activists who have been successful, even if only partially successful, in their own country are often eager to carry their success story to new places—as young Serbian democrats, after Milošević’s downfall, joined in the Rose and Orange revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine. But these activists may need help paying their way; they may need funds for democratic agitation and propaganda, which outsiders can legitimately provide.

The revolutions in Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine are not, however, ideal cases of regime change, for they produced regimes still marred by authoritarian practices and extensive corruption; and the political engagement of ordinary men and women, so wonderfully manifest in the revolutionary demonstrations, has not been routinized (in the form of party politics, say) and sustained. Democracy has social and cultural as well as political and legal prerequisites, and its creation is a long-term project. It requires a strong public education system, vibrant universities, independent churches, associations of many different sorts, local governments that work, and much more. It requires a certain kind of public space for group interaction, where citizens can learn the value of compromise and the possibility of living with ongoing disagreement and partial settlements of political disputes. Here, too, outsiders can help, if they have both commitment and patience. So my cosmopolitan professor should make a point of learning as much as he can about the state of civil society in the countries he visits, and he should look for points of entrance for doctors, lawyers, teachers, trade unionists, coreligionists, environmental activists, aid workers—for anyone who can help people join together in the nongovernmental, antiauthoritarian social practices that underpin democratic politics.

All this is democracy promotion, and it seems to me the best possible kind. Perhaps it does not sound like a quick or effective way to change the world. But, first of all, there is no quick way, and, second, the minimal effects of my cosmopolitan

professor are greatly multiplied by association. He can work with others in such organizations as Human Rights Watch or Greenpeace or in international unions and parties, all of which exist in a global civil society where there is space for political agitation of a democratic sort. I imagine two different kinds of organizations operating in this space, committed, respectively, to liberal and leftist modes of regime change. Human Rights Watch typifies what I take to be the liberal mode. It is an organization run by its staff, focused on monitoring, recording, and criticizing the rights violations of authoritarian states (democratic ones, too) and, sometimes, nonstate groups. It is committed to the enforcement of international law, including, most importantly, the various human rights covenants, but it has no access to the use of force. It has a voice, not a sword, and while it seeks to inform and influence what we might think of as the global public, it speaks specifically to state officials, exposing their crimes, threatening them (at least implicitly, since it has no judicial authority) with criminal prosecution, hoping for internal reform.

I will take the old “internationals,” communist and socialist, as they should have been but mostly were not (and, in the case of the socialist international, still is not), to typify the leftist mode. These were, in principle at least, mass organizations, whose staffs were responsible to the members of the associated parties. Their aim was to mobilize, organize, and educate (often over decades of patient political work) the victims of repression, exploitation, and disenfranchisement, and to help them help themselves—that is, to press within their own countries for the creation of democratic and socialist regimes. They too had no access to military force, but they did have the potential force, which liberal organizations cannot deploy, of mass politics: mobilizations, demonstrations, general strikes. These are legitimate means of regime change.

By contrast, the Red Army marching on Warsaw to create communism in Poland (much like the American army marching on Baghdad to create democracy in Iraq) contradicted by its actions the principles it espoused. Communist internationalism (like democratic internationalism) assumed the existence of local communists (or local democrats) who were supposed to rise up and take “regime change” into their own hands. Without those “hands,” there cannot be any leftist process of democratization—or any other type of democratization, for that matter. What left parties, unions, and social movements need to do, then, is to find, inspire, train, and finance the people in whose hands democracy must finally rest. These people, of course, will not necessarily turn out to be leftists. It is enough if they are democrats, committed to an open-ended politics.

In really awful regimes, my cosmopolitan professor is not likely to meet many local democrats—unless he is sent to join them in prison, which is not the fate I imagine for him (or that he imagines for himself). He will give his lecture about democracy, and at dinner afterward his hosts will talk only about the local soccer team or the local liquor. What can he do then, and what can the organizations to which he pays dues do? In truth, there is very little to do, except to keep democratic dissidents alive by making sure that they are known abroad (publicizing their activities, publishing their books and articles) and convincing the authorities that people around the world are watching them. But if there is any space at all for oppositional political or intellectual activity—like the underground universities in Eastern Europe in the 1970s—outsiders can help to keep the space open and join in whatever goes on there, and that is what they should do. They should be guided, of course, by insiders whose nervous systems are attuned to the local risks and opportunities, who know how far to go and where to stop.

Struggles for democratization, whatever help they receive from outsiders, are always local struggles. Their protagonists do not aim at the triumph of cosmopolitan principles around the world. They want a state of their own, in the literal sense of that term—a state governed by the people who live in it, devoted to their welfare. My cosmopolitan professor supports them because he is committed to democratic (liberal or left) internationalism. But this is not an internationalism that transcends states and nations. Its aim is the creation of decent states and nations, in the hands of their own people. I began by suggesting that we should not think of the state as the chief or only agent of democratization, but state agency *is* the goal of democratization. We used to call this goal the “seizure of power”; and while we do not think of it anymore as a single, glorious, revolutionary moment but rather as a long process, its democratic purpose is what it always was (or always was supposed to be). The people take control of the state and use it to provide physical security, defend civil liberties, redistribute wealth, regulate the market, and fund welfare services. For these purposes, there is no other available agency. So my cosmopolitan professor is a “statist”—his virtue is that he is not focused only on his own state; he wants a decent and democratic state for everyone.

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