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### **‘It’s the political, stupid’: national versus transnational perspectives on democratisation in Iraq**

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## ‘It’s the political, stupid’: national versus transnational perspectives on democratisation in Iraq

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William Robinson’s work on democracy promotion focuses on polyarchy, or low-intensity democracy, a form of political regime that favours the Parsonian-Schumpeterian focus on electoral procedures between competing elites, as being the model promoted by the United States since the 1980s. Robinson argues that democracy promotion is an instrument working in favour of a capitalist transnational elite, organising the capitalist domination of popular masses and taming potential aspirations for enlarged democratisation of the social and economic life. This article focuses on the implications of such questioning of Robinson’s understanding of democracy promotion and claims back democracy promotion from its Robinsonian instrumentalisation. In other words, the article argues that it is necessary to reconstruct democracy by putting some normative and political flesh back on its frame; a much needed conceptual enterprise that is critical to rejecting the contemporary mantra insisting on free-market economy and Parsonian-Schumpeterian procedural liberal democracy as the best package to spread democracy. Consequently, we claim that while there are clearly historical instances of democracy promotion used to achieve other means than genuine democratisation, i.e. democracy promotion as foreign policy instruments; there are also instances of democracy promotion being non-instrumentalised. Consequently, we argue that particular national problems of democracy promotion are relatively more important to consider than those generated by transnational processes identified by Robinson. The recent case of democratisation in Iraq provides the empirical background on which our conceptual argument relies.

**Keywords:** democracy promotion; polyarchy; Iraq; transnational capitalism

### Introduction

The end of the Cold War and retreat of authoritarianism in Europe triggered a triumphant discourse insisting on the superiority of the liberal ideology and its inexorable universalisation as a consequence.<sup>1</sup> This victorious liberal ideology is a hybrid creature, a politico-economic animal constituted by a Western view of liberal democracy as the best political regime on offer. Capitalist economic governance is considered the inescapable framework for modernisation. This model stands at the core of democracy promotion and democratisation processes that flourished in the post-Cold War era. Over the past two decades, the stunning spread of liberal democracy and free market capitalism across Central Europe, Latin America and East Asia has led to this politico-economic model becoming the panacea to

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the world's economic (read development) and political (read stability) problems.<sup>2</sup> Not all observers agree that this intimate liaison between capitalism and democracy is unquestionable.<sup>3</sup> Others point out that democracy and capitalism – and especially in its most dynamic expression, globalisation – are far from being monolithic concepts. Indeed, there is a variety of models of democracy and capitalism on offer, causing both terms to be essentially contested.<sup>4</sup> However, relatively few have engaged in debating this conceptual contestation surrounding democracy promotion and democratisation.<sup>5</sup>

Because democracy promotion is very often intimately linked with economic globalisation and the economic liberalisation of countries being democratised, it is tempting to subjugate democracy promotion to the advances of global capitalism. Indeed, one could say that a key trend in the critical democracy promotion literature has been to do precisely this. Perhaps most notably William Robinson argued that democracy promotion policies, as designed and implemented by the US since the 1980s, aspire to spread polyarchy or 'low-intensity democracy'. This is a form of political regime that favours the Parsonian-Schumpeterian focus on electoral procedures between competing elites. Polyarchy organises the capitalist elites' domination of popular masses, and tames their aspirations for thorough democratisation of social life – including claims for enhanced economic and social justice, in order to facilitate the penetration of global capitalism in peripheral and semi-peripheral regions.<sup>6</sup> Gills, Rocamora and Wilson also suggested that the forms of democracy that are promoted by the West are shaped to serve the interests of global capitalism.<sup>7</sup> They argue that contemporary democracy promotion should include social reforms alongside political liberalisation if democracy is to flourish, and survive in the long term.

Such politico-economically oriented analyses are important in providing us with a more structurally embedded understanding of democracy promotion. However, those who take this analytical path run the risk of misunderstanding the content of democracy promotion. This is because there is a natural shift from the local – where democracy promotion takes place – to the global – where capitalism is deployed. This article, while sympathetic towards the critical politico-economic analyses of democracy promotion, promotes a return to the local, or nation-state, as a framework of analysis. Researchers of democracy promotion need to remain aware of the fact that democracy promotion is not necessarily merely an instrument in the hands of neoliberal transnational elites seeking to insert capitalism in every single country. This article is not a comprehensive critique of theories of global capitalism and transnationalism. It is a critique of economic determinism at every level. This engenders a misunderstanding of the politico-economic content of democracy promotion, which in turn empties democracy promotion of meaning and autonomy as a locally contextualised process.

Consequently, this article is an invitation to engage scholars of transnationalism, in a dialogue in order to move towards a reconceptualisation of the international political economy underlying their approach to democracy promotion. The argument is structured as follows:

First, the article starts with a brief overview of Robinson's position regarding democracy promotion and the role played by transnational capitalist forces in shaping the democratisation agenda. Secondly, it argues that transnational studies of democracy would benefit from a return to the national, as promoted by Gramsci, instead of the global level of analysis to deconstruct polyarchy.<sup>8</sup> The Robinsonian critique, which suggests polyarchy applies to all cases of democracy promotion, is simply not supported by the empirical evidence. Robinson's theory that transnational capital relies on democratisation as a global instrument of consent generation is therefore in jeopardy. The article does not deny that there is a form of common interest between capitalist, political and some civic elites across national

borders, but it concludes that common interests such as this are not as structured and definite as Robinson would like us to believe. This article thus argues that Robinson is correct in his analysis of the shape taken by US democracy promotion; it is an effort in promoting polyarchical and elite-based democracy based on liberal democratic ideals. However, the article contests Robinson's explanation of democratisation on the ground, using Iraq as a case study. It is argued that Robinson's explanation is flawed because of his eagerness to prove that polyarchy promotion is overwhelmingly successful over alternatives. It is rather curious that while opposing polyarchy promotion, Robinson is so insistent that it is successful even when it is not, as in Iraq.<sup>9</sup>

