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Democracy and conceptual contestability: reconsidering conceptions of democracy in democracy promotion

Milja Kurki¹

Abstract

Democracy is a deeply contested concept: historically, complex debates have revolved around the meaning of democracy and the plausibility of different 'models of democracy'. However, democracy's conceptual contestability has received diminished attention in the post-Cold War democracy promotion debate as the attention of democracy promotion actors and scholars has turned to fine-tuning of policies through which a liberal democratic model can be successfully encouraged. It is argued here that the focus on the extension of the reach of the liberal democratic mode of governance has resulted in a conceptually impoverished appreciation of the multiple meanings that the idea of democracy can take. This article suggests that democracy promotion scholars and practitioners do not adequately acknowledge or tackle the notion that democracy is an essentially contested concept. This has important for their ability to take into account the consequences that considering alternative (non- or extra-liberal) models of democracy might have for democracy promotion. To move the debate forward, I explore here what serious engagement with the essential contestability of

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democracy might mean for democracy promotion. I argue that it entails a two-fold move: ‘pluralisation’ and ‘contextualisation’ of the conceptions of democracy that democracy promoters work with. The latter part of the article examines in detail the reasons that might exist for considering such a move as part of the efforts to reformulate democracy promotion policies, as well as the potential dangers that might be involved. Despite the fact that important difficulties are entailed by the extension of the range of ‘models of democracy’ to be considered in democracy promotion, it is argued that important political, normative and practical reasons exist for a reconsideration of the conceptual basis of democracy promotion in the post-Bush era.

Key words: conceptual inquiry, essential contestability, theoretical pluralism, models of democracy, democratic theory, democracy promotion

Democracy and conceptual contestability: reconsidering conceptions of democracy in democracy promotion

Introduction

Despite democracy's historical unpopularity with both political leaders and philosophers the 20th century has seen a significant change in the fortunes of democratic governance. Democracy has become 'the world's new universal religion' (Corcoran 1983: 14). Various states and international organisations, the US, the EU, and the UN for example, have taken on key roles in defining and putting into practice this new religion through various democracy promotion and assistance policies. The attempts by democracy promoters to 'spread the word' on the virtues of democracy have not gone unnoticed in academia: many books and articles have been written in recent decades analysing the successes and failures of democratic transitions around the globe. Traditionally many studies have focused on analysis of key causal variables facilitating democratisation (see e.g. O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986; Przeworski, 1997; Diamond, 2008) but increasing effort has also been expended on analysis of the role of and the motivations informing democracy promotion policies (see e.g. Burnell, 2000; Youngs, 2002; Smith, 1994; Teixeira, 2008).

The democratisation and democracy promotion studies that have proliferated in political science and IR have contributed many interesting insights on the fortunes of democracy around the world. Yet, they have not ‘solved the problem’ of democratisation – it still remains something of a mystery why democracy promotion succeeds in one context and not another (Shapiro, 1983: x). Moreover, doubts remain about the ability of the current literature to deal with the deep problems of contestation that are arising in the international relations of democracy promotion. Notably, it has been difficult for policy-makers and researchers to come to terms with the fact that many countries now view democracy promotion with great scepticism and have started to limit the rights and scope of action of democracy promotion agencies (Carothers, 2006; Gershman and Allen, 2006). Also, it has been disconcerting for many to take note of the fact that the target publics of democracy promotion interventions do not always happily accept the models of democracy that are promoted in their interests (Abrahamsen, 2000; Chandler, 2000; Nagel and Mahr, 1999: 99).

The difficulties encountered in democracy promotion have become more widely noted by democracy promotion researchers and also policy-makers. Barack Obama, for example, has openly recognised the problems that arise from this policy agenda’s occasionally forceful nature, as well as democracy promoters’ inability to adequately listen to the preferences of the target publics (Obama, 2006: 315-7). A number of interesting reports have also been written recently on possible policy directions that democracy promoters should consider in the post-Bush era (Kenneth and Wollack, 2008; Carothers, 2008). Nevertheless, nothing fundamental has changed so far in democracy promotion. Certainly no shifts in the underlying conceptual framework that informs democracy promotion have taken place, or been called for in the re-evaluations of this policy agenda. Crucially, a broad consensus continues to exist on the belief that democracy promotion entails *liberal democracy*

promotion, that is, the promotion of certain key liberal democratic procedures – encompassing electoral processes and institutionalisation of rule of law, freedoms of expression, press and association. Increasing agreement also exists on the view that these procedural aspects of liberal democracy promotion should go along with encouragement of respect for ‘liberal democratic cultural values’, such as belief in rights of the individual, toleration, consensus-building, and the legitimacy of liberal democratic procedural governance (Obama, 2006; Smith, 1994; Burnell, 2000; Diamond, 2008).

It is argued here that a better understanding of the problems of democratisation, and specifically of the contestation over democracy promotion, may be achieved by adopting a new angle to the study of democratisation and democracy promotion. I argue that we should not simply focus on tweaking existing policies, nor simply focus on accumulation of further empirical data on specific cases of democratisation or democracy promotion. We need to instead tackle seriously the *conceptual underpinnings* of democratisation and democracy promotion. This piece specifically argues that it may be justified and useful to open up conceptual questions on the meaning of the idea of democracy in democracy promotion. Considering the centrality of the idea of ‘democracy’ to democracy promotion, it is curious that exploration of the deep theoretical and conceptual contestation over this concept in democratic and political theory is made relatively little of in existing studies on democracy promotion or in policy practice. Some contestation over democracy is acknowledged as a matter of course – most academic commentators note that democracy is a contentious concept in political history, many even referring to it as an essentially contested concept (Schmitter and Karl, 1993: 39; Burnell, 2000: 22; Held, 1996: xi; Whitehead, 2002: 14; Lawson, 1993: 184; Dahl, 2000, 37). Yet, curiously, democracy, as it is conceived to apply in the

contemporary democratisation and democracy promotion context, is understood in a surprisingly singular 'liberal democratic' fashion.

The liberal democratic model undoubtedly has many virtues, not least in its normative and emancipatory qualities and its ability to foster stable political systems. It has brought long sought-after freedoms and rights to many in democratising states. Yet, a doubt remains concerning the problems that may arise from the fact that democratisation and democracy promotion literature and practice works solely within the confines of a single democratic theory tradition, as rich as this is. Indeed, given that democratic theorists have over the last two millennia analysed various different substantive and procedural, normative and empirical, economic and political, extended and narrow, participatory and representational, statist and non-statist, liberal and non-liberal notions of democracy, and given that different theories of democracy have historically been attached to different kinds of political struggles, can the rich history of contestation over democracy simply be sidestepped in the contemporary era of democracy promotion – and more importantly, is it sidestepped at our peril? If the meaning of democracy is not captured holistically by the liberal democratic definitions and policies, and if alternative models of democracy - such as social democracy, participatory democracy, deliberative democracy, radical democracy, or cosmopolitan democracy - can be conceived parallel to the liberal tradition¹, the question arises: should alternative models of democracy be considered too in analysis of democratisation and democracy promotion and what would be the effect of considering them be?

This paper seeks to explore what it might mean to take seriously the contestability of the idea of democracy and to do so specifically in the context of democracy promotion. To set the scene, I examine, first, some key contemporary dealings with democracy in the

democratisation and democracy promotion literature. I argue that there is an inadequate recognition in this literature of the contestability of the notion of democracy: as much as contestation is acknowledged, this is perceived to take place within the confines of a liberal democratic' background discourse. In the second section, I discuss essential contestability of the idea of democracy and what it would mean to take it seriously. I argue that there should be better recognition in the field of both the 'plurality' and the 'contextuality' of conceptions of democracy. In the final section I examine the reasons that we might have for taking on-board the idea of essential contestability in the analysis and design of democracy promotion. I consider also some of the dangers involved in doing so. I conclude that important normative, political and practical problems of democracy promotion may be productively addressed through extending appreciation of the conceptual contestability of democracy. Notably democracy promoters may be in a position to develop more open and 'democratic' debate on democracy and may be able to better understand and negotiate with those actors that call for democratisation along lines divergent from the classical liberal democratic model.

