

# The New Antidemocrats

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by Bruce Gilley

**Bruce Gilley** ([bgilley@Princeton.edu](mailto:bgilley@Princeton.edu)) is adjunct professor of international affairs at New School University. He is the author of four books on China, including *China's Democratic Future* (Columbia, 2004), and co-editor of *Asia's Giants: Comparing China and India* (Palgrave, 2005).

*Abstract: Democratization has lately received new rounds of criticism from antidemocrats on both the right and the left. As the prevalence of democracy throughout the world has surpassed that of dictatorship and other forms of undemocratic government, nostalgia for authoritarianism has blurred the realities of the depredations of dictatorship. Increasingly, the new antidemocrats suggest that the problems of democracy require nondemocratic solutions. But while all democracies will necessarily fall short of their ideal, the solution lies within democratic traditions. The challenge is to motivate future generations to improve on existing democracy, not to replace democratic structures with a system that is simpler, more comfortable, and less demanding of those who live under it.*

In 1997, American journalist Robert Kaplan was interviewed on National Public Radio about the prospects for democracy in Albania, a small postcommunist state of 3.5 million people on Greece's northern border. At the time, the collapse of a \$2 billion financial fraud was causing protests in the country, which was still suffering through the legacies of half a century under the isolationist rule of communist dictator Enver Hoxha. In his many books and articles, Kaplan had evinced a deep skepticism, even disdain, for democracy, whether in the Balkans or the United States. Asked, "does Albania have the right stuff for democracy?" Kaplan responded as follows:

Well, historically one would have to say no, not yet, because historically democracies tend to be stable in places where a middle class has already been created. . . . But before any democratic system is going to be truly stable there, it's going to probably take years, decades perhaps, for a real middle class to develop. And those kinds of historical transitions tend to occur under some form of autocracy or another.<sup>1</sup>

Within a few years, Kaplan was proven wrong. Albania conducted its first fair national parliamentary elections in 2001 and municipal elections

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<sup>1</sup>"All Things Considered," Mar. 16, 1997, at [www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org).

in 2003. In July 2005, a second national election was held in which the ruling party was peacefully removed from office. Freedom House, a nonpartisan, Washington-based organization, rates Albania's civil and political liberties on par with functioning democracies in Latin America and Asia. A majority Islamic country, Albania is expected to seek accession talks with the EU in coming years. Its economy is growing at 6 percent a year.

Was Kaplan's prediction just a bad call, like Samuel Huntington's famous claim in 1984 that the chances of democratization in Eastern Europe were "virtually nil,"<sup>2</sup> or the dozens of mistaken predictions of democratic collapse in India in the last half century? I think not. Intellectual opposition to popular participation in political decision-making is nothing new in our world, but it has been reborn in new forms and armed with new empirical claims in the last decade as the challenge emerged of building democracy in a host of postauthoritarian states.

To be sure, democracy has become the officially promoted form of government in the United Nations and is encouraged openly by the World Bank and the UN Development Programme. Within universities, the post-Cold War shift of the empirical terrain has also forced scholars to turn their attentions to the different models and qualities of democracy as the central question of comparative politics. Yet a mere glimpse into current thinking in mainstream scholarly and policy journals reveals the deep skepticism that has been reborn about democracy in the midst of democracy's global spread.

To some extent, the new antidemocrats have revived old critiques about democracy. In other respects, however, they have found new angles from which to challenge popular rule—the new leftwing critique related to cultural diversity, for example, or the new rightwing critique premised on risks to national interests. What is important is that they come at a time when democracy has spread widely and mostly successfully to most parts of the world. By 2004, electoral democracies accounted for 63 percent of the world's states. In 1950, only 14 percent of states were democracies.<sup>3</sup> Democracy is the dominant regime type in every region of the world save the Middle East.

Antidemocratic thought has thus shifted from a conservative warning of change in a largely undemocratic world to a radical agitation in favor of change in a largely democratic world. Antidemocratic thinkers have become dissidents rather than reactionaries, although they are found on both left and right.

