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PERSPECTIVES

Is contentious politics relevant in liberal democracy?

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In the wake of 9/11 there has been a great deal of discussion about democracy, threats to democracy, and the need to safeguard democracy. There are those in the US State Department who felt that with the United States under attack, one should not challenge its flawed claims to being the world's leading protector of democracy. In this essay I will interrogate the definition of democracy and move the discussion from the purely ideological political plane to include the economic. In so doing I want to insist on the centrality of contentious politics to the continued vibrancy of liberal democracy. For it is only through contentious debate and constructive criticism that we will be able to preserve that which is good in the system, and eliminate that which threatens to undermine it.

It is often the case that when we speak of "democracy" we conflate the political and the economic and assume that the much-celebrated equality contained in the political notion of "one-person, one-vote" also extends to the economic sphere. This is a fundamental mistake because as an economic system, capitalism is defined by the fundamental inequality of property ownership and structured inequality of access to the social fruits, and no amount of "equalizing" at the political and ideological levels can erase that fact. The reality is even starker when we are dealing with dependent capitalist countries whose economic structures and processes make no pretense at equality, and whose class structures are increasingly polarized. In this, the various dependent capitalist countries of the Third World stand out as compelling cases in point, but in what follows the English-speaking countries of the Caribbean will serve as my main point of reference.

In contrast to much public speculation and sentiment, the English-speaking Caribbean have not had a long tradition of democracy. Indeed, when speaking of democracy and the Caribbean peoples' responses to it, there is the common assumption that they are unquestionably democratic. Especially when compared to Latin American and African countries, where armed revolutions and political dictatorships are common marks in their history. Caribbean peoples, by contrast, have a sense that they are different, that they are more given to debating and talking out issues, accommodating political differences, and generally more open to diversity of opinions. Of course, no society or political system is perfect, but in the Caribbean it is widely felt that in terms of adherence to a democratic ideal they are unwavering.

My contention, however, is that while it is true that English-speaking countries have had fewer changes of government by military coups or armed struggle, this does not necessarily make them "democratic" or "more democratic" for that matter. What needs to be done here is to draw a distinction between (a) the *political assumption and perception* of democracy, and (b) the *culture* of democracy. For while in the Caribbean there is a general assumption or presumption that they are democratic societies, in practice they are not. This has to do with the fact that they are dependent capitalist societies with a deeply ingrained culture of capitalist democracy (an oxymoron?) that is only democratic in name. In liberal democratic countries governments do not govern. Rather, instead of the elected leaders, it is the non-elected powerful interests in the top corporations and the lobbyists who have the final say in matters that affect all citizens.

Because of the fact that Caribbean economies are dominated by foreign capital, even if their leaders were more nationally and regionally minded, there is not much room for local Caribbean economic actors to determine the shape and content of programs aimed at national or regional economic development and change. As a consequence, Caribbean capitalists have come traditionally to play the role of "junior partners" of international capital and are not instrumental in setting the economic directions of their countries. For these reasons, since economic control is out of their reach, politics and control of the state is the site of most of the contention and jockeying for power among Caribbean people and their political leaders. For if the economic avenues to power and enrichment are generally shut off, it is through state and political domination that chances for such activities are made possible. These "chances" include the possibility of graft and corruption that the media and much public commentary suggest are so much a part of the politics of the region. I imagine they are also part of the political process in many other dependent capitalist Third World countries today.

Add to this the enabling role of the local media, which are largely unprofessional, highly dependent on outside sources for news and programming, and increasingly devoted to political scandals, social gossip and small talk, and the promotion of local popular culture. The structure and content of the media mute serious political analysis and criticism, and lead to a growing cynicism among the population at large. Elections are rigged, leaders are corrupt, the poor are routinely ignored, and many feel that not a few police officers have some stake in the drug business. Together with these, the legal and court systems are woefully inadequate and overburdened; educational standards in public schools have hit rock bottom; and morality and decency have given way to a narcissistic and individualistic pursuit of a materialist and consumerist North American way of life.

These are not the bases on which a "viable" democracy is built. What does "one-person one-vote" mean when potential voters are undereducated, underemployed, underhoused, and undervalued by those who run the system? And because capitalism espouses a survival-of-the-fittest mentality, I argue that "true" democracy and capitalism are incompatible. Of course, this begs the definition of democracy and the specification of what I mean by "viable" and "true."