Thirdly, and finally, the article claims that Robinson's understanding of democracy promotion is misleading. It is not merely an instrument to gain the consent of the popular masses to the Washington-led transnational neoliberal capitalist project of erecting and consolidating capitalism as a single global mode of production. This is illustrated by a critical analysis of Robinson's article on democracy promotion in Iraq, 'What to Expect from US "Democracy Promotion" in Iraq'.<sup>10</sup> The article concludes that, even though in agreement with Robinson that democracy promotion in Iraq can be read as an attempt to promote polyarchy – the contemporary mantra insisting on free-market economy and Parsonian-Schumpeterian procedural liberal democracy as the best package to spread democracy – crucially, its success is far from evident. There are permanent pressures in the Iraqi nation-state that shape the evolution of democracy promotion and democratisation, which negate the kind of processes Robinson's theoretical lenses assume are taking place. Promoting democracy in Iraq is far from being under the control of US-led transnational capitalist elites but is instead under permanent local pressure from various sources that are motivated by their own specific interests. Consequently, we claim that while there are clearly historical instances of democracy promotion used to achieve other means than genuine democratisation, i.e. democracy promotion as foreign policy instrument; there are also instances of democracy promotion responding to local realities that affects positively or adversely democratisation. The Iraq case shows that democracy promotion translates into the co-habitation or succession of several outcomes that integrates features of the following politico-economic models of democracy: polyarchy, a reform liberal model of liberal democracy, social democracy, but also partial democracy. These developments originate in various local and international pressures, i.e. US-led democracy promotion and Iraqi responses to democracy promotion, generated by the realities affecting Iraq. This is observable without abandonment of a critical Gramscian analysis if one favours a return to an analytical focus on the nation-state instead of on the transnational state. Consequently, we invite Robinson and critical theorists to be realistic regarding the empirical analysis they provide to support the case for low intensity democracy promotion.

### **Transnational polyarchy and its discontent**

In his early work, Robinson<sup>11</sup> posits his conceptual framework within the Italian School tradition, which applied Gramscian concepts to international relations.<sup>12</sup> The Italian School focuses on the concept of international hegemony, with the ideological dominance of leading social classes of a hegemonic state and the dominance of a specific mode of production at its core. In order to become hegemonic, a state has to found and protect a world order that is universal in conception, meaning an order that other states could find compatible with their interests. Such a universal order is based on the concept of global civil society, in other words, a global mode of production linking social classes of the countries it encompasses. It has been designated by Neo-Gramscians as a 'transnational historical

bloc', a form of organic alliance of classes involving elites of core and peripheral countries. Elites share the same material interests, norms, values and ideas about the social world.

Polyarchy, or what Robinson also calls low-intensity democracy, is the instrument through which shared interests, norms and values are spread in order to generate consent to the global capitalist elites' hegemony among popular masses; 'a global political system corresponding to a global economy under the hegemony of transnational elite which is the agent of transnational capital'.<sup>13</sup> For Robinson, democracy promotion is merely an instrument aiming at stabilising the political and social order locally, thus contributing to the stability of the global order, in transitional phases from authoritarian to polyarchic regimes. This transition is caused by the antinomies between a boundary-less global economy, relying on international capital mobility, and the territorially based form of political and social control lauded by authoritarianism. Globalisation redefined the roles of the people as social and economic actors and opened societies to a flow of information leading to growing demands for social and economic emancipation, including democratisation, itself not a product of US intervention, but springing from aspirations of local populations and structural, cultural and ideological transformation caused by globalisation.<sup>14</sup> Gradually, there was a rejection by populations of the Third World of oppressors sponsored by the US and the direct observation by those populations of the affinity of Washington for the regimes that oppressed them. The US thus implemented a foreign policy move from a focus on national security to democracy promotion.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, authoritarian regimes operate on the basis of restricted control over information and political and social control, rendering the co-habitation between authoritarian and democratic regimes difficult in a global economy: 'Economic globalization generates pressures for integration into a single "political regime"'. Polyarchy is the emergent global political structure'<sup>16</sup> and hence 'Social interaction and economic integration on a world scale . . . under the hegemony of transnational capital, require *consensual* arrangements and their mechanisms of ideological hegemony', being deployed globally, throughout a global civil society, materially underpinned by a global economy.<sup>17</sup> This need to accommodate democratisation movements globally explains the switch in US foreign policy since the 1980s from support to dictatorships to democracy promotion, with democracy promotion acting as a damage control device, a consensus-based instrument aimed at limiting the scope of democratic claims. Indeed, polyarchy is a model relying on the state as the domain of dominant classes. Economic and political elites seek to incorporate popular classes and their demands into a wider hegemonic project based on the exercise of consensual power in civil society. This explains the importance of a series of controlled processes like elections in democracy promotion as legitimising instrument. By favouring polyarchy, elites intend to contain popular democracy. By this Robinson means a model emphasising civil society at the centre of the exercise of power by popular classes through participatory mechanisms.<sup>18</sup> Popular democracy puts at risk capitalism because of a shift of the origins of political power from elite to popular classes and their egalitarian economic and social demands, in opposition with the mode of functioning of capitalism, based on surplus appropriation by those having the control of the capital and means of production.<sup>19</sup> Thus, promoting polyarchy attempts at developing 'a transnational Gramscian hegemony in emergent global society' and constitutes 'the theoretical underpinnings of the new political intervention'.<sup>20</sup>

In his later work, Robinson develops further his theory of global capitalism and transnationalism by returning to Gramsci and steering away from the Italian School and its emphasis on an ideological consensus within elites across nations, a 'transnational *intra*-elite consensus'.<sup>21</sup> He elaborates on concepts such as Transnational Corporations (TNC), Transnational State (TNS),<sup>22</sup> Transnational Capitalist Class (TCC) and Transnational