Antidemocratic or pro-authoritarian sentiments have always existed among citizens as a whole, and these will always remain, given the free exercise of human reason. Many of the antidemocratic theories that have circulated throughout history have been largely discredited today—for example, the traditional conservative critique that democracy undervalues greatness

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Huntington, "Will More Countries Become Democratic?" *Political Science Quarterly*, Summer 1984, p. 218.

<sup>3</sup> *Freedom in the World 2004*, Freedom House, at [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org).

in art and morality, or the anarchist critique that democracy masks the intolerable coercion of all states. My topic is those antidemocratic critiques that have currency today and which threaten to undermine the democratic gains of the past quarter century.

Criticisms of democracy are necessary and warranted in most places. Despite its attractions, democracy remains a work in progress with many flaws. But what often claims to be a contribution to a critical theory of democracy is, intentionally or not, destructive rather than constructive for democracy. In some instances, critics are explicit in their avowal of nondemocratic systems. Others pine after something better, relegating democracy to a mere pit stop on the road to utopia.

In an era in which the depredations of dictatorship can easily be lost in the mist of nostalgia, we need reminding that democracy, whatever its imperfections, remains the best known way of organizing political society. If “boredom with established truths is a great enemy of free men,” as Bernard Crick claimed,<sup>4</sup> then we need to be bestirred about the plain old truth of democracy’s attractions.

### **The Antidemocrat Church**

The antidemocratic church is a broad one. It contains every point on the political spectrum. It makes strange bedfellows of *realpolitik* neocons and postmodern professors, among others. It is not a unified opposition but a disunified opposition. Its alternatives are often more at odds with each other than with democracy itself. Nonetheless, this is in the nature of political opposition. And such multifaceted opposition, whatever its incoherence, often succeeds in destroying its shared adversary by a thousand cuts.

The most enduring antidemocratic notion concerns *popular unfitness* for self-rule. Plato, who had been deeply affected by the judicial execution of Socrates by a democratic state, was the father of this ideal. He argued that only virtuous philosopher-guardians could uphold a virtuous state. After him, various intellectuals applied the unfitness argument to different segments of society (women, the propertyless, non-taxpayers, the illiterate). Writ large, the unfitness argument was applied to entire cultures or regions of the world. Japanese were emperor worshippers, Mexicans were all *machismo*, and Spaniards were beholden to a conservative church. The upshot was that rule by all was only likely to succeed in rare circumstances. Since people and cultures are defined by their material and historical circumstances, only truly epochal changes could make the wretched groups fit for self-rule. The most famous revival of the unfitness argument was Samuel Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations*, which posited the West as the unique repository of democratic virtues. Yet it

<sup>4</sup> *In Defense of Politics* (University of Chicago Press, 1972).

can be heard echoed today in pessimistic tracts on the “tribal” nature of Afghanistan society or the Confucian obeisance of China’s people.

The problem with this argument, of course, is that it is empirically always false. The poor, women, and the propertyless did not rise up and destroy Western democracies when given the vote but ensured their success. Likewise, Japanese, Mexicans and Spaniards have proven to be superb democratic citizens, as have citizens in the only two truly Confucian societies in the world, Japan and South Korea. Islam supports democracy in Indonesia, Albania, Mali, Turkey, and elsewhere. Buddhists in Thailand and Mongolia oversee functioning democracies. The possibility, indeed the popular desirability, of democracy has been adduced so many times and in so many places as to render the popular unfitness argument to be a dangerous error fit for burial for all time.

