On Cosmopolitanism and (Vernacular) Democratic Creativity

Or, There Never Was a West

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At the tail-end of the eighteenth century those who called themselves democrats were, according to John Markoff, 'likely to be very suspicious of parliaments, downright hostile to competitive political parties, critical of secret ballots, uninterested or even opposed to women's suffrage, and sometimes tolerant of slavery' (1999: 661) – hardly surprising, for those who wished to revive something along the lines of ancient Athens.

At the time, outright democrats – men like Tom Paine, for instance – were considered a tiny minority of rabble-rousers even within revolutionary regimes.[1] Things only began to change in the first half of the next century. In the United States, as the franchise widened in the first decades of the nineteenth century, and politicians were increasingly forced to seek the votes of small farmers and urban labourers, some began to adopt the term. Andrew Jackson led the way. He started referring to himself as a democrat in the 1820s; within twenty years, almost all political parties, not just populists but even the most conservative, began to follow suit. In France, socialists began calling for 'democracy' in the 1830s, with similar results: within ten or fifteen years, the term was being used by even moderate and conservative republicans forced to compete with them for the popular vote (Dupuis-Deris 1999, 2004). The same period saw a dramatic reappraisal of Athens, which – again starting in the 1820s – began to be represented as embodying a noble ideal of public participation, rather than a nightmare of violent crowd psychology (Saxonhouse 1993). This is not, however, because anyone, at this point, was endorsing Athenian-style direct democracy, even on the local level. (In fact, one rather imagines it was precisely this fact that made the rehabilitation of Athens possible.) For the most part, politicians simply began substituting the word 'democracy' for 'republic', without any change in meaning. Myself, I suspect the new positive appraisal of Athens had more to do with popular fascination with events in Greece at the time than anything else: specifically, the war of independence against the Ottoman Empire between 1821 and 1829. It was hard not to see it as a modern replay of the clash between the Persian Empire and Greek city states narrated by Herodotus, a kind of founding text of the opposition between freedom-loving Europe and the despotic East. And of course changing one's frame of reference from Thucydides to Herodotus could only do Athens' image good.

When novelists like Victor Hugo and poets like Walt Whitman began touting democracy as a beautiful ideal – as they began to do soon after – they were not, however, referring to word games on the part of elites but the broader popular sentiment that caused small farmers and urban labourers to look with favour on the term to begin with – even back when the political elite was still largely using it as a term of abuse. The 'democratic ideal', in other words, did not emerge from the Western literary-philosophical tradition. It was, rather, imposed on it. In fact, the notion that democracy was a distinctly 'Western' ideal only came much later. For most of the nineteenth century, when Europeans defined themselves against 'the East' or 'the Orient', they did so precisely as 'Europeans' – not 'Westerners'.[2] With few exceptions, 'the West' referred to the Americas, considered lands as crude and uncivilised as the East was considered overly refined and decadent. It was only in the 1890s, when Europeans began to see the United States as part of the same coequal civilisation, that many started using the term in its current sense (GoGwilt

[1] Thomas Jefferson for example is remembered as the founder of the 'Democrat-Republican Party' but in fact when founded in 1792 it was known simply as the 'Republican' party: the Federalists called its members 'Democrats' as a term of abuse, to associate them with mob rule, though later they came to adopt the term themselves.

[2] One reason this is often overlooked is that Hegel was among the first to use the term 'the West' in its modern sense, and Marx often followed him in this. However, this usage was, at the time, extremely unusual.

1995; Lewis and Wigen 1997: 49–62). Huntington's 'Western civilisation' comes even later: this notion was first developed in American universities in the years following World War I (Federici 1995: 67).[3] Over the course of the twentieth century, the concept of 'Western civilisation' proved perfectly tailored for an age that saw the gradual dissolution of colonial empires, since it managed to lump together the former colonial metropoles with their wealthiest and most powerful settler colonies while, at the same time, insisting on their shared moral and intellectual superiority, and abandoning any notion that they necessarily had a responsibility to 'civilise' anybody else. The peculiar tension evident in phrases like 'Western science', 'Western freedoms' or 'Western consumer goods' – do these reflect universal truths that all human beings should recognise? or are they the products of one tradition among many? – would appear to stem directly from the ambiguities of the historical moment. The resulting formulation is, as I've noted, so riddled with contradictions that it is hard to see how it could have arisen except to fill a very particular historical need.

If you examine these terms more closely, however, it becomes obvious that all these 'Western' objects are the products of endless entanglements. 'Western science' was patched together out of discoveries made on many continents, and is now largely produced by non-Westerners. 'Western consumer goods' were always drawn from materials taken from all over the world, many explicitly imitated Asian products, and nowadays, most are produced in China. The same, I think, can be said of 'Western freedoms'.

A World Systemic Perspective

In debates about the origins of capitalism, one of the main bones of contention is whether capitalism – or, alternately, industrial capitalism – emerged primarily within European societies, or whether it can only be understood in the context of a larger world-system connecting Europe and its possessions, markets and sources of labour overseas. It is possible to have the argument, I think, because so many capitalist forms began so early – many could be said to already be present, at least in embryonic form, at the very dawn of European expansion. This can hardly be said for democracy. Even if one is willing to follow the by-now accepted convention and identify republican forms of government with that word, democracy only emerges within centres of empire like England and France, and colonies like the United States, after the Atlantic system had existed for almost 300 years.

Giovanni Arrighi, Iftikhar Ahmad and Min-wen Shih (1997) have produced what is to my mind one of the more interesting responses to Huntington's famous argument that democracy, like other liberal values, is an exclusive property of Western civilisation. One of the most telling points: it was at exactly the same time as European powers came to start thinking of themselves as 'democratic' – in the 1830s, '40s and '50s – that those same powers began pursuing an intentional policy of supporting reactionary elites against those pushing for anything remotely resembling democratic reforms overseas. Great Britain was particularly flagrant in this regard: whether in its support for the Ottoman Empire against the rebellion of Egyptian governor Muhammed Ali after the Balta Limani Treaty of 1838, or in its support for the Qing imperial forces against the

[3] At a time when German intellectuals were already locked in debate about whether they were part of the West at all. Another origin of the idea of 'the West' was in fact from Russian discourse, where Slavophiles defined themselves against it.