Liberal democratic background model and the study of democratisation

Democracy, many academics and political actors argue, is a universal value (Sen, 1999). This is not all, however, for it is not only the concept of democracy that has been considered to have universal reach but increasingly also the *meaning* of the concept has been universalised. While liberal democracy has played an important role in democracy promotion throughout the 20th century (Smith, 1994), this model, it seems, has become even more pronounced, if not hegemonic, in the post-Cold War era. When democracy is called for it is overwhelmingly a liberal democratic model of democracy that is advocated. What this means is that democracy promotion is seen to entail the promotion of free and fair elections, alongside

guarantees of individual and minority rights, and the rule of law. The liberal model also often goes hand in hand with the encouragement of liberal cultural values in civil society, such as belief in inviolability of freedoms and rights of the individual and toleration of a plurality of view points. It has often also been attached to the encouragement of liberal capitalist markets.

The focus on promotion of a liberal democratic model is most evident in US democracy promotion (National Endowment for Democracy, 2009; State Department, 2009; Obama, 2006) but the prioritisation of liberal ideals is also evident in EU's approach, which is, while rhetorically more open, still liberal democratic in its core (European Commission, 2006). Liberal democratic ideas about democracy are also pre-dominant, albeit in less regimented ways, in many NGO actors' and in the UN's conceptions of democracy (Bowden and Charlesworth, 2009). A liberal democratic discourse then is almost universal in debates on democracy promotion and democratisation. This has entailed that alternatives to liberal democracy have not featured in mainstream democracy promotion practices, alternatives such as the social democratic model, participatory models, radical democratic models, cosmopolitan models, let alone Islamist and Confucian conceptions of democracy. As Philippe Schmitter (1995: 16) has powerfully stated: 'the one thing that has been almost completely absent from the 50 or so cases of attempted democratization since 1974 is experimentation beyond the basic institutions of liberal democracy'.

The hegemony of the liberal democratic view of democracy has gone curiously unchallenged in the post-Cold War world, even among the political left (Mathieson and Youngs, 2006). The lack of challenge to it in the policy sphere can be explained by the general ideological dominance of liberalism in the post-Cold War world politics and the general loss of confidence in the left and other alternatives following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Yet, it

is somewhat surprising that this dominance is so readily reproduced in the academic study of democratisation and democracy promotion. One would expect the academic literature on democratisation and democracy promotion to be well aware of the contestability of the idea of democracy in political theory, in history of international relations, and in the lived experiences of societies around the world. Curiously, however, outside some important and powerful critiques of liberal democracy promotion by a selection of neo-Gramscians (Robinson, 1996; Gills, Rocamora and Wilson, 1993), a few texts that have examined historical contestation over the meaning of democracy (e.g. Whitehead, 1986), and selected books examining the contested nature of liberal democracy in different regional contexts (Bell, 2006; Sadiki, 2004, Sousa Santos, 2005), in the majority of mainstream democratisation and democracy promotion literature relatively little real discussion over the contestability of the notion and the significance of such contestability for democracy promotion has been evident.

This was especially the case with the so-called ‘triumphalist’ democratisation researchers in the early 1990s. Developing arguments that chimed with Francis Fukuyama’s (1992) end of history thesis, many researchers in democratisation studies considered the end of the Cold War to have killed off the alternatives to liberal democracy. For example, Marc Plattner (1993: 30), one of the key post-Cold War democratisation scholars, argued that liberal democracies are the ‘only true and fully modern societies’: they are the only viable societal model left, for only they are compatible with economic success and rapidly integrating information-intensive world economy. Plattner argued that the death of the Leninist system has precipitated a move ‘closer to the US model’, a liberal democratic model *par excellence*, everywhere in the world (Plattner, 1993: 29).

Yet, it is not such ‘triumphalist’ acceptance of liberal democracy that is the main problem today. Indeed, liberal triumphalism has been on the back foot in recent years. Rather more problematic today is the fact that a liberal democratic discourse now forms an implicit ‘default’ position on debate on democratisation and democracy promotion. Today, two main strands of thinking on the meaning of democracy can be detected in the literature: in one democracy is perceived as a political system that meets particular ‘electoral’ and ‘procedural’ criteria, in the other democratisation is seen to primarily require the development of correct democratic ‘cultural’ elements in societies. Yet, both the ‘procedural’ and the ‘cultural’ perspectives still work within the confines of a distinctly liberal democratic background discourse. The specifically liberal democratic nature of the current engagements with democratisation and democracy promotion may not be immediately obvious to the casual observer, and indeed may strike many as surprising precisely because of the historical contestation that has surrounded democracy. It is for this reason that the current literature and the different routes to a specifically liberal democratic position on democracy deserve to be analysed in some detail.

Liberal democracy as procedural democracy

Liberal democratic thought has a long and interesting history, which we cannot here examine in any detail. One of the interesting things to note about liberal democratic thought is, however, that in the 20th century it has entailed the narrowing down of the meaning of the idea of democracy. Indeed, an intentionally delimited ‘*proceduralist*’ conception of liberal democracy has had a key role to play in 20th century liberal democratic thought.² This procedural model of liberal democracy has been closely associated with a move away from earlier ‘normative’ conceptions of democracy (and of liberal democracy) towards ‘empirical

democratic theory', which has sought to define and study democracy in a clearly measurable manner, as a set of procedures related primarily, although not exclusively, to electoral mechanisms.

The turn towards the acceptance of a 'procedural' liberal definition of democracy started with Joseph Schumpeter (1950 [1946]). Schumpeter writing in the 1940s was concerned to avoid vague and utopian images of democracy in favour of delineating a conception of democracy with clear criteria for analysis of really existing democratic systems. He provided one by defining democracy precisely but narrowly - as a governance mechanism for electing leaders. Democracy, instead of being associated with any direct or maximal forms of democratic 'rule by the people', was simply seen as 'the election of the men who are to do the deciding' (Schumpeter, 1950 [1946]: 296). This view of democracy was liberal in an important but minimal sense – in that each individual had the right to vote and to stand for elections and thereby seek to defend their interests in the political system.

This narrow procedural conception of democracy was later on famously elaborated and expanded on by Robert Dahl, whose work on polyarchy now sets the core parameters of the empirical study of democracy. Dahl set out clear criteria, in terms of procedural elements, for what constitutes a polyarchy, his preferred term for the form of rule characteristic of modern Western states. Polyarchies for Dahl consisted of several core elements: constitutionally elected officials in government, frequent and fairly conducted elections, voting rights for practically all adults and the right to stand for elections, almost universal right to express oneself without the threat of violence, the right to seek alternative sources of information and, freedom to form associations and organisations, including parties, and inclusive citizenship (2000: 85-6). Polyarchies, thus defined, were seen to consist of a set of democratic

institutional and procedural elements of governance; not in vague notions such as ‘democratic society’ or ‘sovereignty of the people’, invoked by classical theorists of democracy from Tocqueville to the Marxists.

Dahl’s polyarchic criteria have become hugely influential as a way of approaching ‘democracy’ in political science and IR. They have provided clear empirical criteria for the study of democracy, even if authors have sometimes added or tweaked some of these criteria (Schmitter and Karl, 1993). The procedural notion of democracy, it should also be noted, has often gone hand in hand with a ‘sectorally narrow’ view of democracy, whereby democracy is associated not only with democratic procedures but also with a narrow sector of social life, the ‘political’ or ‘public’ life (Held, 1996: 98). This harks back to Schumpeter’s and Dahl’s emphasis on separation of the spheres of the economic and the political. Democracy entails procedures for the establishment of a specific kind of *political* equality (Dahl, 2000: 37). Also, procedural democracy is interesting in that, while it is in favour of mass representation, it is not directly interested in active participation of citizens in decision-making or debate but assumes a fairly passive citizenry (Schmitter, 1995: 18).