Closely related to the popular unfitness argument is the *structural unfitness* argument. This is a more polite version that does not require cultural and racial stereotyping. Yet its logic is very similar. Democracy requires certain preconditions. Among them are a middle class (Kaplan’s claim about Albania), an effective bureaucracy, civic traditions of compromise, a lively press, a constitutional tradition, experience with elections, even an obliterated peasantry. Since most of these things exist in only a few places, democracy usually descends into chaos and violence—as one can infer by CNN’s extensive coverage of dark-hued voters or legislators exchanging blows. “One man, one vote, one time” is the epithet of derision—you only get one election before the democracy fails. Algeria’s military-annulled election of 1991 is held up as the paradigm case. Such democratic destruction largely cancels out the purely symbolic (and thus nugatory) benefits of voting. Democracy is best delayed until most of those prerequisites are in place, which will probably take decades. The revival of this argument by writers like Jack Snyder and Fareed Zakaria has tapped into a deep reserve of skepticism about whether all the world’s new democratic citizens are fit for self-rule.<sup>5</sup>

But few if any of today’s successful democracies ever had such conditions when they began their own transitions to self-rule. Moreover, structural unfitness writers underestimate the costs (economic and moral) of continued unpopular authoritarian rule (North Korea, Burma/Myanmar, and Zimbabwe), and suppose themselves qualified to speak for the people concerned in making this choice. South Africans, Filipinos, East Timorese, and Russians have endured grinding socioeconomic dislocation in the first years of democracy: surveys show that only a minority wish to return to the “good ol’

<sup>5</sup> See Jack L. Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict* (W. W. Norton, 2000); Edward D. Mansfield and Jack L. Snyder, *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War* (MIT, 2005); Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (W. W. Norton, 2003); and William Anthony Hay, “What Is Democracy? Liberal Institutions and Stability in Changing Societies,” *Orbis*, Winter 2006.

days” of dictatorship, which after all caused those problems. The best data we have suggests that transitions to democracy are usually good for growth, good for stability, and good for the poor.<sup>6</sup>

A similar argument now holds that modern life is *too complex* to be properly handled by democratic political systems, reliant as they are on the unschooled average citizen. Again, there are echoes of the complexity argument throughout history, going back to the advocates of “scientific governance” beginning with the French philosopher Henri de Saint-Simon and continuing with John Dewey in America. In the information age, and with terrorism, environmental catastrophe, and global capital working in new ways, the argument has gained new adherents. Experts, not commoners, are what modern life calls for. Thus Danilo Zolo wrote in 1992 that the complexity of modern societies “makes the government of postindustrial countries difficult by democratic means.”<sup>7</sup> His answer: a vague admixture of minimal government, authoritarian law and order, and bureaucratic efficiency and expertise.

Again, the problem with this argument is its empirical counterfactuals. Democracies have dealt with complexity better than dictatorships in all but a few cases. Zolo’s advance of something he calls “the Singapore model”—presumably based upon that small Southeast Asian enclave of 4 million people with a unique historical confluence of colonial and cultural factors that have prolonged its effective dictatorship—shows how difficult it is to find any superior alternatives to democracy. Even imperfect democracies are usually preferable to slick dictatorships in matters of complexity: Taiwan’s world-dominating semiconductor industry only began to thrive once the centralizing Kuomintang dictatorship stepped aside in favor of the unruly, and liberalizing, Democratic Progressive Party.

Distinguished CUNY political scientist David Spitz once referred to the arguments above as the “impossibility of democracy” arguments.<sup>8</sup> They were historically argued in terms of the negative impacts of popular rule rather than the positive impacts of elite rule. The rhetorical focus is important because it turns the spotlight off of the ravages of history’s unaccountable tyrants. Such writers rarely try to show that “wise rulers” exist in the places where they advocate democratic rollbacks. As Niccolo Machiavelli, a great humanist, put it, writing behind the back of his patron Prince: “I arrive then at a conclusion contrary to the common opinion which asserts that populaces, when in power, are variable, fickle, and ungrateful. . . . In the matter of prudence and stability,

<sup>6</sup>Dani Rodrik and Romain Wacziarg, “Do Democratic Transitions Produce Bad Economic Outcomes?” Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law, Stanford University, Paper No. 29, Jan. 6, 2005.