Hegemony<sup>23</sup> but executes an ontological mutation that leads to a reconsideration of the role of the nation-state. Robinson calls for a return to a purer Gramscian view that puts social classes and groups exercising hegemony through states and other institutions at the source of hegemony. Robinson rejects the Italian School's focus on the nation-state or blocs of nation-states in the making of hegemony; instead he speaks of a hegemony that is global in character, not international, and thus centred on the TNS.<sup>24</sup>

In his attempt to conceptualise hegemony in *global society*, Robinson severs the link between the nation-state and the international arena, the state being the point of backward linkage to society and forward linkage to the international order, an international hegemony finding its sources in the expansion of a national hegemony established by a social class.<sup>25</sup> For Robinson, the key is to move away from a focus on the hegemony of a specific nation-state and realise that global hegemony is built upon a transnational social group, or class exerting 'consensual domination' on subordinated classes.<sup>26</sup> Robinson, thus, rejects the Italian School assertion that the national context constitutes the starting point of hegemonic exercise. Instead, he claims that hegemony finds its source in a boundary-free transnational capitalist class, some form of nexus linking 'transnationally-oriented elites grounded in globalized circuits of accumulation'.<sup>27</sup> Democracy promotion is then conceptualised as a mere instrument in the hands of such a transnationalist capitalist class. Indeed, Robinson then argues that democracy promotion aims at facilitating the insertion of a global capitalist mode of production in every country by taming popular demands for genuine democratisation of the social and economic life. Instead, democratisation is limited to the cosmetic institutionalisation of electoral procedures organising free and fair elections among carefully chosen competing political elites, which role is subsequently limited to providing capitalism with the stable conditions necessary to its development.<sup>28</sup>

This article disagrees with Robinson's claims and asserts that consent generation policies, expressed by democracy promotion, that seek the inclusion of popular masses in a new politico-economic model characterised by limitless economic liberalisation and limited political liberalisation, do not go unchallenged. This illustrates the importance of the nation-state as actor as a site of analysis, and of democracy as a regime in which contestation and control of the excesses of capitalism can still take place, despite the aims and purposes of polyarchy – promoting transnational classes. Indeed, we argue that by reducing the focus on the nation-state, Robinson misses key-points in the way democracy is experienced. Democracy promotion is influenced by social, economic and cultural realities. The irony is that if Robinson focused more on the national, he would find in democracy promotion essential instruments of contestation of neoliberal projects; rising from the rejection of neoliberal excesses in a national context. Robinson is right in arguing that the US and like-minded allies promote a polyarchical model of democracy but its success as instrument of consent generation to a transnational elite project of globalising capitalism is far from evident. Robinson has 'over-instrumentalised' democracy promotion: he uses the concept to push forward his point about transnational capitalism while losing sight of home-grown challenges to low intensity democracy, and hence to a US-led transnational project of globalising capitalism without restrictions. The final section of this article investigates the empirical evidence offered by Robinson to support his claims by analysing his 2004 article on democracy promotion in Iraq. It is clearly not an article that reflects the proverbial quality of Robinson's work. However, it illustrates his anti-global capitalist engagement to the extent that his willingness to support his global capitalism theory actually harms what democracy promotion is able to achieve on the ground. By dismissing the local level of analysis, this Robinson article is a case in point of how democratic advances are actually misunderstood and penalised. In other words, what Robinson perceives as being an efficient

American exercise in democracy promotion to facilitate the global capitalist penetration in Iraq, turns out to be a rather ineffective democratisation venture once the effects of US-led democracy promotion policies are put under scrutiny.

### **Promoting democracy**

#### ***Reviving democracy promotion***

This section analyses the empirical claims made by Robinson in support of his theory of global capitalism at work in Iraq by analysing his 2004 article entitled ‘What to Expect from US “Democracy Promotion” in Iraq’. More specifically, we intend to demonstrate that Robinson’s willingness to press his point about the influence of transnational capitalism translates into a lack of comprehensive understanding of the substance of democracy promotion. We agree that a restrictive model of liberal democracy is favoured by the US in Iraq. This view understands democracy promotion and the corollary democratisation of Iraq merely as an instrument facilitating the inclusion of Iraqi popular classes into a US-led neo-liberal project intending to incorporate Iraq in the global economy under the supervision of local like-minded transnational elites. However, we contend that Robinson’s analysis is not comprehensive and fails to account for the transformative effect that local realities have on democratisation processes, and hence, on the shape taken by democracy promotion. By ignoring the local dimension, thus by not looking at wider causes and effects of democracy promotion policies in Iraq, Robinson effectively misunderstands what democracy promotion achieved and where it fell short of democratising the country. We will review the following claims made by Robinson: democracy promotion as US policy in the wider Middle East, polyarchy as the model promoted in Iraq, the role of the media, the US attempt at winning over the Iraqi civil society, and the privatisation and liberalisation of the Iraqi economy.

#### ***The democratic wave that was not to be***

Robinson claims that ‘the US plan for “promoting democracy” in Iraq is an integral component of its overall interventionist project in the Middle East’.<sup>29</sup> He then explains that there is a consensus among US rulers and ‘among transnational elites more generally, on political intervention under the rubric of “democracy promotion”’.<sup>30</sup> Iraq falls into a specific target category of US political intervention: countries targeted for transition through ‘US-supported and often orchestrated changeover in government and state structures’.<sup>31</sup> Thus, Robinson implies that toppling the Ba’ath regime was motivated by turning Iraq into a neo-liberal polyarchic regime friendly to US interests in the Gulf. In turn, this would lead the region to integrate global capitalism by replacing existing elites with new transnationally oriented elites exerting hegemony over their populations and implementing economic liberalisation and structural adjustment, thus gearing the Middle East towards integration in the global economy.