Taiping rebellion after the Nanjing Treaty of 1842. In either case, Britain first found some excuse to launch a military attack on one of the great Asian *ancien régimes*, defeated it militarily and imposed a commercially advantageous treaty; then, almost immediately upon doing so, swung around to prop that same regime up against political rebels who clearly were closer to their own supposed 'Western' values than the regime itself. (In the first case, this took the form of a rebellion aiming to turn Egypt into something more like a modern nation-state, in the second, an egalitarian Christian movement calling for universal brotherhood.) After the Great Rebellion of 1857 in India, Britain began employing the same strategy in her own colonies, self-consciously propping up 'landed magnates and the petty rulers of 'native states' within its own Indian empire' (ibid.: 34). All of this was buttressed on the intellectual level by the development around the same time of Orientalist theories that argued that in Asia such authoritarian regimes were inevitable, and democratising movements were unnatural or did not exist.[4]

> Huntington's claim that Western civilisation is the bearer of a heritage of liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, and other similarly attractive ideals – all of which are said to have permeated other civilisations only superficially – rings false to anyone familiar with the Western record in Asia in the so-called age of nation-states. In this long list of ideals, it is hard to find a single one that was not denied in part or full by the leading Western powers of the epoch in their dealings either with the peoples they subjected to direct colonial rule or with the governments over which they sought to establish suzerainty. And conversely, it is just as hard to find a single one of those ideals that was not upheld by movements of national liberation in their struggle against the Western powers. In upholding these ideals, however, non-Western peoples and governments invariably combined them with ideals derived from their own civilisations in those spheres in which they had little to learn from the West. (Arrighi, Ahmad and Shih 1997: 25)

Actually, I think one could go much further. Opposition to European expansion in much of the world, even quite early on, appears to have been carried out in the name of 'Western values' that the Europeans in question did not yet even have. Engseng Ho (2004: 222–4), for example, draws our attention to the first known articulation of the notion of jihad against Europeans in the Indian Ocean, a book called 'Gift of the Jihad Warriors in Matters Regarding the Portuguese', written in 1574 by an Arab jurist named Zayn al-Din al Malibari, and addressed to the Muslim sultan of the Deccan state of Bijapur. In it, the author makes a case that it is justified to wage war against the Portuguese, demonstrating as he did so how they destroyed a tolerant, pluralistic society in which Muslims, Hindus, Christians and Jews had always managed to coexist.

In the Muslim trading ecumene of the Indian Ocean, some of the values elaborated by Huntington – a certain notion of liberty, a certain constitutionalism,[5] very explicit ideas about freedom

[4] One should probably throw in a small proviso here: Orientalism allowed colonial powers to make a distinction between rival civilisations, which were seen as hopelessly decadent and corrupt, and 'savages', who insofar as they were not seen as hopelessly racially inferior, could be considered possible objects of a 'civilising mission'. Hence Britain might have largely abandoned attempts to reform Indian institutions in the 1860s, but it took up the exact same rhetoric later in Africa.

[5] As Engseng Ho points out to me (personal communication, 7 February 2005), constitutionalism in the Indian Ocean tended to emerge first in ports of trade, where merchants, with or without the help of local rulers, were likely to

of trade and the rule of law – had long been widely cherished. Others, such as religious tolerance, were simply assumed – though in some cases they appear to have become values as a result of Europeans coming onto the scene – if only by point of contrast. My real point is that one simply cannot put any of these values down to the one particular moral, intellectual or cultural tradition. They arise, for better or worse, from exactly this sort of interaction.

I also want to make another point though. We are dealing with the work of a Muslim jurist, writing a book addressed to a South Indian king. The values of tolerance and mutual accommodation he wishes to defend – actually, these are our terms, he himself speaks of 'kindness' – might have emerged from a complex intercultural space, outside the authority of any overarching state power, and they might have only crystallised as values in the face of those who wished to destroy that space. Yet in order to write about them, to justify their defence, he was forced to deal with states and frame his argument in terms of a single literary-philosophical tradition: in this case, the legal tradition of Sunni Islam. There was an act of reincorporation. There inevitably must be, once one re-enters the world of state power and textual authority. And when later authors write about such ideas, they tend to represent matters as if the ideals emerged from that tradition, rather than from the spaces in between.

So do historians. In a way, it is almost inevitable that they should, considering the nature of their source material. They are, after all, primarily students of textual traditions, and information about the spaces in between is often very difficult to come by. What's more, they are – at least when dealing with the 'Western tradition' – writing, in large part, within the same literary tradition as their sources. This is what makes the real origins of democratic ideals – especially the popular enthusiasm for ideas of liberty and popular sovereignty that obliged politicians to adopt the term 'democracy' to begin with – so difficult to reconstruct.

The 'Influence Debate'

In 1977, Donald Grinde, an historian of the Iroquois confederacy (and himself a Native American and member of AIM, the American Indian Movement) wrote an essay proposing that certain elements of the US constitution – particularly its federal structure – were inspired in part by the League of Six Nations. He expanded on the argument in the 1980s with another historian, David Johansen (Grinde 1977; Grinde and Johansen 1991) suggesting that, in a larger sense, what we now would consider America's democratic spirit was partly inspired by the example of Native Americans.