<sup>7</sup>Zolo, *Democracy and Complexity: A Realist Approach* (translation from Italian, Penn State University, 1992), p. 63.

<sup>8</sup>Spitz, *Patterns of Anti-Democratic Thought: An Analysis and a Criticism, with Special Reference to the American Political Mind in Recent Times* (Macmillan, 1949).

I claim that the populace is more prudent, more stable, and of sounder judgment than a prince.”<sup>9</sup>

Although it does not argue for the impossibility of democracy, the *economic and social drag* school finds democracy to be an encumbrance on rapid economic growth and social transformation. Spitz put this argument in a category called “undesirability of democracy” and it has several other strains. It is the last refuge for the old arguments about the advance of great men and great values, now restated in terms of more populist aims like rapid economic and social development. Well-read dictators with modernizing visions are the preferred vehicles for such changes, which more quickly create the foundations for democracy in addition to delivering valued goods like education, healthcare, and opportunity.

The socioeconomic-drag school has been particularly popular among economic-oriented scholars and journalists of Asia and Latin America.<sup>10</sup> Thus China has lapped India in their undeclared race to be the new superpower of Asia because of its efficient dictatorship that controls population, builds expressways, and limits unnecessary debate. Along with the unfitness arguments, this school calls for a more restrained press, a less restrained executive and bureaucracy, and a quiet acceptance by the people to limit their involvement in politics.

To say the least, this argument rests on shaky empirical assumptions. The most that one can say in its favor is that it is unproven. As Siegle and colleagues argue,<sup>11</sup> socioeconomic advance is usually faster and better under democracy, whatever the starting point and particular cultural inheritance of a country. India developed slowly because of socialist economic policies, not because of democracy. China’s post-1978 growth has resulted from dismantling, not reinforcing, its political dictatorship. This is also largely the argument of World Bank and UN Development Programme economists who today study democracy as a top developmental tool. Since their democratizations in the 1980s, Latin American countries have experienced solid socioeconomic advance, as shown by their gains in the UN Human Development Index. But such gains make bad television programming. How much better to show mass protests in São Paulo, or media-exposed political scandals in Santiago.

For students of democratic politics, there is an alternative critique of democracy that I call the *democratic disaffection* argument. This is found most prominently in students of Western democracies who detect declining citizen engagement, a rise of media and elite power, and other woes.

<sup>9</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* (Penguin, 1984 [1519]), pp. 254–55.

<sup>10</sup> Youssef Cohen, *Radical Reformers and Reactionaries: The Prisoner’s Dilemma and the Collapse of Democracy in Latin America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 23–32.

<sup>11</sup> Morton H. Halperin, Joseph T. Siegle, and Michael M. Weinstein, *The Democracy Advantage: How Democracies Promote Prosperity and Peace* (Routledge, 2004).

In contemporary American political science, where a romantic ideal of citizen self-government continues to be seen as the standard of comparison, there is a lurid tradition of showing how citizen preferences are unstable, incoherent, or irrational. Information and deliberation are so flawed or dysfunctional as to render claims to self-rule hollow. Such critiques also engender a deep disdain for the average citizen, summed up perfectly by Converse's notorious aside that "what needs repair is not the [survey] item but the people."<sup>12</sup>

The disaffection critique has an ancient lineage among conservative supporters of "mixed government" (which combines popular and appointed elements in legislative power), who believed that it would bring greater liberty than the mass politics of democracy. The modern disaffection critique was revived in 1975 with Michel Crozier, Samuel Huntington, and Joji Watanuki's *The Crisis of Democracy*, and has continued since then with books like Susan Pharr and Robert Putnam's *Disaffected Democracies* (2000). Larry Bartels, a prominent Americanist at Princeton, has openly wondered whether "alternative political systems" than democracy might be preferable for the United States.<sup>13</sup> He has expressed the view that American democracy is illegitimate in democratic terms and "must be defended some other way, if it is to be defended at all."<sup>14</sup> Likewise, Russell Hardin of New York University argues that democracy's only purpose is to resolve conflicts among the powerful and those who look for evidence that it improves individual lives more than alternatives systems will find that "there is none available"—a claim that flies in the face of accumulated evidence of democracy's benefits to societies.<sup>15</sup>