However, Robinson’s claims should be significantly nuanced. Indeed, even though Bush called for regime change targeted at the Axis of Evil<sup>32</sup> and while the idea to bring democracy in the Middle East to reduce the threats originating in extreme ideologies animating the region had been on the agenda of senior US officials, the idea of a democratic wave engulfing the Middle East was not a component of the US official discourse justifying the invasion of Iraq. Indeed, while references to bringing freedom to Iraq were made in pre-war speeches and go back as far as Clinton’s Iraqi Liberation Act of 1998,<sup>33</sup> the justification



for war remained anchored in weapons of mass destruction (WMD) threats. However, evidence shows that the Bush administration's commitment to promoting freedom and democracy in the region pre-dates the invasion of Iraq, with the establishment of the Roadmap for Peace and the Middle East Partnership Initiative.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, regarding the war with Iraq, such discourse remained at worse rhetoric and at best contingency. The shift to democracy promotion gradually took place in justifying the war when it became evident that there were no WMD to be found in Iraq.<sup>35</sup> This seems to be confirmed by the inexistent level of readiness to push the democratisation agenda. Indeed, the mandate of the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Affairs (OHRA), initially in charge of taking over the administration of postwar Iraq, was designed to deal with a potential humanitarian crisis, not a full-fledged exercise in nation-building. In addition, in its postwar action report, the US army vindicates its lack of preparedness regarding governance in liberated Iraq; the report pointing out that 'none of the soldiers had any specific guidance on what the Coalition's governance objectives were and how they might help the Iraqis remake their institutions of government'.<sup>36</sup> As one US officer put it: 'Because we didn't receive any guidance for governance or reconstruction, and certainly not for spreading democracy, I had to make up everything as I went, based on the situation on the ground and what I remembered from my Special Forces training and a handful of political science classes'.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, as Gordon, Lefebvre, Ali and Fallows argue, it is difficult to take Washington's discourse on democracy promotion in the Middle East seriously because of the US lack of engagement with allied autocratic regimes that populate the region.<sup>38</sup> This line of thought seemed to be confirmed by Douglas Feith, undersecretary of defense in the G.W. Bush administration, who explains that the Pentagon continuously tamed the Department of State's desire to put more emphasis on democracy promotion in Iraq as an objective of the war.<sup>39</sup> Why? Because the secretary of defense Rumsfeld was more in favour of creating conditions for democracy to flourish than of creating democracy in Iraq, which would commit the US in the long-term.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, too much democracy too fast, including early elections, could lead to anti-democratic elements gaining power (the one man, one vote, one time phenomenon). Thus, it seems that Washington's strategy to embrace the Gulf region with a democratic kiss does not look that clear cut. If, as Robinson contends, there was a genuine and organised strategy to promote democracy – or polyarchy, in Iraq, the Bush administration's decisions and actions did not embody such a strategy. However, regarding the Middle East, this statement should be nuanced at the light of American policies regarding the Palestinian Territories and Lebanon, the 2004 Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative, the late 2002 MEPI and the 2003 US–Middle East Free Trade Area, all aiming at greater political and economic liberalisation, although in a measured way, and not through regime change as in Iraq. Of course, democracy was promoted in Iraq after the fall of the Ba'ath regime; there were few other options available to the American occupier; the American, regional and international public opinions unlikely to have accepted a puppet regime directed from Washington. Unsurprisingly, Washington decided to build on previous postwar reconstruction experiences and after dismantling the ineffective OHRA, installed the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) at the head of the political and economic reconstruction of Iraq.

However, and significantly for us, the prospect of implanting democracy in Iraq was constantly overshadowed by sectarian and religious violence, terrorist activities targeting coalition troops and essential services infrastructure, inter and intra-parties rivalries, numerous cases of corruption in the public and private sectors, all of which undermined democratic progress. Consequently, Iraq seemed ill-fitted to serve as an example of the successful exercise of democracy that would spread in the region. Thus, a closer look at American motivations to wage war against Iraq and the post-invasion conditions in Iraq

in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Ba'ath regime would have allowed Robinson to realise that the implementation of a transnational neoliberal agenda in Iraq was far from realistic. Indeed, the CPA strategic plan lists four 'core foundations', in which security and the provision of basic services to restore stability take first and second place, with economic growth in third place, and finally, 'enabling the transition to transparent and inclusive democratic governance'.<sup>41</sup> Democracy could not take root in Iraq without a comprehensive plan dealing with critical issues affecting the security, political society and economic dimensions of the postwar reconstruction.<sup>42</sup> However, Robinson is right in pointing out that American officials, once they accepted the fact that they would be in Iraq for much longer than foreseen, kick-started a programme of democracy coaching, striving to create conditions favourable to the deployment of democracy and the co-optation of transnational local elites supportive of the US-led neoliberal project in Iraq.<sup>43</sup>

### *Teaching democracy*

After defining the broader context in which democracy promotion takes place in Iraq, which explains the US plan of democratising the Middle East, Robinson insists that a specific model of democracy is being promoted in Iraq: polyarchy, a regime 'in which a small group rules on behalf of transnational capital and mass participation in decision-making is limited to choosing among competing elites in tightly controlled electoral processes'.<sup>44</sup> Robinson then gives examples of how this polyarchic moment is activated: by sending American intellectuals, namely Larry Diamond, to teach Iraqi tribal leaders 'many of them wearing Western business suits underneath their robes'<sup>45</sup> and by launching and financing the Iraqi Media Network, a Pentagon-sponsored project aiming at US control over news diffusion in and on Iraq. Thus, Robinson claims as empirical evidence that sending intellectuals specialised in democracy promotion to Iraqi tribal leaders is a proof that polyarchy supportive of neoliberalism is being promoted in Iraq.