In democratisation literature, perhaps the best example of a proceduralist analysis of democratisation is Samuel Huntington’s *Third Wave*, one of the key contributions to analysis of democratisation in the early 1990s. Huntington works deliberately with a fairly narrow procedural conception of democracy. He does so because he recognises that to derive meaning of democracy from either the ‘sources of authority’ or ‘purposes served by government’ inevitably raises huge definitional problems and debates regarding the ‘true’ meaning and purpose of democracy. To avoid this contestation, Huntington, drawing on Schumpeter, advances a procedural definition consisting of ‘institutional arrangements for

arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote'(Schumpeter quoted in Huntington, 1990: 6-7). In defining democracy he acknowledges also the two key aspects of democracy set forth by Dahl, contestation and electoral participation, and defines democracy as system of representational selection through fair, honest and periodic election in which candidates freely compete for votes and in which 'virtually all' of the adult population is eligible to vote (Huntington, 1990: 6-7). Democratisation for him then is 'the replacement of a government that was not chosen [through elections] by one that is elected in a free open and fair election' (Huntington, 1990: 9).

This Schumpeterian-Dahlian definition of democracy is the most precise definition of democracy for Huntington and avoids the 'sweeping discussions of democracy in terms of normative theory' (Huntington, 1990: 6-7). While he recognises that certain weaknesses may arise from the narrow definition of democracy, he is adamant that 'fuzzy norms do not yield useful analysis' (Huntington, 1990: 9). Indeed, what is interesting is that Huntington finds the past contestability of the idea of democracy in political theory to be precisely the problem. We should move away from the contested normative debate on democracy towards a narrow but commonly agreed upon definition of democracy. Huntington thinks that the Schumpeterian and Dahlian framework allows us to move away from the indeterminate and long-running debate over democracy's meaning towards serious study of empirical democratisation 'out there'. Indeed, he goes as far as to say that the debate over the meaning of the idea of democracy is over: 'by 1970s the debate was over, and Schumpeter had won' (Huntington, 1990: 6-7).

Many democratisation researchers have echoed Huntington's reasoning in defending a minimal procedural liberal democratic form of governance as the standard bearer in contemporary politics (see e.g. Przeworski, 1991; Barro, 1999).³ Even when variations in the 'extent of democracy' in different contexts are discussed a procedural liberal model sets the standard against which such variation is measured. For example, the 'democracy with adjectives' debate has taken place within a Dahlian/Schumpeterian framework. While anything from neo-patrimonial to authoritarian and proto-democratic states have been identified in the world – indeed up to 50 different subtypes have been identified – what is interesting about this 'adjectives debate' is that it still works on the basis of a liberal background model and indeed a particularly narrow procedural liberal background model (Collier and Levitsky, 1997: 434). The sub-types approach presumes the liberal democratic procedural model as the 'ideal type' that transition aims for and in relation to which sub-types are delineated.

A procedural liberal democratic notion of democracy has set the terms of debate in 20th century political science and its study of democratisation. Yet, it is important to note that the proceduralist positions on democracy have been much criticised in recent years.

Liberal democracy and culture: expanding the liberal model

Indeed, while proceduralism still has its advocates, it is important to note that many scholars have started to pay significant attention to the cultural contexts of democratic politics, over the narrow focus on procedural elements. The shift away from the narrowly procedural democratic model has been precipitated by an increased awareness of the problems that persist in many states despite the increase in 'electoral democracy'. Zakaria (1997) famously

argued that electoral ‘illiberal’ democracies were on the rise in world politics. Zakaria argued that instead of conceiving liberal democracy simply in terms of electoral proceduralism there had to be more conscious realisation amongst researchers of the importance of advocating constitutional liberalism, and the values that go with that, in international politics. As Zakaria (1997) argues: ‘the international community and the United States must end their obsession with balloting and promote the gradual liberalization of societies’. This argument for a *more extensively liberal* democracy over electoral democracy has entailed an important shift in emphasis in debates on democracy promotion: from obsession with procedural facets to encouragement of liberal rights, values and active civil society participation. Indeed, as Chandler (2000: 9) argues, ‘culture is now key’.

Larry Diamond (1993, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2008) one the leading researchers on democratisation and democracy promotion, is one key scholar who has tried to move away from narrow proceduralism towards taking into account of political culture and varieties in local democratic forms. Emphasis on electoral democracy, he recognises, ‘masks a much more variegated picture’ with regard to the success of democracy (2000: 15). We must also shift emphasis from analysis of mere democratic transitions (institutionally) to ‘democratic consolidation’ (Diamond, 1999; 2000) – this is because ‘consolidation involves a second dimension...an attitudinal dimension’ (Gunther et al quoted in Chandler, 2000: 12). Diamond, emphasises the importance of moving away from electoralism towards taking into account of developments in civic pluralism and individual and group rights because ‘all of these amount to a higher standard and a deeper phenomenon, what may be termed ‘liberal democracy’ (Diamond, 2000: 17). It follows that promotion of liberal democratic values in ‘civil society’ has become a key aspect of democracy promotion.⁴

Diamond's emphasis on how his civil society approach leads to 'a higher' form of liberal democracy is telling in that it shows that, while there has been a shift in emphasis in analysing democracy, there has not been a shift in the background model of democracy. While Diamond looks away from the electoral-proceduralist liberal democratic model, which he sees as problematic in important senses, he has turned to a liberal-cultural(-proceduralist⁵) model instead. The critique of electoralism and proceduralism has not necessitated rethinking the overall model of democracy in any fundamental sense: the liberal democracy and its value priorities (liberty of the individual, representation, political equality, rights) still serve as the default position within which problems of consolidation are tackled (Jahn, 2005).

This can be seen in the work of many other scholars too. For example, Nagel and Mahr, despite first recognising the need to accept 'greater openness to greater variation with the concept of democracy' and the need for much more sophistication in dealing with differential regional contexts in democratisation (1999: 12), bolster the claim that liberal democracy provides the key to democratisation in contemporary politics. Indeed, their analysis of 'changing concepts of democratisation' does not seem to entail analysis of radically different conceptions of democracy, but rather acceptance of differential paths and time-sequencing of policies in (liberal) democratisation (1999: 62-3). While a richer liberal cultural model today provides an important corrective to the procedural model, liberal democratic thought and values still provide the backdrop for the discussion.

Contestability within the liberal model

Many democratisation theorists have opted, rather unquestioningly, for the liberal definition of democracy. But lest we go too far in our attack on the current field, we must note that there

are a few authors that have explicitly raised the issue of contestability of the idea of democracy in their studies – authors such as Schmitter and Karl, Burnell and Whitehead. These authors deserve close examination.

Schmitter and Karl's famous article on the meaning of democracy is perhaps the best reference point in mainstream democratisation studies reflecting on the potentially varied meanings that the idea of democracy can take. Powerfully, and unusually for the democratisation literature, Schmitter and Karl (1993: 40) argue that democracy can take various meanings and institutional forms, and also that its meaning is contingent upon socio-economic conditions and state practices. Indeed, they warn that 'there is no one form of democracy and that Americans should be careful not to identify the concept of democracy too closely with their own institutions' (summarised in Diamond and Plattner, 1993: xi). They also, very provocatively, highlight that different kinds of democracy are not more or less democratic than each other but *democratic in different ways* (Schmitter and Karl, 1993: 41). This claim opens up the possibility that there are a variety of qualitatively different models of democracy available to us, none of which can be decisively proved correct or incorrect.