This accumulated literature has been challenged both empirically and normatively by authors who show that democracies in general, and American democracy in particular, in fact work quite well.<sup>16</sup> The problem with the disaffection critique, as these authors show, is that it is based on a crude, even cartoonish, model of citizens as self-interested materialists and of the political process as a kind of giant preference-aggregation machine. It ignores the role of deliberation and virtual normative control in creating defensible policies; that incoherence is often a reflection of competing moral intuitions, and that

<sup>12</sup> Converse, *Attitudes and Non-Attitudes: Continuation of a Dialogue*, edited by Edward. R. Tufte (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1970), p. 176.

<sup>13</sup> Bartels, "Uninformed Votes: Information Effects in Presidential Elections," *American Journal of Political Science*, 1996.

<sup>14</sup> Larry Bartels and Christopher Achen, *Blind Retrospection: Electoral Responses to Drought, Flu and Shark Attacks*. Prepared for presentation at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston, Aug. 28–Sept. 1, 2002.

<sup>15</sup> Russell Hardin, *Liberalism, Constitutionalism, and Democracy* (Oxford, 1999), p. 320.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Erikson, James Stimson, and Michael MacKuen, *The Macropolity* (Cambridge, 2000); Gerry Mackie, *Democracy Defended* (Cambridge, 2003); Pippa Norris, *Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism* (Cambridge, 2003).

passion and emotion are valid responses to political issues. Its vision of the political world is so narrowly confined to specific bills and questions that it ignores entirely how democracies narrow the range of alternatives to those that are reasonably justified and can withstand deliberative scrutiny. Most important, it ignores what sort of system people themselves actually want.

Recently, a *national interests* argument against democracy has been revived in the United States. Of course, nationalists in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian states like China and Russia have long argued that democracy will weaken the great power status of their countries. But the new version of this argument concerns not the impact of democracy at home but the impact of democracy abroad. In the Cold War, the staple argument of antidemocratic realists like Henry Kissinger was that American-friendly dictatorships in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, or the Philippines would turn anti-American if democracy were encouraged there. Today this argument is being revived in the debate on democratic prospects in the Middle East. Thus Gregory Gause writes that the U.S. government should stop promoting democracy in the region since it might bring to power “Islamist domination” in the largely Islamic states. Instead, he writes, the United States should promote rule by those groups that are more likely to accept U.S. foreign policy and to emulate U.S. political values.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, there is a difficult moral question about the comparative value one places on the fundamental rights of others and one’s own “national interests.” But thankfully, it is rare that such a tradeoff even arises. Most democratic states are more cooperative and less threatening to a country such as the United States than they would have been under continued dictatorship. Gause’s claim that the Middle East is different because there is a “real ideological alternative” to liberal democracy there ignores the fact that it was precisely the defeat of such alternatives—leftist revolution in Latin America, communist tyranny in Eastern Europe, Asian values in East and Southeast Asia—that led to the development of democracies in those regions. Empirically, dictatorships create more problems for American national interests than democracies do—a fact demonstrated vividly by the 9/11 attacks. China represents the greatest threat to the world’s fastest growing region because its dictatorship encourages an aggressive irredentism with respect to democratic Taiwan, one that would most probably be dulled by a democratic transition in China.

### **Classical Critiques**

The antidemocratic arguments sketched above are often found among those on the right. The division, of course, is not neat. Antidemocrats have a way of borrowing freely from the views of the entire political spectrum.

<sup>17</sup>F. Gregory Gause III, “Can Democracy Stop Terrorism?” *Foreign Affairs*, Sept./Oct. 2005.