Robinson's point about Larry Diamond teaching democracy to Iraqi tribal leaders is a valid observation; a change of regime and the promotion of new political institutions need to be explained to those Washington wants to patronise on the road to polyarchy. However, Robinson's empirical evidence would have more weight if he had had a look at the content of what Diamond taught the tribal leaders he met at the University of Scientific, Humanistic, and Theological Studies in Hilla and if he had taken a look at the provisions of the Transitional Administrative Law (basis of the Iraqi Fundamental Law), promulgated on 8 March 2004 and thus available to Robinson when he wrote his article in April 2004.<sup>46</sup> The university and its associated democracy centre was a CPA-funded project aiming at reconciling Islam and democracy under the guidance of a moderate Shi'a cleric, Sayyid Farqad al-Qizwini, a lifelong opponent to the Ba'ath regime.<sup>47</sup> Diamond gave a speech entitled 'What is Democracy?' in which he identified four key elements of democracy, all constitutive of a liberal version of democracy: 'choosing and replacing the government through free and fair elections; active citizen participation in politics and civic life; protection of the human rights of all citizens; and the rule of law, in which the regulations and procedures apply equally to all citizens'.<sup>48</sup> Thus, the liberal democratic model promotes core values of individual political and economic liberty and freedom, including the right to private property; freedom of expression; and, stability of the political, social and economic order. Institutions at the core of this model are limited state powers; principle of checks and balances within the state; an independent competitive market economy; and a dynamic and pluralistic civil society.<sup>49</sup> The promotion of such a model of democracy is compatible with Robinson's thesis that democracy promotion is actually low intensity

democracy promotion, for it is precisely a liberal democratic model that is associated with polyarchy promotion. However, Diamond's lecture deserved deeper interrogation for it provides an example that democracy in Iraq, and an attempt to fuse Islam and democracy would not necessarily lead to the Iraqi adoption of Western liberalism and a reduced role for the state. Indications of this emerged at the lecture: when quizzed by a female lawyer whether women would be allowed to be judges, al Qizwini, present at the lecture, intervened to point out that this was not permitted by Islam.<sup>50</sup> It was not typical liberal democracy that would be envisioned for Iraq.

Robinson argues that in a polyarchic system any elements jeopardising the local neoliberal transnational oriented elites' control over the political process would not be tolerated. However, in Iraq, a system of government that is republican, representative (parliamentary), democratic and federal, Islam is considered as a source of legislation.<sup>51</sup> This expressly goes against the liberal tradition of challenging the state and the church by creating a sphere of private interests impervious to their influence; i.e. 'freeing the polity from religious control and freeing the civil society (personal, family and business life) from political interference'<sup>52</sup> and thus against Robinson's claims about the promotion of a classic liberal democratic polyarchic model in Iraq by the US.

### *Democracy promotion and the propaganda war*

Robinson offers as an example of US democracy promotion activities of the Iraqi Media Network (IMN), launched by CPA with Pentagon funds, in an effort to operate a better control over information in Iraq. However, Robinson should not consider the IMN as a success of American democracy promotion in Iraq. By the time of his writing, there was sufficient information available pointing in the direction of the failure of this American-sponsored project.

Indeed, CPA identified the establishment of a free press as essential to building a democratic society as it would spread ideas and values congenial to the whole American project of re-formatting the Iraqi society along democratic lines. The establishment of a free press was an essential element of the CPA's attempt at manufacturing consent amongst the Iraqi population. However, CPA consistently failed to objectively inform the Iraqi population about reconstruction progress. An official black-out was practiced on insurgents' activities and whatever bad news could impede on the reconstruction. Nonetheless, Iraqis were not blind and when faced with essential services shortages and witnessing the lack of progress in their daily life, they could not turn to the CPA as a source of information, which essentially focused on providing information on progress made but without perspective. In the weeks that followed the fall of the Ba'athist regime dozens of newspapers were started. Most of these new ventures were launched by various political parties and their production and reporting of news were often distorted as they reflected specific political interests and objectives. The opening of the news world translated also into a boom of satellite broadcasts, essentially from abroad, with the two pan-Arab channels as al-Jazeera and al-Arabiyya amongst the favourites. Iran also opened an Arabic-language station targeting the Shi'a audience. All the main international news agencies were also present in Iraq and provided a news feed closer to the mark.<sup>53</sup>

Such developments in the media world contributed to a questioning of the American, and generally speaking of a Western, version of news reporting. Indeed, as Emad El-Din Aysha argues, 'From the early days of satellite television to the CNN age, what really existed was a "US village" of global reach. In contrast, regional informational umbrellas can now collect and disseminate information quite independently on a local basis, while

increasingly being able to broadcast their version of events globally'.<sup>54</sup> The diversification of sources of information available to Iraqis jeopardises one of the main instruments of consent generation in the hands of US authorities: propaganda. As Richard Bulliet puts it, 'Prior to Sept 11, we did not realize that we were in a propaganda war, but we were', and the US in the Middle East 'is at best playing catch-up, at worst losing'.<sup>55</sup> In an effort to make use of this new freedom of expression, and to fight back Arabic speaking channels' influence in Iraq, the CPA created a broadcasting station (comprising a newspaper, a radio and TV station), the Iraq Media Network (IMN) to inform the population about the Coalition's intents and operations.<sup>56</sup> However, the IMN would always face a reputation of being a mouthpiece for the CPA. Indeed, the majority of Iraqis preferred watching the pan-Arab satellite channels and the IMN never managed to get its message through. Moreover, in its order n°14,<sup>57</sup> the CPA listed a series of prohibited media activities including reporting on events that could conflict with the CPA's policies, incite violence against the CPA and coalition personnel, and endanger public order. Such a statement did not play in favour of the occupation and was perceived by the Iraqi public as a confirmation that the IMN was not independent from the CPA and hence could not be trusted.<sup>58</sup> Through its inability to provide objective and accurate information, CPA gave ground to rival perspectives, not always objective either, about the evolution of the situation in Iraq. Consequently, CPA lost one of its essential instruments of communication and consent generation to its overall project of remoulding Iraqi civil society.<sup>59</sup>