Despite making an important 'pluralising' opening, Schmitter and Karl, however, quickly retreat in their argumentation. They do so by identifying a 'welcome convergence towards a common definition of democracy' (Schmitter and Karl, 39). There is for them now a 'remarkable consensus on minimal conditions that polity must meet in order to merit the prestigious appellation of 'democratic' (Schmitter and Karl, 1993: 39). These minimal conditions are those referred to by Dahl (Schmitter and Karl, 1993: 44). Indeed, it is the procedural definition that Schmitter and Karl return to, although they add some qualifications to it in order to avoid the problems of 'electoralism'. In essence, for Schmitter and Karl

(1993: 40) democracy is ‘a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens acting directly through the competition and co-operation of their elected representatives’. Although they recognise that there can be variations in the functioning of liberal democracies, the liberal model is still nowadays the consensus model that we should work with. Socialist or radical democratic models outside this consensus are then sidestepped.

This return to liberal democracy is also evident in Peter Burnell’s work on democracy promotion. Burnell openly recognises that ‘democracy is an essentially contested concept’ (2000: 22). Burnell recognises also the limitations in the liberal conception of democracy advocated in the world system and the existence of alternatives to it.

[T]he notions of democracy that lie at the centre of much democracy assistance, while not all being identical, occupy a limited range. First, they are a political construct. Ideas of social democracy and economic democracy are excluded. Second, they are informed by individualism rather than by expressly communitarian notions of society. Third, although many of the formulations specify a range of freedoms and other qualities going well beyond mere electoralism and they should not be confused with ‘illiberal’ democracy, even so there are few concessions made to the most radical models of participatory democracy....[From a non-liberal perspective] much, perhaps all of contemporary democracy assistance can look very inadequate – more akin to rearranging deckchairs on the Titanic than what has been called ‘tinkering around the edges’ (Burnell, 2000: 4, 23).

Yet, Burnell continues to be attracted to the limited kinds of democracy promotion that arise from the ‘lowest common denominator’ liberal-procedural views. Also, he explicitly states that it would be quite irresponsible for democracy promoters to start promoting models of democracy in target states that ‘are judged too risky to entertain at home’ (2000: 4). In the end Burnell then too comes to agree with the liberal-democratic consensus view (2000: 28).

Laurence Whitehead does so too, despite the fact that he has powerfully highlighted the differences between the American procedural/legalist and European ‘socialist’ approaches to democracy during the Cold War (Whitehead, 1986), and despite his advocacy of a ‘floating but anchored’ concept of democracy (Whitehead, 2002: 6, 7). Although Whitehead recognises that the liberal model is not self-evident, conceptually or historically - it is merely a model on which there is inter-subjective consensus at a specific time in history (2002: 15) - interestingly, Whitehead does not seek to challenge the existing inter-subjective consensus on the liberal democratic model. He argues that his concern is with ‘really existing democracies’ rather than with ‘one or more idealized variants of a ‘possible’ democracy (2002: 9) and that

contingently and for the present period [the liberal model] provides a rather coherent and broad-based exposition of a predominant view. The liberal model therefore provides the baseline for the contemporary debates about democratization which occupy the rest of this volume (Whitehead, 2002: 26).

While an understandable move, this is also an important decision, for in failing to explore meanings of democracy beyond the liberal model, not only are we assuming and reproducing an inter-subjective consensus on this model, but also in so doing we run the risk of ‘not seeing’ the kinds of non-liberal democratic or extra-liberal democratic models that might

already exist. What about the advocates of radical democracy in the World Social Forum? What about the development activists that wish to reclaim a social rather than liberal democratic form of democracy in Africa? Where do these actors and their understandings of democracy fit in?

The liberal democratic model has been a very powerful model in current democratisation and democracy promotion field, drawing within its remit also those explicitly seeking to open up questions of contestability in the field. However, this model is not a neutral model of democracy as will be seen and has moreover deterred deep-level engagements with the contestability of the idea of democracy. We need to then consider what a more adequate treatment of essential contestability might mean.

Democracy and essential contestability

The notion of democracy has divided views over two thousand years: both regarding whether it is desirable and over what it means. It is noteworthy that in political theory circles democracy has for a long time been treated as an ‘essentially contested’ concept (Gallie, 1964), a fact acknowledged, if briefly and rather superficially, by select democratisation and democracy promotion scholars (Burnell, 2000: 22; Grugel, 2002: 4; Whitehead, 2002: 14). But what does essential contestability of democracy mean exactly?

Essential contestability

The idea of essential contestability generally refers to the idea that a concept can take on a variety of different meanings at any given time (Whitehead, 2002: 14) or, as Gallie argued

‘essentially contested concepts are such that their criteria of correct application are multiple, evaluative, and in no settled relation of priority with one another’ (paraphrased in Gray (1977: 332). Essential contestability means, not only that concepts are contested in a historical sense, but that in principle it is impossible to conclusively decide on the correct application of the concept (Gray, 1977: 338). It is also important to note that ‘an essentially contested concept is a concept such that any use of it in a social or political context presupposes a specific understanding of a whole range of other contextually related concepts whose proper uses are no less disputed and which lock together so as to compose a single, identifiable conceptual framework’ (Gray, 1977: 332). Essentially contested concepts then are contested not in isolation but within and between wider value and thought systems.

It is important to note that essential contestability is a challenging notion, not to be taken lightly. Why? First, we have to recognise that the essential contestability of social and political concepts is a deep challenge to the way in which we use concepts to describe the world. Essential contestability means that we cannot, in a simple and direct sense, use concepts simply to ‘refer’ to, categorise and explain the world out there. Not only can our understandings of a concept, be it globalisation or democracy, be in disjuncture with the interpretation of the same notion by different social actors, but also we must recognise that how we decide to conceptualise an idea is a deeply political, normative and ideological matter. All conceptual definitions are bound up with complex political, ethical and ideological lines of contestation. It follows from this that all theories of a concept that is essential contestable are implicated in normative and political power relations and positions: indeed, ‘in virtue of the essential contestability of its constitutive concepts, any kind of social theory is a form of moral and political practice’ (Gray, 1983: 77).

We also must recognise that essential contestability of concepts is an issue closely related to the question of *theoretical pluralism*. Theoretical pluralism refers to a situation where multiple theoretical view points can be had about the world around us. There is then no one obvious objective truth about the world, but a variety of truth claims can be maintained. Essential contestability then points us towards a critique of ‘positivist’ objective knowledge and towards the need to recognise the plurality of view points from which people ‘see’ and ‘speak about’ the world.

It is important to note however that, while a deeply challenging idea, contrary to what is often assumed, acceptance of essential contestability of concepts need not mean that we have to adopt a relativistic position on concepts' ability to capture the world – that all conceptual interpretations or theories are as good each other. Indeed, if we are to believe John Gray it is *impossible* to base essential contestability thesis on radical relativism for 'unless divergent theories or world-views have something in common, their constituent concepts cannot be "contested", even though their proponents are in conflict' (Gray, 1977: 341-2). Indeed, various constructive ways can and have been developed to deal with the question of essential contestability and the question of theoretical pluralism (Harding, 1986; Connolly, 1995).

The deep challenges posed by the essential contestability idea are important to consider in relation to many social and political concepts – from terrorism to globalisation. They are especially important to consider in debates about democracy, I would argue, one of central and most widely accepted essentially contested concepts. But what would taking seriously the essential contestability of democracy mean for how we should understand or approach debates on democracy among democratisation and democracy promotion scholars? But what would taking seriously the essential contestability of democracy mean for how we should understand or approach debates on democracy among democratisation and democracy promotion scholars?

Pluralising and contextualising debate on 'democracy'

Many democratisation and democracy promotion scholars, as we have seen, make fleeting references to the essential contestability of the idea of democracy. Diamond (2008: 21) for example powerfully notes that '[d]efining democracy is a bit like interpreting the Talmud (or any religious text): ask a room of rabbis (or political scientists) for the meaning, and you are likely to get at least eleven different answers'. Nevertheless, the essential contestability of democracy is treated lightly by many authors, including Diamond: authors tend to merely refer to democracy's contestability before speedily returning to the liberal consensus view of democracy. I argue here that acceptance of the essential contestability of democracy, if taken seriously, necessitates not just that we refer to past contestation over democracy, or recognise contestation within the liberal model, but that we seriously tackle two issues: the fact that a real *plurality* of interpretations might exist over what democracy means (beyond the liberal democratic canon too) and that conceptions of democracy arise from and are evoked within various different *contextual* settings.