Some of the specific evidence they assembled was quite compelling. The idea of forming some sort of federation of colonies was indeed proposed by an Onondaga ambassador named Canassatego, exhausted by having to negotiate with so many separate colonies during negotiations over the Lancaster Treaty in 1744. The image he used to demonstrate the strength of union – a bundle of six arrows – still appears on the Seal of the Union of the United States (the number was later increased to thirteen). Ben Franklin, present at the event, took up the idea and promoted it widely through his printing house over the next decade, and in 1754 his efforts came to fruition with a conference in Albany, New York – with representatives of the Six Nations in attendance – that drew up what came to be known as the Albany Plan of Union. The plan was ultimately

create systems of commercial law, and written communal rules more generally, by mutual agreement. How it spread inland is an interesting question.

rejected both by British authorities and colonial parliaments, but it was clearly an important first step. More importantly, perhaps, proponents of what has come to be known as the 'influence theory' argued that the values of egalitarianism and personal freedom that marked so many Eastern Woodlands societies served as a broader inspiration for the equality and liberty promoted by colonial rebels. When Boston patriots triggered their revolution by dressing up as Mohawks and dumping British tea into the harbour, they were making a self-conscious statement of their model for individual liberty.

That Iroquois federal institutions might have had some influence on the US constitution was considered a completely unremarkable notion in the nineteenth century when it was occasionally proposed, but when it began to get attention again in the 1980s, it set off a political maelstrom. Many Native Americans strongly endorsed the idea, Congress passed a bill acknowledging it; all sorts of right-wing commentators immediately pounced on it as an example of the worst sort of political correctness. At the same time, though, the argument met immediate and quite virulent opposition both from professional historians, considered authorities on the Constitution, and from anthropological experts on the Iroquois.

The actual debate ended up turning almost entirely on whether one could prove a direct relation between Iroquois institutions and the thinking of the framers of the constitution. Payne (1997), for example, noted that some New England colonists were discussing federal schemes before they were even aware of the League's existence; in a larger sense, opponents argued that proponents of the 'influence theory', as it came to be known, had essentially cooked the books by picking out every existing passage in the writings of colonial politicians that praised Iroquoian institutions, while ignoring hundreds of texts in which those same politicians denounced the Iroquois, and Indians in general, as ignorant murdering savages. Their opponents, they said, left the reader with the impression that explicit, textual proof of an Iroquoian influence on the Constitution existed, and this was simply not the case. Even the Indians present at constitutional conventions appear to have been there, officially, to state grievances, not to offer advice. Invariably, when colonial politicians discussed the origins of their ideas, they invoked Classical, Biblical or European examples: the book of Judges, the Achaean League, the Swiss Confederacy, the United Provinces of the Netherlands. Proponents of the influence theory, in turn, replied that this kind of linear thinking was simplistic: no one was claiming the Six Nations were the only or even primary model for American federalism, just one of many elements that went into the mix – and considering that it was the only functioning example of a federal system of which the colonists had any direct experience, to insist it had no influence whatever was simply bizarre. Here, they certainly had a point. Indeed some of the objections to the 'influence theory' raised by anthropologists seem so peculiar – for example, Elisabeth Tooker's objection (1988) that since the League worked by consensus and reserved an important place for women, and the US constitution used a majority system and only allowed men to vote, the one could not possibly have served as inspiration for the other; or Dean Snow's remark (1994: 154) that such claims 'muddle and denigrate the subtle and remarkable features of Iroquois government.' One can only conclude that Native American activist Vine Deloria was right to suggest much of this was simply an effort by scholars to protect what they considered their turf – a knee-jerk defence of intellectual property rights (in Johansen 1998: 82).

In other quarters, the proprietary reaction is much clearer. 'This myth isn't just silly, it's destructive,' wrote one contributor to *The New Republic*. 'Obviously Western civilisation, beginning in Greece, had provided models of government much closer to the hearts of the Founding

Fathers than this one. There was nothing to be gained by looking to the New World for inspiration' (Newman 1998: 18). If one is speaking of the immediate perceptions of many of the United States' 'founding fathers', this may well be true. But if we are trying to understand the Iroquois influence on American *democracy*, then matters look quite different. As we've seen, the Framers did indeed identify with the classical tradition, but they were hostile to democracy for that very reason. They identified democracy with untrammelled liberty and equality, and insofar as they were aware of Indian customs at all most were likely to see them as objectionable for precisely the same reasons.

If one re-examines some of the mooted passages, this is precisely what one finds. John Adams, remember, had argued in his Defence of the Constitution that egalitarian societies do not exist; political power in every human society is divided between the monarchical, aristocratic, and democratic elements. He wrote that the Indians resembled the ancient Germans in that 'the democratical branch, in particular, is so determined, that real sovereignty resided in the body of the people,' but all three managed to convince themselves they were really the ones in charge. This he said worked well enough when one was dealing with populations scattered over a wide territory with no real concentrations of wealth, but, as the Goths found when they conquered the Roman empire, it could only lead to confusion, instability, and strife as soon as such populations became more settled and had significant resources to administer (Adams 1797: 296, see Levy 1996: 598, Payne 1997: 618). His observations are typical. Madison, even Jefferson, tended to describe Indians much as did John Locke, as exemplars of an individual liberty untrammelled by any form of state or systematic coercion – a condition made possible by the fact that Indian societies were not marked by significant divisions of property. They considered Native institutions obviously inappropriate for a society such as their own, that did.[6]

Still, Enlightenment theory notwithstanding, nations are not really created by the acts of wise lawgivers. Neither is democracy invented in texts, even if we are forced to rely on texts to divine its history. Actually, the men who wrote the constitution were not only for the most part wealthy landowners; few had a great deal of experience in sitting down to make decisions with a group of equals – at least, until they became involved in colonial congresses. Democratic practices tend to first get hammered out in places far from the purview of such men, and if one sets out in search for which of their contemporaries had the most hands-on experience in such matters, the results are sometimes startling. One of the leading contemporary historians of European democracy, John Markoff, in an essay called 'Where and When Was Democracy Invented?', remarks, at one point, very much in passing:

> [T]hat leadership could derive from the consent of the led, rather than be bestowed by higher authority, would have been a likely experience of the crews of pirate vessels in the early modern Atlantic world. Pirate crews not only elected their captains, but were familiar with countervailing power (in the forms of the quartermaster and ship's council) and contractual relations of individual and collectivity (in the form

[6] One of the most fascinating pieces of evidence produced by the pro-influence theory side is a text from 1775, during the writing of the Articles of Confederation, when colonial representatives negotiating with the Six Nations were willing to represent the entire idea of a colonial union as stemming from Canassatego's suggestion to their 'forefathers' some 30 years before. In other words they were perfectly content to speak of the federation as an Iroquois idea when speaking to the Iroquois – despite the fact that, if one simply considers texts written or public statements made by colonial politicians to European or settler audiences at the time, one would not be able to produce evidence they were still unaware that Canassatego had ever existed (Grinde and Johansen 1995: 627).