Had Robinson's analysis focused on local developments regarding the US policy on the Iraqi media, he would have concluded that far from being a successful venture, the IMN achieved little. On the contrary, the IMN never played its intended role of generating consent to the US project of remoulding the Iraqi political system, and thus, can hardly be considered as playing in favour of the consolidation of Iraqi transnational elites supportive of the US neoliberal project in Iraq, which is the argument made by Robinson. It is both a policy failure of the US occupational authorities and an analytical failure for Robinson, who, in his desire to shore up his case for the role of transnational capitalist elites in spreading global capitalism, did not take into consideration the local repercussions of the IMN's operations. Similarly, when Robinson looks at how consent to US policies is generated in Iraqi civil society, he makes a conceptual mistake, further aggravated by the empirical evidence provided to support his argument. Indeed, as the next section demonstrates, Robinson conceptualises the generation of consent – or hegemony – in civil society as a unidirectional flow going from the top, i.e. the transnational elites, to the bottom, the popular masses. A focus on the local, instead of the transnational, would have allowed Robinson to observe that producing hegemony is an interactive process involving genuine consideration of mutual interests, values and norms in order to reach a *modus operandi*. In Iraq, the newly US co-opted elites did not manage to produce hegemony. They did not manage to create consent to polyarchy and the hegemony of a transnationally oriented capitalist class in Iraq. In fact, the deep sectarian cleavages that characterise Iraqi political and civil society turned Iraqi civil society into a battlefield for opposing political factions. Far from agreeing to follow the lead of the US and turn Iraq into a polyarchical regime favourable to neoliberal economic policies and to the interests of transnational capitalism, Iraqi elites are involved in numerous internal conflicts that force them into an existential fight for support across the civil society.

### ***Manufacturing hegemony: a two-way street***

This emphasis on the role of the media in democracy promotion illustrates what Robinson calls 'a Janus-faced project of consent and coercion',<sup>60</sup> showing that democracy promotion

programmes complete, and not replace, military intervention: 'US and international operatives hope that political intervention will lead to the establishment of internal consensual mechanisms of domination as the flip side of direct coercive domination by US armed force' over the Iraqi civil society<sup>61</sup>; as Gramsci would put it, 'domination' of antagonistic groups alongside 'intellectual and moral leadership' over allies.<sup>62</sup> However, faithful to Gramsci, to battle for civil society requires the definition of a common interest between rulers and ruled, and the identification of a critical question in the analysis: the relationship between coercion and consent in the exertion of power by the hegemonic class,<sup>63</sup> involving a process of ideological exchange.<sup>64</sup> This dimension of a Gramscian exertion of power is not taken into consideration adequately by Robinson. Indeed, due to his transnational framework of analysis, Robinson focuses on the existence of national elites that act as intermediaries between the Iraqi masses and the US transnational project aimed at bringing about 'political order that can achieve internal stability as the necessary condition for the country to function as a reliable supplier of oil, an investment outlet for transnational capital, and a platform for further transnational economic and political penetration of the Middle East'.<sup>65</sup> Hence, according to Robinson, the US agenda in Iraq includes extensive privatisation, opening of the economy and of Iraq's resources to transnational corporations, cajoling local political, business and civic elites into supporting the remoulding of Iraqi political and civil society through 'democracy training'. As Robinson emphasises, 'weaving together a pro-Western elite capable of assuming the reigns of local power is only half the US strategy. The other half is to try to control and suppress alternative political initiatives within civil society and prevent popular or independent voices from emerging',<sup>66</sup> in other words, achieving hegemony.

For Gramsci, the process of hegemony elaboration in the political and civil society implies a genuine exchange of ideas between rulers and ruled in order to forge a common identity that trickles down the whole society. Accordingly, there is a continuous interplay between hegemon and targeted subordinate actor(s). The hegemon aims at identifying, aggregating and incorporating subordinates' vital interests into the hegemon's policies. The whole procedure is wrapped in institutions and processes constituting a canvas preserving the stability and cohesion of the system. This is what Gramsci calls a historical bloc. To analyse a historical bloc requires a historical enquiry of power relations in a specific framework of analysis, defined in time and space. Where Robinson contends that the current transnational agenda can be analysed as an attempt to set up a transnational historical bloc, we assert, similarly to Anderson, that the framework of analysis of such an enquiry should be the nation-state.<sup>67</sup> Actually, Robinson himself ventures an observation of the cleavages animating Iraqi society and acknowledges that local realities impede the achievement of the US-led transnational project in Iraq.<sup>68</sup>

However, Robinson does not perform a detailed analysis of the effects that such fault lines have on the future of polyarchy and transnational capitalism in Iraq and hence he misses evidence pointing at a different reality: while genuine democratic advances in Iraq are limited, polyarchy at the service of neoliberalism is far from being the only outcome of the American occupation of the country. Indeed, Robinson indicates two strategies at work. First, the new Washington-oriented Iraqi elite, backed by democracy promotion programmes financed by the US, aims at garnering consent across Iraqi civil society to the polyarchisation and integration of Iraq in the global capitalist economy. Secondly, Washington and its Iraqi supporters seek to eliminate resistance to this politico-economic programme by isolating civil society organisations resisting the 'liberalisation' of Iraq. Both the US government and Robinson fail in achieving their objectives: Occupational authorities fail in generating consent to their policies across Iraqi civil



society, while Robinson, focusing on the role of the transnational capital in Iraq, falls short of accounting for the failures of the US government in Iraq.

Indeed, the democratisation of Iraq was implemented in two spheres: political democratisation of Iraqi institutions and insertion of democratic values like human rights and the rule of law in civil society. The programme of civil society reengineering in Iraq aimed at sharing values and the generation of a common interest (between Iraqi parties and between Iraqis and the US) to manufacture consent for the whole American project. The goal of this project was nothing less than the acceptance by the Iraqi population of the new American-sponsored leaders.<sup>69</sup> In this case, we agree with Robinson that the US seeks to sponsor consensus-building processes and forums aiming at the generation of a nationwide and region-wide consensus to root low-intensity democracy in Iraq<sup>70</sup> through grassroots democracy promotion programmes.<sup>71</sup>