Democratic disaffection arguments, for example, are almost as often heard on the left as on the right, especially when the right is in power.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, many prominent leftwing critics, such as Mark Danner, have joined in the national-interest critique of attempts at democracy in the Middle East, warning that “Democratic outcomes do not always ensure friendly governments. Often the contrary is true.”<sup>19</sup>

Antidemocratic views are not the preserve of left or right but of elitists of all stripes who distrust or disdain the common citizen, or wish to privilege their own views and interests over those of others. Thus the variety of antidemocratic arguments below are typically expressed by those on the left. But again they crop up on the right as well, and the mixing and melding of them is unconstrained.

Just as there is a classical rightist critique of democracy, there is also a classical leftist critique, what might be called the *class repression or anticapitalist* critique. For Marx, democracy merely empowered the bourgeoisie, which had the material and intellectual means to dupe the proletariat into doing its bidding through the ballot box. Substitute any favored group for the proletariat—Ecuadorian tribes, Malay farmers, Polish autoworkers—and you have the modern version. The modern term of derision is “neoliberalism,” a claim that the hurly-burly of democratic politics is simply laissez-faire capitalism in the political arena. Powerful elites run the show to line their own pockets and the average citizen has little say in the matter, according to an argument made in the 1960s by Theodore Lowi.<sup>20</sup> Amy Chua argues that democracy has empowered wealthy minorities—Jews, Chinese, and Indians—and thus brought political turmoil worldwide.<sup>21</sup> Adam Przeworski believed that democracy would not survive the turmoil of early marketization in Eastern Europe that would surely bring to power business oligarchs and dash the industrial proletariat.<sup>22</sup>

The problem with the class view is that it can never explain how workers and farmers keep coming to power in democracies, or how the poor in democracies do so much better than in any other system.<sup>23</sup> Brazil has elected

<sup>18</sup> Compare Pankaj Mishra’s critiques of Indian democracy in the *New York Review of Books* while the BJP was in power (e.g., “Murder in India,” Aug. 15, 2002) with his celebration of majority rule in the election that brought Congress back to power in 2004 (“India: The Neglected Majority Wins!” Aug. 12, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> Mark Danner, “Taking Stock of the Forever War,” *New York Times Magazine*, Sept. 11, 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Lowi, *The End of Liberalism; Ideology, Policy, and the Crisis of Public Authority* (Norton, 1969).

<sup>21</sup> Chua, *World on Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability* (Doubleday, 2003).

<sup>22</sup> Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America* (Cambridge, 1991).

<sup>23</sup> Yi Feng, “Democracy, Political Stability and Economic Growth,” *British Journal of Political Science*, July 1997.

three straight Left or socialist candidates to its presidency. Taiwan's indigenous and worker-based DPP is now the governing party in Taiwan. Eastern European democracy survived by creating the structures to regulate capitalism that Marx overlooked while reading through parliamentary reports on British factory conditions. However imperfect democracy's succor for the poor, the alternatives are almost always far worse, a point made by the late Harvard sociologist Barrington Moore.<sup>24</sup> The disadvantaged groups are most aware of this, for they suffer the most under alternatives. The Marxist critique cannot explain why the citizens repeatedly prefer pluralist democracy to proletarian dictatorship—especially in India, the world's largest and most enthusiastic poor electorate.

Seeking refuge from the confounding realities of real world politics, many on the left have taken flight into the postmodern *ideological repression* critique of democracy. This frees them from having to take seriously the views of anyone except themselves since others are assumed to be laboring under false consciousness. The reason why Lula has failed the class interests of his Brazilian constituents is not that high office has brought prudence to his views but that he is caught in a cage of reason created by the powerful. The most that anthropologist Julia Paley can say in favor of democracy is that it is “perhaps less directly repressive than military dictatorships,” but an ideologically repressive “enacting form of power” nonetheless and thus a moral near-equivalent.<sup>25</sup>

For postmodernists, the challenge is mainly internal. If their claims are to be believed, then we would expect that social revolutions and the advance of the disadvantaged could never take place. Yet they do, and the disadvantaged usually fare better under democracy than under various proposed “alternative democracies” in which power and discourse are supposed to be more equitable. It is in the democratic institutions of liberal states, not on the streets of Seattle or the Internet blogs of NGO activists, where social justice is to be found.