First, it is important to recognise that if we take essential contestability seriously we must recognise that there are variations in conceptions of democracy, and not only within the liberal model but also beyond it. Classical democratic theory literature is helpful here for it has specified a variety of direct and indirect, participatory and representational, communitarian and cosmopolitan, narrowly political and more widely economic models of democracy, liberal and non- or extra-liberal models of democracy. The main modern 'models' of democracy that are often recognised in democratic theory are:

- 1) the liberal representational model, which puts emphasis on defence of individual freedoms (to act according to their interests/wishes; this is expressed for example in their right to vote freely), representational democratic structures (taking the form of

parliamentary systems) and minimal (if effective) state, which safeguards the sphere of personal autonomy of citizens.⁶

- 2) the Marxist/socialist ‘delegative’ model, which emphasises substantive (rather than merely formal) democracy resulting from equalisation of social and economic inequalities, as well as directly democratic and immediately revocable delegative form of democratic institutions (see e.g. Mayo, 1955); and
- 3) the social democratic model, which works with some liberal democratic structures and procedures, but adds to them an emphasis on social solidarity and development of institutional structures for democratic control over economic processes, notable over general wage levels (Tilton, 1991).

Beyond these ‘standard models’, moreover, a whole range of further models of democracy have been envisaged, notably:

- 4) participatory democracy, which challenges the hierarchical, infrequent and what is perceived as elitist forms of representation in liberal democratic systems and which puts emphasis on citizen empowerment and active participation in the civil society, the work place, as well as in public decision making (Pateman, 1970; Barber, 2003);
- 5) radical democracy, which emphasises non-hierarchical and non-state-based agonistic forms of democratic politics, focused often around social movement interactions (rather than party politics) (see e.g. Laclau and Mouffe, 1985);
- 6) deliberative democracy, which emphasises the importance of generating more deliberative mechanisms in modern democratic systems, thus generating not only a greater role for citizens in democratic governance but also more effective and responsive forms of democratic state (Bohman, 1997; Warren, 2008); and

- 7) the cosmopolitan models of democracy, which emphasise the need, through various innovative mechanisms including global political parties and global forms of taxation, to democratise politics globally as a pre-condition to any meaningful sense of democracy within states (Patomäki and Teivainen, 2004).

Beyond these models, various arguments for feminist, green and even Islamist and Confucian ideas of democracy have been made (see e.g. Pateman, 1989; Humphrey, 2007; Sadiki, 2004 and Bell, 2007).

For the sake of space we cannot here examine all these models in detail: to gain a more detailed understanding of these models one should turn to their advocates or a number of excellent texts reviewing a selection of them, for example McPherson's (1966, 1977) or David Held's (1996) works. What is crucial for us to note, however, is that different models have significantly diverging views of how society is structured, how democracies function, and also of the normative justifications for democracy.

To start with, models of democracy tend to understand society and power relations within it very differently. For example, liberal democrats tend to adopt a pluralist approach to political power, seeing it widely dispersed in society and with democracy focus on equalising power relations between individuals in the formal sphere of the political system only. Socialists and participatory democrats, however, explicitly aim to democratise socio-economic power relations beyond the sphere of 'public politics' as this is seen as the crucial site of power in society. Radical democrats on the other hand perceive power as a fluid notion, which is why their perception of democratic politics too is fluid and 'performative', rather than institutionally entrenched. Cosmopolitans on the other hand perceive certain structural forms

of power relations to be so globally entrenched that any attempt to tackle them on merely state level will leave most crucial undemocratic mechanisms (such as global economic system) intact. Democrats from different theoretical traditions focus on different aspects of society and literally ‘see’ different kinds of power relations in it.

It follows that models of democracy also envision very different institutional forms as central to ‘democracy’. For example, a liberal model highlights party systems and elected representative institutions as the key mode and site of democratic governance. Socialists, perceiving electoral democracy in a bourgeois capitalist state as inherently compromised, look to delegative systems of democracy premised on equalisation of income and workloads. Participatory democrats on the other hand seek to build direct and indirect forms of participation into everyday social interactions in the workplace, in the schools or in the community. They emphasise democracy on multiple levels, rather than simply on formal electoral-representative levels. Radical democrats look to build democracy *in* the civil society through proliferation of social movements⁷, while deliberative democrats look to new forms of public deliberation (such as citizen assemblies) as ways of re-activating democratic participation within democratic states. The institutional focal points of different types of democrats can vary radically.

The theories of democracy also highlight different sets of values in relation to each other, or sometimes the same values but in different priority orders. For example, while the liberal model highlights values of political equality, freedom from arbitrary power and consensus building, the Marxist and social democratic models highlight values of economic equality and justice and conflicts of interests between classes, while participatory democrats highlight participation and active interaction of humans as a key aim of democracy. Islamic and

Confucian models of democracy on the other hand prioritise respect for communal values and challenge secular individualist focus on protection of individuals' interests. There are then deep 'social theoretical', institutional and also value differences of emphasis between the alternative models of democracy.

Interestingly, the 'alternative' models of democracy all tend to be critical of the liberal model, albeit for different reasons: some because of the perceived elitist inclinations of a model that relies heavily on elections (every four or six years) as the key form of 'democratic participation', others because of its tendencies to leave economic and social inequalities intact, others yet for its statist focus. Yet, it is important to note that the relationship between the alternative models and liberal democracy is complex, for few critics of liberal democracy perceive themselves as absolutely hostile to the liberal democratic model. Most critics see some value in the liberal democratic model, even if they argue that it is incomplete or biased in defence of certain interests. Indeed, most alternative models seek to complement, re-radicalise, or fill the gaps of liberal democracy. Alternative models then, while critical of the liberal democratic approach and while clearly not reducible to it, have a complex and often complementary relationship with liberal democratic thought.

Discussion of alternative models of democracy must inevitably remain superficial here for reasons of space, and is the subject of the author's work elsewhere. Yet, the key point to be emphasised here is that a variety of distinct models of democracy have been argued for and developed in democratic theory literature and, given this, we should take seriously the contention that alternative non- or extra-liberal models do exist. If we are to take essential contestability seriously, we should not ignore these alternatives, or simply seek to reduce

them to variations of the liberal model. We need to give them, and the social and political struggles they seek to speak to and in some cases evoke, a hearing on their own grounds.

Second, it should be noted that essential contestability, if taken seriously, also seems to entail that we take seriously the differences in social, political and normative contexts from within which models of democracy arise. Indeed, essential contestability leads us towards recognition not only of the plurality but also of the *contextuality* of conceptions of democracy. Social democracy, feminist democracy, Islamist democracy, and even liberal democracy, arise from and are evoked in particular settings and speak to specific political struggles and interests. While models of democracy are not necessarily exclusively representative of specific groups or historical contexts, they should not be treated as abstract, universal or a-contextual either.

Various examples that highlight the contextuality of conceptions of democracy could be discussed here but I will focus here on Larbi Sadiki's (2004) work on democracy in Middle East. This illustrates well the importance of recognising contextuality as well as plurality of models. Sadiki points out that the problem in the Middle East is not that this region is incapable of living up to the standards of the Western conceptions of liberal democracy, but rather that the Western liberal view of democracy is not able to take account of the meanings attached to democracy in the Middle East (Sadiki, 2004: 10). Sadiki (2004: 4) then argues that just because there is no democracy in the Western sense in the Middle East this does not mean that 'democracy carries no meanings for Arab Middle Easterners'. Democracy, on the contrary, is a widely shared ideal for many people in the region. Yet, it has different meanings than in the West and moreover various discourses and counter-discourses of

democracy are evident in the region. Sadiki moves to radically contextualise as well as pluralise our understandings of democracy in the Middle East.