> of written ship's articles specifying shares of booty and rates of compensation for on-the-job injury). (Markoff 1999: 673n62)

As a matter of fact, the typical organisation of eighteenth century pirate ships, as reconstructed by historians like Marcus Rediker (2004: 60–82), appears to have been remarkably democratic. Captains were not only elected, they usually functioned much like Native American war chiefs. Granted total power during chase or combat, they were otherwise treated like ordinary crewmen. Those ships whose captains were granted more general powers also insisted on the crew's right to remove them at any time for cowardice, cruelty, or any other reason. In every case, ultimate power rested in a general assembly, that often ruled on even the most minor matters, always, apparently, by majority show of hands.

All this might seem less surprising if one considers the pirates' origins. Pirates were generally mutineers, sailors often originally pressed into service against their will in port towns across the Atlantic, who had mutinied against tyrannical captains and 'declared war against the whole world'. They often became classic social bandits, wreaking vengeance against captains who abused their crews, and releasing or even rewarding those against whom they found no complaints. The make-up of crews was often extraordinarily heterogeneous. 'Black Sam Bellamy's crew of 1717 was "a Mix'd Multitude of all Country's," including British, French, Dutch, Spanish, Swedish, Native American, African American, and two dozen Africans who had been liberated from a slave ship' (Rediker 2004: 53). In other words, we are dealing with a collection of people in which there was likely to be at least some first-hand knowledge of a very wide range of directly democratic institutions, ranging from Swedish *things* to African village assemblies to Native American councils such as those from which the League of Six Nations itself developed, suddenly finding themselves forced to improvise some mode of self-government in the complete absence of any state. It was the perfect intercultural space of experiment. In fact, there was likely to be no more conducive ground for the development of new democratic institutions anywhere in the Atlantic world at the time.

I bring this up for two reasons. One is the obvious one. We have no evidence that democratic practices developed on Atlantic pirate ships in the early part of the eighteenth century had any influence, direct or indirect, on the evolution of democratic constitutions sixty or seventy years later. Nor could we. While accounts of pirates and their adventures circulated widely, having much the same popular appeal as they do today, they would be about the very last influence that a French, English, or colonial gentleman would ever have been willing to acknowledge. This is not to say that pirate practices were likely to have influenced democratic constitutions. Only that we would not know if they did. One can hardly imagine things would be too different with those they ordinarily referred to as 'the American savages'.

The other reason is that frontier societies in the Americas were probably more similar to pirate ships than we would be given to imagine. They might not have been as densely populated, or in as immediate need of constant cooperation, but they were spaces of intercultural improvisation, largely outside of the purview of states. Colin Calloway (1997; cf. Axtell 1985) has documented just how entangled the societies of settlers and natives often were, with settlers adopting Indian crops, clothes, medicines, customs, and styles of warfare, trading, often living side by side, sometimes intermarrying, and most of all, the endless fears among the leaders of colonial communities and military units that their subordinates were absorbing Indian attitudes of equality and individual liberty. At the same time as New England Puritan minister Cotton Mather, for example,

was inveighing against pirates as a blaspheming scourge of mankind, he was also complaining that fellow colonists had begun to imitate Indian customs of child-rearing (for example, by abandoning corporal punishment), and increasingly forgetting the principles of proper discipline and 'severity' in the governance of families for the 'foolish indulgence' typical of Indians – whether in relations between masters and servants, men and women, or old and young (Calloway 1997: 192).[7] This was true most of all in communities, often made up of escaped slaves and servants who 'became Indians' outside the control of colonial governments entirely (Sakolsky and Koehnline 1993), or island enclaves of what Linebaugh (1991) has called 'the Atlantic proletariat', the motley collection of freedmen, sailors, ships whores, renegades, Antinomians and rebels who developed in the port cities of the North Atlantic world before the emergence of modern racism, and from whom much of the democratic impulse of the American – and other – revolutions seems to have first emerged. But it was true for ordinary settlers as well. The irony is that this was the real argument of Bruce Johansen's book 'Forgotten Founders' (1982), that first kicked off the 'influence debate' – an argument that largely ended up getting lost in all the sound and fury about the constitution: that ordinary Englishmen and Frenchmen settled in the colonies only began to think of themselves as 'Americans', as a new sort of freedom-loving people, when they began to see themselves as more like Indians. And that this sense was inspired not primarily by the sort of romanticisation at a distance one might encounter in texts by Montesquieu or even Jefferson, but rather, by the actual experience of living in frontier societies that were essentially as Calloway puts it, 'amalgams'. The colonists who came to America were in a unique situation: having fled the hierarchy and conformism of Europe, they found themselves face to face with an indigenous population far more dedicated to principles of equality and individualism than they had hitherto been able to imagine. They proceeded to exterminate them, even at the same time as they found themselves becoming like them, adopting many of their customs, mores and attitudes.

Crucially, during this period the Five (later Six) Nations were something of an amalgam as well. Originally a collection of groups that had made a kind of contractual agreement with one another to create a way of mediating disputes and making peace, they became, during their period of expansion in the seven-teenth century, an extraordinary jumble of peoples, with large proportions of the population war captives adopted into Iroquois families to replace family members who were dead. Missionaries in those days often complained that it was difficult to preach to Seneca in their own languages, because a majority were not completely fluent in it (Quain 1937). Even during the eighteenth century, for instance, while Canassatego was an Onondaga sachem, the other main negotiator with the colonists, Swatane (called Schickallemy) was actually French – or, at least, born to French parents in what's now Canada. On all sides, then, borders were blurred. We are dealing with a graded succession of spaces of democratic improvisation, from the Puritan communities of New England, with their town councils, to frontier communities, to the Iroquois themselves.