What I propose, then, is to provide an operational definition of "democracy" as an ideal type. To this end, I argue, and not terribly originally, that a democratic state or country is one that seeks to promote the *well-being* of either all or, at least, the majority of its citizens. Can the self-described liberal democratic countries of the Caribbean, or elsewhere in the Third World, pass this democratic test? A democratic society will create the conditions under which human dignity and life chances, especially for the weakest and least able, are enhanced. Such a society will make provisions for the voices of the people—particularly again, the marginalized—to be heard and taken seriously into account. The survival-of-the-fittest mentality does not take this into account and thus violates the spirit of democracy.

Of course there is likely to be disagreement, depending on the way one conceptualizes and defines well-being, human dignity, and life chances. Nevertheless, sticking to the idea of democracy as majority rule (of, for, and by the people), "democracy" is properly understood to be about recognizing the integrity of the social whole and doing what is necessary to promote its vitality. It is about balancing the community's and the individual's interests, and in those cases where they conflict, to side with the community; to accommodate as many of the popular voices as possible. Again, how do dependent capitalist Caribbean and other Third World countries measure up on this dimension?

As noted above, in the Caribbean there is liberal- or capitalist-democracy, which skirts the contradiction by promoting the ideological notion of *equal opportunity* to replace that of *equal condition*. In this sense "equality" is taken as a given, and is automatically presumed to colour all social, economic, and political undertakings. In other words, although premised on competition, all are thought to compete on a "level playing field" and all are said have "equal" access to the social goods that are thought to be distributed according to merit. While this is well known, where the confusion enters is when Caribbean (and other) people equate liberal- or capitalist-democracy with "democracy" proper. The emphasis on structured inequality between the owners and non-owners of productive property, and the fact that this is seen as definitive of the system, preclude any possibility of equating democracy with capitalism.

When the notions of "capitalism" and "equality" are conflated in the public's consciousness, those *individuals* who are able to secure fewer of the social goods are deemed merely to be more *lazy individuals* or just plain *unlucky individuals*. Invoking the *ideology of individualism* the contradiction is masked and escapes public notice, thus leaving intact the prevailing class structures of domination and exploitation that guarantee continued inequality. Thus, to invoke the example of Cuba, if we were to compare capitalist Cuba (pre-1959) with socialist Cuba, it is indisputable that as a community or society, the well-being and life chances of ordinary citizens of socialist Cuba are far greater than they were under the dependent capitalist regime. Let us not forget that the regime in question covered the period when Cuba was America's playground and when the dictator in Cuba was American-sponsored, like so many other dictators put in place around the world by supposedly well-intentioned liberal democratic leaders in the West.

Similarly, we may choose to compare the same citizens of socialist Cuba with those of dependent capitalist Haiti and Guyana, the two poorest countries in the Western hemisphere, or with Jamaica, Nicaragua, El Salvador etc., and assess the vital questions of education levels and literacy, medical and dental care, homelessness, sports and recreation, caloric intake, etc. Here, too, we may ask the same questions of contentious politics regarding liberal democracy, with respect to life chances, well-being, human dignity, and so on. What does the record show?

As dependent capitalist countries, those in the English-speaking Caribbean will have little difficulty qualifying as "capitalist democracies," but as I have been arguing, this is not to be confused with "equality." What happens if we were to focus on the political options or alternatives in these English-speaking Caribbean countries? To what extent are the citizens free to oppose dependent capitalism as an economic system and United States' interference in their countries?

In the age of global capitalism, to what extent are their economies "free" to exploit and develop national resources in keeping with the interests of the majority of their citizens? What does the history of revolutionary Cuba teach us about dependent capitalist democracy here? What about the contemporary experiences in Venezuela where the Chávez government is attempting to be more democratic and inclusive with respect to sharing the national oil wealth with the traditionally disenfranchised? Just as Castro in Cuba has found, the response of the liberal-democratic media around the world has been to delegitimize Chávez, to paint him as undemocratic and as bad for the masses of Venezuelans. Again, what does the record show?