Sadiki, as well as Daniel Bell (2006) who has contextualised the idea of democracy in Chinese context, are sceptical of the singular universalistic liberal notion of democracy. For them the concept's meaning is quite literally negotiated and understood in different ways in the context of different cultural, social and economic discourses and social systems. This insight is important because it emphasises that models of democracy are tied in crucial ways to social and political contexts and can also represent specific social and political experiences, positions, and power relations.

We have here sought to remind ourselves of the meaning of essential contestability and have explored what it might mean in relation to conceptions of democracy, arguing that it seems to lead us towards the recognition of the plurality and contextuality of conceptions of democracy. But why exactly should democratisation and democracy promotion researchers, or democracy promotion agencies, need to take into account the contestability of democracy?

Problems and prospects in the promotion of an essentially contested concept

Many democracy promotion researchers have been rather satisfied with the consensus that has developed on the idea of liberal democracy since the 1990s, for it has removed many of the divisive debates characteristic of debates on democracy during the Cold War (see e.g. Smith, 1994: 13; Schmitter and Karl, 1993). It follows that it is often concluded that the consensus on the liberal model need not and should not be questioned, even if policies of liberal democracy promotion should continually be tweaked and improved. This, I argue is a

wrong, and too easy a conclusion to draw. I argue here that there are important reasons – theoretical, normative, political and practical – to take seriously the essential contestability of the idea of democracy.

Reasons to consider pluralisation and contextualisation of models of democracy promoted

There are, in my view, five important reasons to recognise the contestability of democracy, and hence pluralisation and contextualisation of conceptions of democracy, in current democratisation and democracy promotion debates.

The first reason is, quite simply, that to not do so *would mean ignoring much of democratic theory from the last two centuries*. Democratic theorists have taken essential contestability of democracy to be one of the most basic and crucial starting points in their analysis. Given that essential contestability of democracy has been a very broadly accepted notion in democratic theory, and given that as a result libraries of books, volumes and articles, have been written about contending conceptions of democracy, it would be somewhat curious for researchers and practitioners of democracy promotion to completely ignore this. While of course there is nothing self-evidently correct or important about academic research into democracy and its variations, and while not all ‘alternative democratic models’ envisioned in democratic theory are necessarily practicable, surely the insights of democratic theory should at least be examined, even if they are then discarded.

However, taking account of the idea of essential contestability does not simply hang on such an academic argument. Important normative and political questions are also tied to this notion. Indeed, the second reason for recognition of democracy’s contestability is that it is *normatively and politically important to democratise the debate on democracy* in today’s

context. As Larbi Sadiki (2004) and Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2005) have also argued, democracy promoters must resist the temptation to think that Western actors or organisations hold superior ‘universal’ ‘correct’ definitions of democracy, while other actors’, say socialists’ or Islamists’ views on democracy are somehow inadequate, parochial or out-dated. If we take ‘listening to different perspectives’ to be a key democratic value (this being a value that many liberals, socialists and even radical democrats would appreciate) then hearing and explicitly encouraging a plurality of views on the meaning of democracy in academic and policy debates, would seem to be desirable. This includes listening to alternatives from outside of the liberal democratic consensus and not assuming that all views are simply reducible to liberal democratic ideals and priorities. While simply accepting that all views of democracy are equally valid would be problematic (see section to follow), it would seem in principle democratic to ensure that the currently dominant liberal democratic consensus does not silence the non- and extra-liberal perspectives.

Ensuring that a plurality of views is heard seems especially important for debates about a concept such as democracy, because this concept is continuously used to justify actions and policies in world politics, with important political, economic and social consequences for many and varied groups of people, and because, simultaneously, the kinds democracy that are advocated by social actors, whether it be liberal democracy promoters, feminist NGOs, socialist trade unions, or Middle Eastern democratisers, are also tied in with their social experiences, structural positions and political struggles or projects. To fail to listen to other conceptions of democracy is to run the risk of failing to listen or to understand the political struggles and projects embedded in calls for particular forms of democracy. Recognising plurality and contextuality of conceptions of democracy reminds us not to assume a dictatorial perspective on debate on democracy and also points us to consider the inherent

biases and weaknesses that may inhere in the positions we ourselves hold. This does not mean that ‘anything goes’ or that we cannot disagree with invocations of other conceptions of democracy. But it does mean that democratisation and democracy promotion scholars should consider ways in which they can at least promote listening to alternatives rather than reproducing the tendency to dictate what constitutes a ‘correct’ (liberal) form of democratisation.

This emphasis on contestability and pluralist of views on democracy flies in the face of the call for ‘consensus’ on democracy advocated by many liberal and conservative democracy promoters. While there is a definite attraction to the consensus model view of democracy (this is discussed later), it should be noted that this position, at least normatively, is not *self-evident*. The consensus model approach is one that, while facilitating concerted action by organisations, also shuts down debate on those models that do not fit the consensus and hence silences the views of those whose political ideals reach beyond the lowest common denominator consensus. Indeed, it should be noted that the consensus view is premised on particular hierarchy of democratic values: it highlights the values of efficiency, consensus and order over other democratic values such as difference, debate and antagonism (Mouffe, 2005).

The third reason to consider the pluralisation and contextualisation of models of democracy is that such a move allows us to recognise *variation in the meaning and scope of democratic politics*. It is important to understand that democracy can exist and be appreciated *in very different senses* by social actors and can also exist, and be ‘promoted’ in *different spheres* of social life. Liberal procedural democracy is one face of democracy but it has many other, often un-noted, faces, within and between polities. Forms of democracy can also be practised

in local communities, work places, or in global civil society movements and through a variety of means, including voting but also delegation, consensus-building methods and deliberation. Importantly, not all actors necessarily prioritise the liberal sense of democracy: for some development actors social democracy is not a secondary ‘add-on’ to liberal democracy and for some green NGOs local and global forms of participatory democracy are more important than passive liberal citizenship rights. The dominance of the singular liberal view of democracy can dangerously hide this plurality of senses of democracy.

Pluralisation of ideas on democracy brings home that radically different conceptions or models of democracy can complement, co-exist and work across different terrains of social life in complex ways. Indeed, it is important to note that models of democracy are not necessarily mutually exclusive. A liberal and a radical model of democracy for example are not necessarily in contradiction with each other. Models of democracy can also apply to different social terrains: while the liberal democratic and the classical social democracy models are overwhelmingly state-centred, other models reach beyond and below the traditional state-focus, allowing not only different senses of democratic practice but different terrains of democratic practice to be worked with. Radical democracy for example looks below the state level representational democracy and calls for agonistic politics between individual and social groups across state borders or classical party system lines (Laclau and Mouffe, 1986; Mouffe, 2005). Cosmopolitan models of democracy too explicitly expand the scope, instruments and methods of democratic governance to the inter- and transnational sphere, this necessitating movement away from classical liberal democratic procedures and identity politics. Pluralising and contextualising conceptions of democracy allows democratisation and democracy promotion researchers, and hence perhaps also practitioners, to keep open the possibility that democracy can exist, and may perhaps be promoted, not just

on liberal (procedural or cultural) lines within states but in a plurality of senses, in different ways and in different spheres of social life. Not only does this move us away from prioritising of liberal type of state-centered democracy as the end of point of democratisation but it also arguably potentially enables a wider range of actors to be incorporated into democratisation agenda.