[7] 'Though the first English planters in this country had usually a government and a discipline in their families and had a sufficient severity in it, yet, as if the climate had taught us to Indianise, the relaxation of it is now such that itis wholly laid aside, and a foolish indulgence to children is become an epidemical miscarriage of the country, and like to be attended with many evil consequences' (Calloway 1997:192).

Traditions as Acts of Endless Refoundation

Thinking about the relation of cosmopolitanism and democracy, my particular concern has been to consider where democratic innovation – that is, the creation of new forms of egalitarian political decision-making – tends to come from. It seems to me that the most likely place to look for it is in what I refer to as 'cosmopolitan spaces', situations where people of a wide variety of backgrounds and drawing on a variety of traditions find themselves obliged to improvise some mode of collective governance outside the effective supervision of the state.

Democratic *practice*, whether defined as procedures of egalitarian decision-making, or government by public discussion, tends to emerge from situations in which communities of one sort or another manage their own affairs outside the purview of the state. The absence of state power means the absence of any systematic mechanism of coercion to enforce decisions; this tends to result either formations like Greek hoplites or pirate ships, a system of majority voting (since in such cases the results, if it did come down to a contest of force, are readily apparent). Democratic innovation, and the emergence of what might be called democratic values, has a tendency to spring from what I call zones of cultural improvisation, usually also outside of the control of states, in which diverse sorts of people with different traditions and experiences are obliged to figure out some way to get on with one another. The creation of European colonial empires after 1492 had the indirect effect of creating many such cosmopolitan spaces along its fringes. Frontier communities whether in Madagascar or Medieval Iceland, pirate ships, Indian Ocean trading communities, Native American confederations on the edge of European expansion, could all be taken as examples. Obviously, such societies do not necessarily produce democracy. They might well produce forms of brutal tyranny. Often there is a mix of both. Nonetheless, this is where new democratic forms are most likely to come from.

All of this has very little to do with the great literary-philosophical traditions that tend to be seen as the pillars of great civilisations: indeed, with few exceptions, those traditions are explicitly hostile to democratic procedures and the sort of people that employ them. Governing elites, in turn, have tended either to ignore these forms, or to try to stomp them out.

At a certain point in time, however, first in the core states of the Atlantic system – notably England and France, the two that had the largest colonies in North America – this began to change. The creation of that system had been heralded by such unprecedented destruction that it allowed endless new improvisational spaces for the emerging 'Atlantic proletariat'; states, under pressure from social movements, began to institute reforms; eventually, those working the elite literary tradition started seeking precedents for them. The result was the creation of representative systems modelled on the Roman Republic that then were later redubbed, under popular pressure, 'democracies' and traced to Athens.

Actually, I would suggest that this process of democratic recuperation and refoundation was typical of a broader process that probably marks any civilisational tradition, but was then entering a phase of critical intensity. As European states expanded and the Atlantic system came to encompass the world, all sorts of global influences appear to have coalesced in European capitals, and to have been reabsorbed within the tradition that eventually came to be known as 'Western'. The actual genealogy of the elements that came together in the modern state, for example, is probably impossible to reconstruct – if only because the very process of recuperation tends to scrub away the more exotic elements in written accounts. Historians, who tend to rely almost exclusively on texts and pride themselves on exacting standards of evidence, therefore often end up,

as they did with the Iroquois influence theory, feeling it their professional responsibility to act as if new ideas really do emerge from within textual traditions. Let me throw out two examples:

- *African fetishism and the idea of the social contract.* The Atlantic system of course began to take form in West Africa even before Columbus sailed to America. In a fascinating series of essays, William Pietz (1985, 1987, 1988) has described the life of the resulting coastal enclaves where Venetian, Dutch, Portuguese, and every other variety of European merchant and adventurer cohabited with African merchants and adventurers speaking dozens of different languages, a mix of Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, and a variety of ancestral religions. Trade within these enclaves was regulated by objects the Europeans came to refer to as 'fetishes', and Pietz does much to elaborate the European merchants' theories of value and materiality to which this notion ultimately gave rise. More interesting perhaps is the African perspective. Insofar as it can be reconstructed, it appears strikingly similar to the kind of social contract theories developed by men like Thomas Hobbes in Europe at the same time (MacGaffey 1994; Graeber 2005). Essentially, fetishes were created by a series of contracting parties who wished to enter into ongoing economic relations with one another, and were accompanied by agreements on property rights and the rules of exchange; those violating them were to be destroyed by the objects' power. In other words, just as in Hobbes, social relations are created when a group of men agree to create a sovereign power to threaten them with violence if they fail to respect their property rights and contractual obligations. There are even later African texts praising the fetish as preventing a war of all against all. Unfortunately, it is completely impossible to find evidence that Hobbes was aware of any of this: he grew up in a merchant's house, lived most of his life in port towns and very likely had met traders familiar with such customs; but his political works contain no references to the African continent whatsoever, other than one or two references to Classical Greek sources.

- *China and the European nation-state.* Over the course of the Early Modern period, European elites gradually conceived the ideal of governments that ruled over uniform populations, speaking the same language, under a uniform system of law and administration, and eventually, too, that this system should be administered by an meritocratic elite whose training should consist largely in the study of literary classics in that nation's vernacular language. The odd thing is that nothing approaching a precedent for a state of this sort existed anywhere in previous European history, though it almost exactly corresponded to the system Europeans believed to hold sway (and which to a large extent, did hold sway) in Imperial China.[8] Is there evidence for a Chinese 'influence theory'? In this case, there is a good deal. The prestige of the Chinese government evidently being higher, in the eyes of European philosophers, than African merchants, some such influences could be acknowledged. From Liebniz's famous remark that the Chinese should really be sending missionaries to Europe rather than the other way around, to the work of Montesquieu and Voltaire, one sees a succession of political philosophers extolling Chinese institutions. In addition there was a popular fascination with Chinese art, gardens, fashions and moral philosophy (Lovejoy 1955) at exactly the time that Absolutism took form – only to fade away in the nineteenth

[8] Obviously the Chinese state was profoundly different in some ways as well: first of all it was a universalistic empire. But Tooker to the contrary, one can borrow an idea without embracing every element.