A different version is the *cultural repression* argument. The idea here is that democracies promote only the interests of individuals, not groups. Unable to segment themselves from the majority culture, minorities find their “horizons of meaning” steadily undermined by the leveling assumptions of democracy. Here, democracy is an instrument of cultural genocide. Deborah Yashar, for example, argues that democratization in Latin America based on individual rights regimes has disempowered and threatened indigenous groups.<sup>26</sup> A whole “communitarian” school of political philosophy argues

<sup>24</sup> Barrington Moore, *Reflections on the Causes of Human Misery and Upon Certain Proposals to Eliminate Them* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970).

<sup>25</sup> Julia F. Paley, “Toward an Anthropology of Democracy,” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 2002.

<sup>26</sup> Deborah Yashar, *Contesting Citizenship in Latin America: The Rise of Indigenous Movements and the Postliberal Challenge* (Cambridge, 2005).

for limits on democratic rights and extensions of cultural rights.<sup>27</sup> This is a revival on the left of the now impolite rightwing critique of democracy as endangering cultural greatness, an echo of what Allan Bloom called “the old alliance of Right and Left against liberal democracy, parodied as ‘bourgeois society’.”<sup>28</sup>

This critique both overestimates the damages to cultures done by democracy and underestimates the ability of democracies to respond to such concerns within the democratic framework. Apartheid South Africa and Lenin’s “prisonhouse of nationalities,” not to mention the “autonomous region of Tibet,” were hardly kind to the minorities they governed. Today, the main contention among Quebecois, North American Indians, Mindanese, or Basques is within their own cultures, not against the cultural majority. Democracy, not vague “alternatives,” opens doors to cultural solutions. As Seyla Benhabib writes: “Democratic equality and deliberative practices are quite compatible with cultural experimentation and with new legal and institutional designs that accommodate cultural pluralism.”<sup>29</sup>

Closely related is the *cultural relativism* argument. This says that certain cultures simply do not value democracy as a fundamental right the way “Western” ones do. There is a neat echo here of the rightwing popular (or cultural) unfitness argument, the only difference being that the rightwing disdains and the leftwing cherishes the culture in question. Thus Joshua Cohen at MIT, a sort of Samuel Huntington of the left, has argued that Islam and Confucianism do not support a universal right to democracy, which is said to be a culturally specific notion of justice from the West.<sup>30</sup>

Whatever the elegance of philosophical arguments about Confucius or Mohammed, empirically this argument is always fighting a rearguard action against successive waves of democratic agitation in Confucian (Taiwan, South Korea, Japan and now China) and Islamic (Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and now Iran) societies. Electoral rights seem to be universally valued by people whatever their specific cultural values. To deny that those democratic urges exist is to forget how alien democratic values are to *all* cultures, even the Western culture that created it, which also produced fascism and colonialism.

Finally, the most dismal antidemocratic position on the left might be described as the *guilt-by-association* argument. Blinded by rage against the United States for the most part, critics oppose democracy on the grounds that “the friend of my enemy is my enemy.” To promote democracy in the world is to promote U.S. or Western hegemony—an idea that would have puzzled former Democratic presidents Jimmy Carter and Woodrow Wilson. The left has

<sup>27</sup> Amitai Etzioni, *The New Golden Rule: Community and Morality in a Democratic Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).

<sup>28</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (Simon & Schuster, 1987), p. 32.

<sup>29</sup> *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (Princeton, 2002).