These programmes promote a classic liberal version of democracy with a focus on electoral representative government, individual liberty and freedom, protection of private property, limitation of state power, institutionally and through developing a vibrant civil society. However, because of his focus on the transnational, even though he points out the particularly difficult cleavages animating Iraqi society, Robinson's insights are limited regarding the factors that impede the development of a strong liberal civil society. It is not so much those organisations opposed to the US-sponsored plan of turning Iraq into a liberal capitalist country that are contested by the Iraqi state, as the whole fabric of Iraqi civil society that is under pressure. The US failed in its attempt to win over the Iraqi civil society because the US did not manage to secure the consent of the Iraqi political society. It is possible that some Iraqi elites are transnationally-oriented and in favour of a neoliberal economic reformatting of the country. Nonetheless, building hegemony to neoliberal economic reforms across the Iraqi civil society is challenged by conflicts opposing Iraqi political factions. Ironically, polyarchy allowed for the contest for the state to spill over Iraqi civil society; with political factions battling for support in a bid to stay or gain more power. Polyarchy, and its focus on electoral procedures, created social and economic conditions that allowed political organisations to invade civil society in an attempt to provide services that would provide them with electoral support.

Indeed, Kerr argues that civil society in a post-totalitarian context is weak and subject to a return of the past state dominance.<sup>72</sup> In Iraq, this translated to the loss of autonomy of Iraqi civil society with the rise of faith-based organisations sponsored by political parties in search of legitimacy within civil society by providing healthcare, education and various social services, or, by Iraq's neighbours as a way of projecting their foreign policy onto Iraq. These organisations are active in areas that are traditionally privatised under the neoliberal model: healthcare, education, provision of essential services, poverty reduction, etc. ... all with the intent of gaining vassals that support the political party that provides these services. These faith-based 'NGOs' are in direct competition with independent liberal civil society organisations that promote civil society as the seat of counter-power to the state. In fact Kerr argues that the growing presence of faith-party-based civil society organisations could lead civil society organisations to fail 'to consolidate sufficient autonomy to contest or guide the state'.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, these organisations are also in direct competition with foreign capitalist economic actors that seek new market shares in Iraq. If, as Robinson contends, the Iraqi elite are indeed capitalist and transnationally-oriented, how does he explain that political parties and religious organisations turn into economic actors providing services and goods, generating profits, not for a transnational capitalist class, but for their own organisations, seeking to consolidate and expand their power across Iraqi society?



Actually, this emergence of the state in civil society goes against the classic liberal democratic model that insists on limiting the power of the state in the economic and civic sphere of activity. The state, through its political parties, is strongly reinserting itself in Iraqi civil society and is leading Iraq away from liberal democracy to a more interventionist model. In such a model, the state is the main, unchecked actor in the political, economic and civic dimensions. This trend puts at risk good governance and hence democratic advances. Consequently, Iraqi civil society is composed of two types of actors with opposing agendas: genuine secular liberal civil society organisations seeking to promote liberal democracy are facing party-sponsored organisations seeking to entrench their religious and political gains across civil society. The genuine democratisation of the state and civil society in Iraq is thus under threat. Hence, Robinson's argument about building hegemony through gaining the consent of the masses to the US-backed elites in power does not seem relevant. As things stand in Iraq, even if there are neoliberal-oriented elites in Baghdad, the sectarian realities animating Iraqi society are at the forefront of the political debate, not the fake democratisation for the sake of neoliberal advances in the country. Democratic advances in Iraq are limited less by a US-backed plan to promote polyarchy in complement to neoliberal economic policies than by the struggle between Iraqi political actors to win over the battle for civil society. The insertion of Iraq in the global capitalist economy under the leadership of capitalist transnationally-oriented elites is not complete. Robinson, because of his rejection of the nation-state as a framework of analysis, does not account for such developments and hence, is not in a position to conclude that the hegemony of Iraqi transnationally-oriented elites over civil society is not a reality. The same conclusions are reached regarding Robinson's discourse on the opening of the Iraqi economy to global capitalism.

### *Iraq for sale?*

Robinson claims that the US sought the general privatisation and opening of natural resources to transnational interests in Iraq with the adoption of CPA Order 39, opening the Iraqi economy to foreign investments. He implies that this is a step in the direction of foreign ownership of natural resources, including oil; the proof that savage capitalism is at work in Iraq. However, while Order 39 opens the Iraqi markets to foreign investments, ownership of Iraqi natural resources is specifically forbidden in the text. Moreover, Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs) amounted to close to nothing for a long period of time in occupied Iraq.<sup>74</sup> Investors do not invest in high risk countries, even though this statement has to be tempered thanks to an improvement in the security situation since 2007. As a recent report underlines, direct investments in Iraq in 2009 drastically rose, however, 'largely reflective of a handful of multi-billion dollar energy deals that are the first wave of investments as Iraq moves to develop its hydro-carbon industries'.<sup>75</sup> Of course, reconstruction contracts went to US firms to start with but that was essentially because of the nature of the projects and the US-perceived efficiency of local contractors: massive infrastructure projects for which Iraqi contractors did not have the technology and resources to deal with, essentially also because of the decrepit state of the infrastructure under Saddam. However, it is important to note that, even when Iraqi contractors could have proved a better option in low technology-high labour intensive cases, thanks to their cheaper fees, they rarely won the contracts. As the US Government Accountability Office (GAO) points out, the conditions in Iraq and the lack of contract oversight leads to 'fraud, waste and abuse'<sup>76</sup> and hinders the reconstruction effort.<sup>77</sup> Consequently, there is no questioning that the US administration attributed major infrastructure contracts to American companies

in priority as a form of return on investment in the invasion and occupation. However, to affirm that this illustrates the forces of global capitalism at work proves difficult in light of the legislative developments in Iraq.

Indeed in March 2006, the US government implemented the Iraqi First Act, which brought down barriers preventing Iraqi businesses competing with international companies for US government contracts. Local businesses were supported through a programme aiming at developing skills and business practices to enhance Iraqi competitiveness. That led 53 state-owned companies to restart their activities. Overall, by June 2007, Iraqi companies had won contracts with US government for a total of \$1 billion – representing 42 per cent of all contracts awarded.<sup>78</sup> These facts contradict Robinson's claims. To be fair, he could not have addressed them because these developments occurred after the publication of his article. Nonetheless, further developments in the economic liberalisation of Iraq tended to undermine further Robinson's thesis about the limitless insertion of global capitalism in the country.