> century once China had become the object of European imperial expansion. Obviously, none of this constitutes proof that the modern nation state is in any way of Chinese inspiration, but considering the nature of the literary traditions we're dealing with, even if it were true, this would be about as much proof as we could ever expect to get.

So is the modern nation-state really a Chinese model of administration, adopted to channel and control democratic impulses derived largely from the influence of Native American societies and the pressures of the Atlantic proletariat, that ultimately came to be justified by a social contract theory derived from Africa? Probably this would be wildly overstating things. Still, it seems naïve indeed to assume it was simply a coincidence that democratic ideals of statecraft first emerged during a period in which the Atlantic powers were at the centre of vast global empires and an endless confluence of knowledge and influences, or that they eventually developed the theory that those ideals sprang instead exclusively from their own 'Western' civilisation – despite the fact that during the period in which Europeans had not been at the centre of global empires they had developed nothing of the kind.

Finally, I think it is important to emphasise that this process of recuperation is by no means limited to Europe. In fact, one of the striking things is how quickly most everyone else in the world began playing the same game. To some degree, as the example of al-Malibari suggests, it was probably happening in other parts of the world even before it began happening in Europe. Of course, overseas movements only started using the word 'democracy' much later – but even in the Atlantic world, that term only came into common usage around the middle of the nineteenth century. It was also around the middle of the nineteenth century – just as European powers began recuperating notions of democracy for their own tradition – when Britain led the way in a very self-conscious policy of suppressing anything that looked like it might even have the potential to become a democratic, popular, movement overseas. The ultimate response, in much of the colonial world, was to begin playing the exact same game. Opponents to colonial rule scoured their own literary-philosophical traditions for parallels to ancient Athens, along with examining traditional communal decision-making forms in their hinterlands. Material wasn't hard to find. As Steve Muhlenberger and Phil Payne (1993; cf. Baechler 1985), for example, have documented, if one simply defines it as decision-making by public discussion, 'democracy' is a fairly common phenomenon; examples can be found even under states and empires, if only, usually, in those places or domains of human activity in which the rulers of states and empires took little interest. Greek historians writing about India, for example, bore witness to any number of polities they considered worthy of the name. Between 1911 and 1918, a number of Indian historians (K.P. Jayaswal, D.R. Bhandarkar, R.C. Majumdar)[9] began examining some of these sources, not only Greek accounts of Alexander's campaigns but also early Buddhist documents in Pali and early Hindu vocabularies and works of political theory. They discovered dozens of local equivalents to fifth century Athens on South Asian soil: cities and political confederations in which all men formally classified as warriors – which in some cases meant a very large proportion of adult

[9] Rather than pretend to be an expert on early twentieth-century Indian scholarship, which I'm not, I'll just reproduce Muhlenberger's footnote: K.P. Jayaswal, Hindu Polity: A Constitutional History of India in Hindu Times 2nd and enl. edn. (Bangalore, 1943), published first in article form in 1911–13; D.R. Bhandarkar, Lectures on the Ancient History of India on the Period form 650 to 325 BC, The Carmichael Lectures, 1918 (Calcutta, 1919); R.C. Majumdar. Corporate Life in Ancient India. (original written in 1918; cited here from the 3rd edn, Calcutta, 1969, as Corporate Life).

males – were expected to make important decisions collectively, through public deliberation in communal assemblies. The literary sources of the time were almost as hostile to popular rule as Greek literary sources,[10] but until around 400 AD at least, such polities definitely existed, and some of the deliberative mechanisms they employed continued to be employed, in everything from the governance of Buddhist monasteries to craft guilds, until the present day. It is possible, then, to say that the Indian, or even Hindu, tradition was always inherently democratic, and this became a strong argument for those seeking independence or self-rule.

These historians clearly overstated their case. After independence came the inevitable backlash. Historians began to point out that these 'clan republics' were very limited democracies at best: the overwhelming majority of the population – women, slaves, those defined as outsiders – were completely disenfranchised. Of course all this was true of Athens as well, and historians have pointed that out at length too. But it seems to me questions of authenticity are, at best, of secondary importance. Such traditions are always largely fabrications. To some degree that's what traditions are: the continual process of their own fabrication. The point is that in every case, what we have are political elites – or would-be political elites – identifying with a tradition of democracy in order to validate essentially republican forms of government; also, that not only was democracy not the special invention of 'the West', neither was this process of recuperation and refoundation. True, elites in India started playing the game some 60 years later than those in England and France, but historically, this is not a particularly long period of time. Rather than seeing Indian, or Malagasy, or Tswana, or Maya claims to being part of an inherently democratic tradition as an attempt to ape the West, it seems to me, we are looking at different aspects of the same planetary process: a crystallisation of long-standing democratic practices in the formation of a global system, in which ideas were flying back and forth in all directions, and the gradual, usually grudging, adoption of some of these ideas (and, occasionally, practices) by ruling elites.

Contemporary Parallels

Our habit of framing everything in terms of 'Western' ideologies, or 'Western' discourse (and then arguing over whether these are good or evil) tends to blind us, I think, to the actual historical dynamics at play – and certainly hobbles any ability to assess their real political implications. Let me choose just one example here: the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas that began in 1994, and some of the scholarly arguments that have swirled around it.