<sup>30</sup> Joshua Cohen, “Is There a Human Right to Democracy?” and “Minimalism About Human Rights: The Most We Can Hope For?”, unpublished working papers.

thus forfeited the role of encouraging democratic change in the world because it fears the use of Western power, seeing revived colonialism lurking behind every tree. Many a leftwing dictator embraces this critique—Mugabe in Zimbabwe, CCP rulers in China—because it provides them with a perfect ethnocentric distraction.

## Conclusion

The commonplace truth of our day is that democracy has proven to be the most just and the most free system of organizing political communities. Few of the pessimistic predictions made about democracy have come to pass, while too often the awful predictions about the consequences of nondemocratic forms that were never heard have in fact been fulfilled. Recall the paeans sung to Tito's Yugoslavia, which was said by Sidney Verba and colleagues to be "in the forefront in the innovation of new modes of political activity"<sup>31</sup> before it collapsed into one of the most horrific imperial breakups in world history, in which more than 200,000 lives were lost.

The modest but comparatively major achievements of democracy, with all its flaws, are at risk from an array of great minds who are bored with established truths and seek to create grand new narratives of freedom and progress. The good old days of Saddam, Tito, and Mao loom in those minds as paradise lost. Chavez, Putin, and Hu Jintao are tolerated as the torchbearers of an "alternative democracy."

While all democracies fail to live up to the ideal, it is a mistake to assume that these shortcomings require nondemocratic solutions. The solutions to these failings—the proper place for the grand new narratives of progressive change—lie within, not outside of, the democratic tradition.

Allowing the new antidemocratic thought to go unchallenged is not a mature sign of a liberal society, but a worrying sign of a society that is hesitant to undertake the arduous business of improving democracy and is always wondering about "alternatives." Letting these critiques stand unchallenged also exerts an often-fatally negative influence on new and potential democracies. The West's policy towards China alternates between encouraging democratic change and bolstering the communist regime. The leftwing Italian parliamentarian Gaetano Salvemini, recalling his own attacks on democracy in the prefascist era, wrote:

I must acknowledge . . . that I would have been wiser had I been more moderate in my criticism of the [democratic] Giolittian system. For while we Italian crusaders attacked him from the Left, accusing him of being—as he was—a corrupter of Italian democracy in the making, others assailed him from the Right because he was even too democratic

<sup>31</sup> Sidney Verba, Norman N. Nie and Jae-on Kim, *Participation and Political Equality: A Seven-National Comparison* (University of Chicago, 1987 [1978]), p. 219.

for their taste. Our criticism thus did not help to direct the evolution of Italian public life toward less imperfect forms of democracy but rather toward the victory of . . . reactionary groups. . . . As for the results of the Fascist dictatorship in contrast with those of Italian democracy in the making, they are here before our very eyes. Let us hope that the Italians will not be the only ones to learn from that frightful experience.<sup>32</sup>

There are many “contradictions” of democracy. Yet most of these are the source of its strength, not its weakness. Critics who find these contradictions are discovering nothing more than the timeless contradictions of individual and social life, not the fatal weakness of the system that manages, even celebrates, them. This is the boring truth of our world. The challenge is to fire the imagination of youth, and of restless minds, by improving on, not replacing democratic structures.

George Kateb wrote that democracy scares people on both left and right because it bares man in his full glory, or shame, forcing him to make his own identity, to confront his own confusions without the aid of tradition or class or any other structures as guides to who he is, or should be. “The real . . . crisis [of democracy] would appear . . . when large numbers of people feel that life in a constitutional democracy is too much, and that something safer and more comfortable should replace it.”<sup>33</sup>

Let us hope that day does not come. But we live in an era in which nondemocratic forms have become sufficiently rare or dying that they are reappearing as utopias. That makes them particularly attractive in the face of the dull heroism required of democracy.

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<sup>32</sup> *Memorie di un fuoruscito* (1960).

<sup>33</sup> George Kateb, “On the ‘Legitimation Crisis,’” in William Connolly, ed., *Legitimacy and the State* (New York University Press, 1984), p. 198.