Fourth, pluralisation and contextualisation of models of democracy may be important because it allows democratisation researchers to better *understand and deal with problems in current democracy promotion*, notably, why certain groups of people might contest the approaches to democratisation that western IGOs and NGOs advocate. Many development theorists and analysts of democratisation in Eastern Europe for example have highlighted that the democracy promotion guided through in these contexts has missed out on the fact that the target populations themselves have been critical of the kinds of liberal democracy advocated in their name and have in fact envisioned the type of democracy they are after quite differently from the current democracy promotion guidance (Abrahamsen, 2000; Chandler, 2000; Sadiki, 2004; Bell, 2006). Recognising that the ‘democracy’ in democracy promotion might be essentially contested is an important point to be appreciated in allowing scholars and practitioners in the field to deal with the kinds of calls for alternative conceptions of democracy that we see in Africa, Eastern Europe, Asia or Middle East, where not just democracy but alternative ‘non-liberal democratic’ or ‘extra-liberal democratic’ models of democracy are proposed. Looking at the world through the liberal lenses, democracy promoters can too easily side-step such calls. Instead of facing with discomfort the developing states’ calls for social democracy, Middle Easterner’s calls for Islamist democracy, or African NGOs’ calls for radical participatory or green democracy, perhaps democratisation researchers, and democracy promoters, should start by opening their eyes to

quite legitimate variation in views on democracy. This would be normatively desirable but also practically desirable in allowing productive engagement to emerge between critical (or even hostile) target publics and democracy promoters. It is important to remember that those actors that turn to alternative models do so for a reason: often because the liberal democratic ideas are seen as incapable of addressing their concerns (for example, deep-seated structural gender inequality, economic injustice or cultural disempowerment). For democracy promoters to fail to listen to alternative non- and extra-liberal perceptions of democracy is to run the risk of failing to understand the wider political struggles that surround the invocation of these conceptions. As I will discuss in the next section, listening to plurality of views on democracy is of course difficult in practice, yet it can facilitate imagining more effective policies on the ground.

Beyond the theoretical, normative/political and practical reasons discussed above, there is one further reason for the move suggested here. Instead of assuming that the problem of democracy has been solved, either conceptually or historically, an assumption that is sometimes implicit in democratisation researchers and democracy promotion agents' attitudes, the move here suggests that the conceptual puzzles of democracy need to be opened up for continuing debate. This is important in keeping 'history open' for debate on future forms of democracy. Contrary to the teleological thinking embedded in much of the triumphalist liberalism, there is a need for a more open-ended approach to democracy. History is not at its end, history is radically open, if not indeterminate (Patomäki 2003). This means that democracy must also be approached with an open-ended view, with our minds open not only for 'what is' but what 'could be'. Indeed, I support the position of Held and Patomäki on the need to imagine different democratic futures, futures embedded in but not confined to the existing empirical order (Held, 1996: 44; Patomäki, 2003). Democracy, as a

mainstream figure such as Guillermo O'Donnell (2007) has also recently recognised is a concept that is open ended, dynamic, normative, and inherently critical of existing structures. This means that debate should be kept going on its meaning in order to envision alternative democratic futures. Remaining attuned to the contested nature of democracy and the contextuality of conceptions of it, helps us to move away from teleological frameworks, towards a more radically open, and I would suggest, more progressive view of change in world politics.

There seem to be a number of theoretical, normative, political, and practical reasons to reconsider the contestability of democracy in democratisation and democracy promotion research. But what are the limitations, difficulties, and even dangers of such an approach? These need to be considered carefully.

Dangers of pluralisation and contextualisation of democracy in democracy promotion

The first difficulty with the approach suggested here is that it goes sharply against the grain of the views of many hardened liberals in the field and, importantly, challenges the widely held 'progressive' narrative of democracy promotion. Some commentators in the liberal mainstream will undoubtedly point out that, since hard historical experiences have led us towards the consensus on the value of liberal democracy, to open this consensus up for debate would be to take a step back in world's political development. An important related problem that encourages caution among many is that downgrading the consensus model might problematically legitimate calls for 'proven-wrong' models of democracy, such as 'social democracy', in contemporary world politics.

These lines of criticism are, while to be expected, fairly problematic. To argue that the liberal democratic consensus that now exists constitutes an end point in debate about democracy is a questionable claim, not least because it entails a curious teleological conception of democracy, politics and history. Also, the simple empirical fact that debate on democracy seems to have continued in many quarters of world politics, even if often outside the liberal Western states, international organisations, and democracy promotion scholarship goes towards disproving any such claims. It is also not as well to remember that the argument that the Marxist or social democratic models of democracy are now dead because of the experiences in the USSR or 1990s Sweden are far from conclusive (Callinicos, 1991; Ryner, 2002).

However, another far more serious line of attack that can be raised against the moves suggested here is that opening up debate on democracy might lead to dangerous denigration of international democracy promotion as we know it. The lowest common denominator approach may have its problems but it also has advantages: it results in a fairly consensual if also limited forms of democracy promotion. Not only has this approach arguably had some successes, but also the minimal liberal approach is practical in international environment in that it requires minimum consensus and in that its promotion is more readily measurable, a key criteria for any funding body with auditing mechanisms in place expecting measurable results. Opening up this consensus may lead not only to unwieldy and corrosive debate but also quite possibly the advancement of criteria for democracy promotion that are too vague or ambitious to be practicable. If we lack clear criteria on what democracy is, can it even be ‘promoted’? And how would we practically promote or encourage multiple models? These are unsettling questions for all those involved in developing practical democracy promotion measures. Given the need for basic agreement on policies and the need to measure the

effectiveness of funded activities against clearly defined criteria, it seems dangerous indeed to abandon the consensus on the minimal procedural model. If we can agree on the ‘boxes democratisers must tick’ (e.g. on level of fairness of elections, or the efficiency of institutionalisation of rule of law, level of activity in civil society) this provides us at least with clear criteria against which to evaluate democracy promotion policies.

Nevertheless, a doubt remains: if democracy is a contested concept, there might be something amiss in advancing democracy by simply measuring how well states ‘tick the boxes’ pre-defined in democracy promoters’ guidance documents. With conceptual contestability in mind, not only might we have to consider radically rethinking the boxes to tick (expanding criteria) but perhaps we should also question the very idea of ‘tick box’ democracy promotion.

To think of such a possibility is of course deeply troubling within the current setting. Yet, the discomfort with existing answers may not be entirely unproductive. First, it is important to note that we need not simply throw away existing experience, measures and policies in liberal democracy promotion. We can also proceed by simply explicitly recognising the specificity (and political partiality) of the kinds of assumptions that are embedded within the existing policies. This would mean recognising what the existing policies do and do not do, who they do and do not include. Many lessons can here be learned from the critics of liberal democratisation (Sadiki, 2004; Sousa Santos, 2005; Robinson, 1999). Simultaneously, democracy promoters may also want to consider making further openings in their policies and language towards wider perspectives on democracy and the various views expressed in target states. There are already some tentative openings in the direction of extra-liberal models of democracy in EU’s democracy rhetoric. These can and should be explicitly

expanded on. Such moves might go hand in hand with active encouragement that democracy promotion agents develop their capacities in political and normative reflection on plurality of democratic thought.

We might also consider changing the language of promotion. There has already been a shift in some circles from language of ‘promotion’ to that of ‘assistance’ (Burnell, 2000), but there is something to be said, with our considerations in mind, for a further moves in this regard, for moves to language of ‘democracy facilitation’, ‘encouragement’ or better yet ‘democracy dialogue’. Such language would imply less of a student-teacher relationship between West and the rest, and a more dialogical and multilateral approach to democracy debate.

Reframed democracy promotion with essential contestability in mind might also entail reframing policy initiatives and funding calls in such ways as to explicitly open up room for ‘extra-liberal democratic’ movements and aims within them (e.g. by removing obvious references to promotion of liberalisation). We might then consider ‘encouraging’ alternative models of democracy in target countries by funding organisations that encourage forms of democratic politics that may not conform or seek to reproduce the classical liberal democratic politics but instead advocate socialist, feminist, Islamist, green or even cosmopolitan forms of democracy. In many states such organisations exist and hold hopes for peaceful and more integrative participatory democracy but often either have not wanted to be seen as stooges of Western democracy promotion or get over-looked by Western actors because they do not conform to liberal conceptions of democracy but rather seek socialists or radical democratic forms of democracy or closed community-based participatory democracy. We may also consider integration of democracy dialogue with wider policy debates on development and

trade. As Obama has recognised too, democracy promotion can work cross-purposes and appear hypocritical given Western trade policies (2006: 317).