The Zapatista base is made up of speakers of a variety of Maya languages – Tzeltal, Tojalobal, Ch'ol, Tzotzil, Mam – originally from communities traditionally allowed a certain degree of self-governance (largely so they could function as indigenous labour reserves for ranches and plantations located elsewhere), who had formed new, largely multi-ethnic, communities in newly opened lands in the Lacandon (Collier 1999; Ross 2000, Rus, Hernandez and Mattiace 2003). In other words, a perfect example of what I've been calling spaces of democratic improvisation: a jumbled amalgam of people, most with at least some initial experience of methods of communal self-governance, that found themselves in new communities outside the immediate supervision of the state. They were, too, at the fulcrum of a global play of influences, absorbing ideas from ev-

[10] I say 'almost' because Early Buddhism was something of an exception. The Buddha himself appears to have been a supporter of governance by popular assembly. The Brahmanical tradition though is uniformly hostile. Some of the first political tracts in India contain advice to kings on how to co-opt and suppress democratic institutions.

erywhere; they also, by their own example, had an enormous impact on social movements across the planet. The first Zapatista *encuentro* in 1996, for example, eventually led to the formation of an international network, People's Global Action (PGA) based on principles of autonomy, horizontality and direct democracy, stretching from India to Brazil. It was PGA, in turn, that put out the original call for the famous actions against the WTO meetings in Seattle in November 1999. The central principles of Zapatismo – the rejection of vanguardism, the emphasis on creating viable alternatives in one's own community as a way of subverting the logic of global capital – has had an enormous influence on participants in social movements that in some cases are at best vaguely aware of the Zapatistas themselves and have certainly never heard of PGA. No doubt the growth of the Internet and global communications have allowed the process to proceed much faster than ever before, and allowed for more formal, explicit alliances, but I doubt this sort of ramifying effect is in any way unprecedented. In fact I suspect it represents a very common historical pattern.

Our accustomed terms of analysis and, even more, of debate, tend to make all this very difficult to see. This is true even of those who are nothing if not sympathetic. Let me take as an example an author whose position is in many ways quite close to my own. In a book called *Cosmopolitanism* (2002), literary theorist Walter Mignolo writes a response to an essay by Slavoj Žižek that argues that those on the Left need to temper their critiques of Eurocentrism in order to embrace democracy, since this is, he argues, 'the true European legacy from ancient Greece onward' (1998: 1009). A remarkable statement in and of itself, of course. Mignolo's response is to examine the cosmopolitanism of Vittoro and Kant (that Žižek praises), showing just how much their ideas took shape within, and indeed presumed, the brutal violence of European colonial empires. He then invokes Zapatista calls for democracy as a counter-example:

> The Zapatistas have used the word democracy, although it has a different meaning for them than it has for the Mexican government. Democracy for the Zapatistas is not conceptualised in terms of European political philosophy but in terms of Maya social organisation based on reciprocity, communal (instead of individual) values, the value of wisdom rather than epistemology, and so forth… The Zapatistas have no choice but to use the word that political hegemony imposed, though using that word does not mean bending to its mono-logic interpretation. Once democracy is singled out by the Zapatistas, it becomes a connector through which liberal concepts of democracy and indigenous concepts of reciprocity and community social organisation for the common good must come to terms. (Mignolo 2002: 180)

Mignolo calls this 'border thinking'. He suggests it might be taken as a model for how to come up with a healthy, 'critical cosmopolitanism', as opposed to the Eurocentric variety represented by Kant, or Žižek. It is an appealing idea. The problem though, it seems to me, is that in doing so, Mignolo himself ends up falling into a more modest version of the very essentialising discourse he's trying to escape.

First of all, to say 'the Zapatistas have no choice but to use the word [democracy]' is simply untrue. Of course they have a choice. Other indigenous-based groups have made very different choices, and insist their own traditions of egalitarian decision-making as having nothing to do

with democracy.[11] The Zapatista decision to embrace the term, it seems to me, was more than anything else a decision to reject anything that smacked of a politics of identity, and to appeal for allies, in Mexico and elsewhere, among those interested in a broader conversation about forms of self-organisation – in much the same way as they also sought to begin a conversation with those interested in re-examining the meaning of the word 'revolution'. Second of all, and even more serious, Mignolo falls into the same trap as so many who invoke 'the West': comparing Western theory with indigenous practice. Just like an anthropologist who compares concepts derived from observing the way people act as 'dividuals' in India or Papua New Guinea with some philosopher's conception of 'the Western individual' (rather than from, say, the way people act in a church in Florence or New Jersey), he contrasts democracy as 'conceptualised in terms of European political philosophy' with democracy as it emerges in 'Maya social organisation.' But in fact, Zapatismo is not simply an emanation of traditional Maya practices. Its origins, rather, have to be sought in a prolonged confrontation between those practices and, among other things, the ideas of local Maya intellectuals (many, presumably, not entirely unfamiliar with the work of Kant), liberation theologists (who drew inspiration from prophetic texts written in ancient Judea), and mestizo revolutionaries (who drew inspiration from the works of Chairman Mao, from China). Democracy, in turn, did not emerge from anybody's discourse. It is as if simply taking the Western literary tradition as one's starting point – even for purposes of critique – means authors like Mignolo always somehow end up trapped inside it.

In reality, the 'word that political hegemony imposed' is in this case itself a fractured compromise. If it weren't, we would not have a Greek word originally coined to describe a form of communal self-governance applied to representative republics to begin with. It is exactly this contradiction the Zapatistas were seizing on. In fact, the contradiction seems impossible to get rid of. Liberal theorists (e.g. Sartori 1987: 279) do occasionally evince a desire to brush aside Athenian democracy entirely, to declare it irrelevant and be done with it, but for ideological purposes, such a move would be simply inadmissible. After all, without Athens, there would be no way to claim that 'the Western tradition' had anything inherently democratic about it. We would be left tracing back our political ideals to the totalitarian musings of Plato or, if not, perhaps compelled to admit there's really no such thing as 'the West'. In effect, liberal theorists have boxed themselves into a corner. Obviously, the Zapatistas are hardly the first revolutionaries to have seized on this contradiction, but their doing so found an unusually powerful resonance – this time, in part, because this is a moment of a profound crisis of the state.

