

Positive Alternatives to Empire

A Project of the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs

Promoting Democracy?

There was once a great debate on whether, in principle, democracy is a Western imposition. That now seems deeply implausible. As Amartya Sen and others have demonstrated in wide-ranging studies:

- Democracy and human rights were not invented or practiced only in the West.
- Without democracy, rulers have few incentives to pay attention to the poor, resulting in governmental underperformance and even famine.
- Without democracy, there are few effective channels to alert rulers to pressing problems and little information on how to avert disasters.

Democracy movements from Albania to Zimbabwe attest to people's desire to express their views and exercise control over their governments. And the vast majority of those governments claim to be democratic in some sense. Even Hu Jintao, the new Chinese premier, has called for greater local and intra-party 'democracy' in China to reduce corruption and improve government delivery.

If democracy is a universal value (however contested its interpretation) and one that is essential to alleviating the plight of the most vulnerable people in our world, then the key issue is not *whether* democracy should be promoted but rather *how* and *by whom*. When are powerful actors legitimately encouraging democracy and when are they imposing values or using such values to advance other agendas? In the process of answering this question, the world has become divided again.

Unilateral vs. Multilateral Approaches to Promoting Democracy

After 9/11, after Afghanistan, after Iraq, the new schism of our time is between *unilateralists* and *multilateralists*. The Bush administration is fundamentally unilateralist: America must project its power and its values across the world to deter all possible threats and promote 'regime change'; it does so in the name of security and democracy. America must forge

strategic alliances to further these ends but America does not require the consent of others to make its actions legitimate. Some unilateralists support direct control of other societies in the medium term (the ‘strong’ Empire approach) but most merely call for some kind of ongoing American presence and influence (the ‘mild’ Empire approach—sometimes mild enough that supporters deny it counts as Empire).

The multilateralist outlook contrasts starkly with such visions, by placing emphasis instead on inclusive procedures of decision-making. These procedures may prevent decisive action at times but they promote fairness in the use of power and protect against the abuse of power. Furthermore, inclusive procedures at the international level provide legitimacy, impetus and sustainability to the forms of democracy developed within states.

With George W. Bush at the helm, unilateralists currently have the upper hand. How dangerous is the unilateral approach to ordering the world? According to the world’s most eminent historian of *imperium*, Eric Hobsbawm,

“overwhelming US military and technological dominance combined with a domestic inclination toward economic protectionism make for an unprecedented kind of militaristic global empire ... US militarism could destabilize the world”.

One of America’s youngest public intellectuals, Jedediah Purdy, sounds a similar alarm about some potential spillover effects on democracy and human rights:

“India and China, which alone contain almost half the world’s population outside the wealthy Euro-American zone... hold tremendous potential both for human flourishing and for an illiberal and belligerent future. These developments are not susceptible, even as a purely pragmatic matter, to imperial intervention; but they are significantly affected by whether the United States behaves, and is perceived to behave, as an attractive model of liberal modernity or as an arrogant and threatening power”¹.

Dire warnings indeed. Yet they are echoed and elaborated across almost the entire political spectrum.

¹ Eric Hobsbawm, “After the Winning of the War,” in *Le Monde Diplomatique* (June 2003) as summarised by the Global Policy Forum, www.globalpolicy.org; Jedediah Purdy, “Liberal Empire: Assessing the Arguments,” in *Ethics and International Affairs*, Vol. 17 No. 2.

What are the positive alternatives to Empire? There can be few questions more in need of an urgent answer. But in contrast to the glamour of American *imperium*, multilateralist ideas are less neat, less epic, less Hollywood. Specific proposals to strengthen the rules and institutions of global co-operation and mobilize them to promote democracy don't yet resonate widely or constitute a coherent whole. Complain as much as one likes, but multilateralists have no 'big idea'. Without such a focused vision, there is little hope of producing systematic change, mobilizing the masses or influencing relevant elites.

The Project

The Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs is convening a series of high-level panels to address this gap in the global discourse. Drawing on the wisdom of leading thinkers and groundbreaking policy-makers, our aim is to provide *appealing strategic content* to a core idea: **Democratic Globalization**.

This resonant term captures a particular kind of multilateralism. First, it recognizes that economic globalization is outstripping political globalization with potentially disastrous consequences: the invisible hand of the market needs a 'thick glove' of rules and institutions governed by fair and inclusive procedures. Second, "democratic globalization" suggests that these rules and institutions need to be modified and mobilized to promote democracy. The difficulty lies in providing this two-pronged alternative to Empire and to Anarchy with definite and inspiring content.

The panel discussions will be complemented by public presentations and widely circulated publications. The most important of these will be an independent **Carnegie Report on Democratic Globalization**. This Report will not be a compromise document between a majority of states or social actors. Rather, it will articulate a (necessarily) more controversial set of views and strategies generated by a vanguard of leading multilateralist figures in the great debate on globalization and democracy.

Framing Questions

Panel 1: Methods to Promote Democracy without Empire

Many issues confront policy-makers who aim to promote rather than impose democracy. But what are the *key legitimate means* and *strategic intervention points* to realize democracy?

Our focus here will not be on intervention and the use of force (which the Carnegie Council has explored in other forums) but on identifying and strengthening the most promising non-violent economic and political multilateral means to promote democracy.

Some of the key economic and political means we will consider are:

1. Trade incentives – Which barriers might be lowered or raised in return for particular democratic reforms? Which goods and services could, if exported, substantially increase openness? Which treaties and clauses are most crucial in this regard?
2. Aid incentives – Which conditionalities, if any, should be placed on grants? On loans? On debt relief? Will the agenda of democracy necessarily be used to mask the parochial interests of developed states or can this abuse be effectively limited?
3. Sanctions – Should these be economic? Political? Cultural? In each case, where and at whom (how broadly) should they be targeted?
4. Recognition – How can inclusion in or exclusion from various political forums be used as incentives for democracy (e.g. Commonwealth, ASEAN)? Should sale of a country's resources as well as borrowing by non-democratic rulers be disallowed?
5. Publicity – Should pro-democracy media be created if few exist? How can local and international media be 'reoriented' to promote democratic values? How can technical support such as election monitoring and voter education have greater impact?
6. International Law – What is the role of international legal norms and institutions in determining the legitimacy of such coercive actions? What are the other key ways that international judicial institutions can use their mandates to enhance democracy?

Panel 2: Agents of Accountability

What can crucial *non-state actors* contribute to promoting democracy along the lines identified above? Addressing each of the areas above, we will consider the important roles of the following political actors:

- (1) International NGOs
- (2) International Media
- (3) Multinational Corporations
- (4) International Consumers
- (5) International Courts and Tribunals

We will constantly ask important questions about:

- (a) Representation – Why and when are these actors more ‘representative’ of democratic values and demands than the governments they corral and criticize?
- (b) Accountability – In what ways and domains can these actors themselves be held more accountable so as to increase their credibility and efficacy?
- (c) Effectiveness – How far can go-it-alone strategies work? In working together, is the central problem one of co-ordination, of vision, or of divergent interests?

An Historic Opportunity

The topic of Empire has moved center-stage. However, while unilateralists have a relatively clear agenda, multilateralists are often stuck carping on the sidelines. It is time to move beyond diagnosis and complaint. This year’s Carnegie Council’s New York Forums provide a context for leading multilateralists to talk to one another and identify shared and feasible goals and methods to promote democracy alongside human rights. The Carnegie Report and other widely disseminated publications will convey these discussions and conclusions to the wider community of scholars, policy-makers and activists. Our aim is not simply to stimulate debate but also to foster innovation and shared priorities. In our changed and dangerous world, there can be few more important tasks.