Although within some agencies tentative openings in the direction suggested here exist (e.g. within EU's discourse), taking into account the suggestions here is 'a lot to ask'. Given the difficulty of the demands, however, it follows that democracy promoters may have to evaluate whether and how far they may wish to go in assisting 'plurality' of perspectives. Balancing support for different social forces and their different ideals of democracy is not easy, and may result in some democracy promoters having to openly 'choose their sides'. For example, the US might decide not to encourage socialist and radical democratic models or organisations. Other actors, EU for example, might opt for a more pluralistic approach. In either case, however, if the alternative models were seriously considered the process of democracy promotion would be more open, politically reflective and would move us away from the current practice, which, as critics have documented, runs the risk of encouraging only limited forms of democratisation under a technocratic cloak. Such a pluralistic and openly politicised agenda might make democracy promotion, or democracy dialogue, more effective in responding to problems on the ground and in being able to deal with the contestation that currently exists.

Finally, let us discuss another difficult problem that arises from the move suggested here and that is likely cause consternation among democratisation and democracy promotion researchers. The arguments here create a tendency towards relativisation of the idea of democracy in international politics. But does pluralisation and contextualisation of conceptions of democracy mean that we are in no position to criticise regimes on grounds of their lack of democracy? Is Chinese system just as democratic – just on different grounds – as

the US or the Swedish system? Or is the specific cultural context in Nigeria a viable excuse for the inability of the state to institute adequate democratic representation in the country? Pluralisation and contextualisation critics could say are synonyms with relativism and nihilism.

The dangers of relativism are real enough. Yet, first, it is important to note that the consensus approach, as we have seen, is not self-evidently superior either; it fails to recognise diversity of viewpoints on democracy, which has multiple negative effects as documented earlier. Second, and crucially, we must note that pluralisation *need not* entail relativisation. Just because we pluralise conceptions of democracy this does not mean that we cannot evaluate some systems to be significantly less democratic than others, or indeed as non-democratic. It merely means that we should do so in reference to multiple criteria. Even with multiple criteria we can still say that the claims to democratic status by North Korea or Congo are problematic. Indeed, we can say that they are undemocratic on numerous grounds – these regimes fail on liberal, social democratic, participatory and deliberative criteria of democracy. Assessments in other contexts may be more complex, however. For example, measured on liberal democratic grounds (representativeness, liberty) we can say that both Russia and China are either limited or non-democracies. In relation to social democratic criteria they could however be seen to contain some aspects of socio-economic democracy, given that both still emphasise the role of the state in guaranteeing a semblance of economic equality. Also, they may not be entirely undemocratic on aspects of participatory democracy. On the other hand, we should note that while perhaps highly ‘liberal’, according to social democratic criteria some of the most liberal democratic states do rather poorly. Also, some of the liberal states do less than satisfactorily with regard to preferences of many participatory democrats, especially with the sharp downturn of democratic participation and civil society

activism in many Western liberal democratic states. With pluralisation and contextualisation of the idea of democracy, evaluations of democratic systems become less cut and dry, yet they need not become relativistic. This may be uncomfortable in challenging Western political and normative superiority in current debates on democracy, but nevertheless presents an interesting opening for a more pluralistic level of debate on democratisation and democracy promotion.

Conclusions: conceptual reflexivity and democracy promotion

Democracy promotion has been a major political project during the late 20th and early 21st century but is also a project that is increasingly contested: in the aftermath of Iraq, Afghanistan and Ukraine many target states are sceptical of the democracy promotion agenda (Carothers, 2006). How are we to deal with this development? One response is to accept, on realist lines, that the ‘fad’ of democracy promotion has reached its zenith and its usefulness as a foreign policy agenda is now limited. Hence, perhaps we should now downscale this agenda in favour of other more useful ways of defending national interests. On the other hand commentators with a more liberal bent would be unwilling to concede such a conclusion and would instead argue that we must remain resolved to promoting democracy in world politics. For them, we must be willing to learn from the hardships of democracy promotion and tweak the democracy promotion policies so as to equip them to better deal with the many challenges they face.

There is another possible response, however: a response that is informed not by a sceptical stance or an enthusiast’s view of democracy promotion. This response involves returning to important *conceptual* issues at the heart of democracy promotion agenda: to the conceptions

of democracy promoted in the world system, to investigation of what is at stake in the conceptual categories we use. This approach does not accept either the self-evident normative superiority of democracy, nor that it is wrong to promote democracy in world politics. Rather it puts focus on the complex and power-ridden politics involved in the - often implicit - contestation over the meaning of democracy in international relations. This paper has argued for this conceptual angle to democratisation and democracy promotion, and in so doing has argued for pluralisation and contextualisation of conceptions of democracy in the world system. It has considered the pros and the cons of such a move and has come to the tentative conclusion that a move towards more open debate on conceptions of democracy might be an important and useful step in international relations, especially in dealing with democracy promotion.

This approach has some difficulties and dangers associated with it. For example it might result in the breaking down of consensus on the liberal model and also relativisation of debate on democracy. It also raises the difficult question: if there are many models of democracy and these are contextual, can democracy be promoted at all? These questions (and many other questions that we have not discussed here, such as questions about the ethics of democracy promotion) are difficult but also essential to consider. By pushing us to deal with these questions the approach here has some potential in furthering debate in two regards. First it allows us to be more open - historically, politically and theoretically - to the plural meanings of democracy and how this concept is used in various social and political struggles and contexts in different ways by different actors. Quite simply, we can see that if we fail to listen to and acknowledge alternative models we also fail to potentially listen to and acknowledge social and political actors in different roles from us, who might have very different views on successes and failures of liberal democracy. Also, democratising debate on democracy might

lead to a more equal and a more dialogical approach to democracy promotion, where democracy is promoted on multiple levels and in multiple senses. This may allow democracy promoters to better understand the attitudes to democracy and democracy promotion of those target populations whose differing voices can be within the liberal paradigm, too readily ignored.

Of course putting to practice such an approach in democracy promotion agencies is not going to be easy and some actors might even reject it. Also, much more work needs to be done on how aims of pluralisation and contextualisation might be effectively integrated into a policy process (subject of the authors' future research agenda). Yet, in the meanwhile it is important to recognise that conceptual contestation, and the political disagreement it reveals, should not be ignored for the sake of mere convenience. We should not forget that thought on democratisation and democracy promotion, and thought on democracy, '[emerge] in the struggle for social power' (Corcoran, 1983: 22). Engaging in conceptual debate on democracy in democracy promotion then is not just an abstract conceptual exercise, but in itself implicated in important global struggles over social and political power.

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¹ The problem is not just the liberal tradition but the dominance of particular variants within it. Liberal democratic thought itself is much wider and richer than current debates portray.

² On link between liberalism and procedural democracy see Bobbio (2005: 37-8).

³ See for example Adam Przeworski's (1999) famously narrow definition of democracy.

⁴ This implies a movement away from emphasis on passive electoral citizenship. Yet, advocacy of liberal values in civil society does not necessarily equal encouragement of real participation or empowerment of citizens. Also, 'radical' civil society forces, or ones that work against or challenge the consensus on liberal proceduralism and cultural values, do not sit easily with such a model of civil society. Indeed, liberalism has a very specific understanding of the role of civil society, which is contested by many more radical social actors (see Baker, 2002).

⁵ The role of procedures is still seen as important by most liberal-cultural analysts. One of the key values to be entrenched is in fact the belief in the value of proceduralism.

⁶ It should be noted that the liberal democratic tradition is rich, however, and that liberal democracy can also be conceived in more social-liberal permutations, where emphasis is primarily on 'democratic' values over 'liberal' values (see e.g. MacPherson, 1977).

⁷ In liberal democracy the role of civil society is more 'instrumental': it is a site of support for democratic procedures on the state level (see Baker, 2002).