The Impossible Marriage

In its essence, I think, the contradiction is not simply one of language. It reflects something deeper. For the last 200 years, democrats have been trying to graft ideals of popular self-governance onto the coercive apparatus of the state. In the end, the project is simply unworkable. States cannot, by their nature, ever truly be democratised. They are, after all, basically ways of organising violence. The American Federalists were being quite realistic when

[11] The Aymara movement in Bolivia, to select one fairly random example, chose to reject the word 'democracy' entirely on the grounds that in their people's historical experience the name has only been used for systems imposed on them through violence. I am drawing here on a conversation with Nolasco Mamani (who is, among other things, the Aymara observer at the UN) in London during the European Social Forum 2004.

they argued that democracy is inconsistent with a society based on inequalities of wealth, since, in order to protect wealth, one needs an apparatus of coercion to keep down the very 'mob' that democracy would empower. Athens was a unique case in this respect because it was, in effect, transitional: there were certainly inequalities of wealth, even, arguably, a ruling class, but there was virtually no formal apparatus of coercion. Hence there is no consensus among scholars whether it can really be considered a state at all.

It is precisely when one considers the problem of the modern state's monopoly of coercive force that the whole pretence of democracy dissolves into a welter of contradictions. For example: while modern elites have largely put aside the earlier discourse of the 'mob' as a murderous 'great beast', the same imagery still pops back, in almost exactly the form it had in the sixteenth century the moment anyone proposes democratising some aspect of the apparatus of coercion. In the US, for example, advocates of the 'fully informed jury movement', who point out that the Constitution actually allows juries to decide on questions of law, not just of evidence, are regularly denounced in the media as wishing to go back to the days of lynchings and 'mob rule'. It is no coincidence that the United States, a country that still prides itself on its democratic spirit, has also led the world in mythologising, even deifying, its police.

Francis Dupuis-Deri (2002) has coined the term 'political agoraphobia' to refer to the suspicion of public deliberation and decision-making that runs through the Western tradition, just as much in the works of Constant, Sieyés, or Madison as in Plato or Aristotle. I would add that even the most impressive accomplishments of the liberal state, its most genuinely democratic elements – for instance, its guarantees on freedom of speech and freedom of assembly – are premised on it. It is only once it becomes absolutely clear that public speech and assembly is no longer, can no longer be, the medium of political decision-making, but at best an attempt to criticise, influence or make suggestions to political decision-makers, that they can be treated as sacrosanct.

Jurists, meanwhile, have long been aware that the coercive nature of the state ensures that democratic constitutions are founded on a fundamental contradiction. Walter Benjamin (1978) summed it up nicely by pointing out that any legal order that claims a monopoly of the use of violence has to be founded by some power other than itself, which inevitably means, by acts that were illegal according to whatever system of law came before it. The legitimacy of a system of law thus necessarily rests on acts of criminal violence. American and French revolutionaries were, after all, guilty of high treason according to the system of law under which they grew up. Of course, sacred kings from Africa to Nepal have managed to solve this logical conundrum by placing themselves, like God, outside the system. But as political theorists from Agamben to Negri remind us, there is no obvious way for 'the people' to exercise sovereignty in the same way. Either the right-wing solution (constitutional orders are founded by, and can be set aside by, inspired leaders – whether Founding Fathers or Fuhrers – who embody the popular will), or the left-wing solution (constitutional orders gain their legitimacy through popular revolutions) lead to endless practical contradictions. In fact, as sociologist Michael Mann has hinted (1999), much of the slaughter of the twentieth century derives from some version of this problem. The demand to simultaneously create a uniform apparatus of coercion over every piece of land on the surface of the planet, and to maintain the pretence that the legitimacy of these apparatuses derives from 'the people', has led to an endless need to determine who, precisely, 'the people' are supposed to be. Try to solve the problem using the coercive mechanisms themselves and terrible things are likely to happen.

> In all the varied German law courts of the last eighty years – from Weimar to Nazi to communist DDR to the Bundesrepublik – the judges have used the same opening formula: 'In Namen des Volkes', 'In the Name of the People.' American courts prefer the formula 'The Case of the People versus X'. (Mann 1999: 19)

In other words, 'the People' must be evoked as the authority behind the allocation of state violence despite the fact that any suggestion that the proceedings be in any way democratised is likely to be greeted with horror by all concerned. Mann suggests that pragmatic efforts to work out this contradiction, to use the apparatus of violence to identify and constitute a 'people' whom those maintaining that apparatus feel worthy of being the source of their authority, has been responsible for at least 60 million murders in the twentieth century alone.

It is in this context that I might suggest that the anarchist position – that there really is no resolution to this paradox – is really not all that unreasonable. The democratic state was always a contradiction. Globalisation has simply exposed the rotten underpinnings – by creating the need for decision-making structures on a planetary scale where any attempt to maintain the pretence of popular sovereignty, let alone participation, would be obviously absurd. The neoliberal solution of course is to declare the market the only form of public deliberation one really needs, and to restrict the state almost exclusively to its coercive function. In this context, the Zapatista response – to abandon the notion that revolution is a matter of seizing control over the coercive apparatus of the state, and instead proposing to refound democracy in the self-organisation of autonomous communities – makes perfect sense. This is the reason an otherwise obscure insurrection in southern Mexico caused such a sensation in radical circles to begin with. Democracy, then, seems for the moment to be returning to the spaces in which it originated: cosmopolitan spaces – the spaces in between. What forms it will eventually take, if it does manage to detach itself from the mechanisms of systematic violence in which it has been entangled, is something we cannot, at present, predict. But the endless elaboration of new cosmopolitan spaces, and the retreat of states in so many parts of the globe, suggests that there is the potential at least for a vast outpouring of new democratic creativity.

Notes

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David Graeber
On Cosmopolitanism and (Vernacular) Democratic Creativity
Or, There Never Was a West
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