Moreover, in 2006, the Investment Law replaced CPA Order 39. Far from comprehensively opening the Iraqi economy to foreign direct investments, this law regulated investments in the housing sector and kept out of it oil and gas extraction and production,<sup>79</sup> the banking and insurance sectors. The opening and partial privatisation of the Iraqi economy is a fact but it does not reach the amplitude claimed by Robinson. It seems that the privatisation at work in Iraq is rather selective and less triggered by transnationally-oriented local capitalist elites than generated by the need to develop the infrastructure critical to the provision of essential services and to securing revenues for the government. As the news has recently shown, seven years into the reconstruction, Iraqis grow impatient at the lack of regular electricity provision and running water.<sup>80</sup> Iraq needs foreign investments and skills to provide for its population and hence to contribute to an amelioration of the security situation by mitigating discontentment. Thus, one can argue that the opening of the Iraqi economy finds its dynamics domestically more than in an external imposition of neoliberal economic policies by the US. The hegemony of international capitalist forms of social reproduction faces saturation in Iraq due to the local realities affecting the postwar reconstruction process.<sup>81</sup>

In addition, oil contracts were kept out of the Investment Law because of a lack of agreement between the three Iraqi communities about how to share the revenues generated by new oil exploitation. A look at the contracts signed by the Iraqi governments reveals that far from selling Iraq's resources to foreign interests, the government limited the claims of transnational corporations that will develop the Iraqi oil sector. Nine technical service contracts were awarded to oil companies for a total of \$100 billion in investment.<sup>82</sup> The bidding process took several years because the Iraqi government consistently refused to allow foreign companies to claim a share of the oil on top of providing a fee-based service.<sup>83</sup> These short-term contracts concern the redevelopment of six oil fields to boost production. In 2008, the Iraqi government initiated a bidding procedure with 41 companies, including six state-owned companies (Algeria, Vietnam, Angola, Pakistan, Turkey and Thailand), to award long-term contracts for extraction in existing and new oil fields.<sup>84</sup> As the then oil minister Shahrastani emphasised the fee-based contracts will not give the winning companies a share in the revenue from oil sales 'because this wealth belong to Iraq only and thus we will not allow anyone to share the Iraqis' oil'.<sup>85</sup>

In conclusion, classic neoliberal policies are at work in the country but not to the extent Robinson would like us to believe. Local political and economic realities in Iraq shaped the economic liberalisation of the country at a moderate tempo. Far from an outrageous and uncontrolled opening of Iraqi markets to the forces of transnational capitalism, we witness a more measured liberalisation that reflects the political interests at stake.

Transnational elites have not taken control of Iraq but currently battle local groups representing various religious, ethnic, political and economic interests. Low intensity democracy was partially promoted by the US in Iraq but the conditions affecting and the local reactions to democracy promotion strategies lead us to nuance Robinson's claim that polyarchy is exclusively at work in Iraq.

## Conclusions

This article originates in a discomfort regarding the role given by William Robinson to democracy promotion within his theory of global capitalism. According to Robinson, contemporary democracy promotion is in fact the promotion of low intensity democracy or polyarchy; a model promoting liberal democracy with its focus on electoral procedures, a strict dichotomy between state and civil society and the protection of the sphere of private interests. Polyarchy organises the capitalist elites' domination of popular masses, avoids thorough democratisation of social life – including claims for enhanced economic and social justice, and facilitates the penetration of global capitalism in peripheral and semi-peripheral regions.<sup>86</sup> While we acknowledge the link that exist between the promotion of a model of liberal democracy and the capitalist turn imposed on economies subjected to such politico-economic liberalisation, we claim that Robinson misunderstands the content of democracy promotion because of his focus on the transnational and corollary dismissal of the local framework of analysis. While it is important to engage in a critical politico-economic analysis of democracy promotion, this should not come at the price of instrumentalisation of democracy promotion. We laud a return to the local, or nation-state, as framework of analysis of the political economy of democracy promotion. Researchers of democracy promotion need to remain aware of the fact that democracy promotion is not necessarily merely an instrument in the hands of neoliberal transnational elites seeking to insert capitalism in every single country.

In contrast, we argue that democratisation processes are not always characterised by the conceptual dominance of the neoliberal politico-economic model that reduces the role of democracy to supporting transnational capitalist advances. Returning to Gramsci and replacing the nation-state at the centre of the analysis is critical to understanding how democracy and democratisation relate to the capitalist mode of production. The comprehensive observation of the effects and the interactions between democracy promotion strategies and those at the receiving end shows that the successful promotion of polyarchy is not as straightforward as it seems. By limiting his empirical analysis to an observation of a top-down imposition of democracy promotion strategies, Robinson does not provide a comprehensive account of how these strategies are received, processed and reacted to by popular masses. We conclude that Robinson's theory of global capitalism would gain in strength by implementing a review of the role played by democracy promotion in strategies of spreading global capitalism. As the Iraqi case illustrates, the privatisation of parts of the Iraqi economy should not be our main worry. Democracy promotion in Iraq is the victim of sectarian and interest-based pressures that impede its development. The Iraqi state and its components are growing strong and civil society is on the defensive. Iraq is far from providing Robinson with the empirical evidence of a neoliberal transnational project at work. We are not even in a position to claim that polyarchy, and its emphasis on an institutional model of democracy with electoral procedures at the core of the exercise of democracy, is at work in Iraq. Democracy and liberalism are currently losing ground in Iraq, in favour of a return to a more authoritarian and patriarchal form of exercise of political power. This statement underscores the limitations of assessing democracy promotion from a

transnational perspective; unable to pinpoint local realities and interests that are dichotomous from the transnational focus on global capitalism and its subservient liberal democracy.

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