To the extent that globalization creates sweat shops, displaces all types of farmers, disrupts traditional ways of life and the families that led them, it cannot be seen as a panacea for the problems of underdevelopment. Yet under the rubric of free trade, globalization and neoliberalism are promoted as the only way forward for the developing countries. Ignored in the process is the fact that globalization also gives rise to hundreds of thousands of economic refugees, makes obsolete many skilled jobs, and negatively affects people in the most far-flung corners of the globe. It is clear, then, that globalization, while intimately tied to capitalism, is *inimical to the idea and the practice of democracy and equality*. Hence I pose the rhetorical question: is globalization the cause of world poverty and its associated ills, or the solution to those problems?

As suggested, the main analytical point to be noted is the ideological opposition between an individualistic and voluntarist approach to social change, on one hand, and a more structural understanding, on the other. Those who favor a more bourgeois, individualistic approach can explain social inequality, poverty, homelessness, illiteracy, unemployment, etc. by invoking such things as lack of self-sacrifice and absence of a work ethic, and perhaps even a little bit of bad luck on the part of the poor, unemployed, and homeless masses in many "democratic," dependent capitalist, developing countries. But while not denying the existence of "human agency," the structuralists will tend to point to issues of class structure, race structure, gender structure, age structure etc., *to explain patterns* of social inequality among the poor, among minority ethnic groups, women, youth, and so on.

In the Caribbean, therefore, as with other Third World countries, where there is visible and palpable evidence of *patterned* social inequality within specific groups, the defenders of individualism and voluntarism never seem to associate these with the idea of "democracy" or the "failure" of democracy. The hegemonic understanding of "democracy" in Caribbean societies leads to a situation in which poverty, homelessness, illiteracy, unemployment and so on can exist comfortably alongside claims to be living in a free, equal, and democratic society. To comprehend this contradiction, I try to problematize and question the popular claim the there has been a long tradition of democracy in English-speaking Caribbean countries. I question how this can be so when our political independence is not yet fifty years old, and claims to economic independence, as individual states or collectively as a region, are not seriously entertained by credible scholars or economic specialists.

The Caribbean experiences of colonialism, slavery, and indentureship, and all their associated ills, such as patriarchy, racism, and classism, have stamped the individual countries and the region as a whole, with the scars of empire. These historical experiences were not premised on concerns for "democracy" as I have sought to understand it here. In the age of globalization, in particular, one certainly cannot take seriously any claims that these countries are "economically independent" in the true meaning of the term, for the resources of any given country are not utilized to promote or enhance the economic well-being of the people of that country.

This brings me back to a central theoretical and political consideration. It deals with what I have called the "other side of democracy," and suggests that in much common discourse about "democracy" there is more than meets the eye. There is a hidden side that disguises the inequalities in the system by getting the public to think of "democracy" purely as a political system that is to be divorced from capitalism as an economic system. The truth is, however, that capitalism, especially in the advanced industrial countries, is most commonly accompanied by liberal democracy. While capitalism is a system of economic exploitation based on inequality, it is skilfully presented to the public and consumed by them as a system of "equality."

In this understanding, the average Caribbean citizen is led to believe that there is "equal opportunity" for all to succeed if one is *individually* motivated and willing to work hard. Thus, while one hears a great deal about "political prisoners" and abuses of power in the non-liberal democratic, socialist countries, one never hears of the economic prisoners in the democratic capitalist countries as victims of abuse. In my take on the matter, economic prisoners are the poor of the system, but for political and ideological reasons, since poverty is a necessary and systemic part of the economic system of capitalism, one will never hear complaints concerning the poor, the homeless, and the destitute as economic prisoners. Stated differently, under capitalism both capital and labor can have equal democratic rights in the political sphere (one-person one-vote, freedom of speech, freedom of association, freedom of movement, etc.), but equality and freedom do not carry over into the separate economic sphere. Much of human life is determined in that economic sphere, outside the reach of democratic accountability. Capitalism can, therefore, coexist with the ideological notions of freedom and equality in a way that no other system of domination can.

The political and ideological implications are clear. For I include such abuses as homelessness and abject poverty, widespread illiteracy, denial of access to decent health care for lack of money and so on, as direct evidence of the violation of the democratic rights of citizens. This is the other side of democracy, where the contradictions of double-think and double-speak à la Orwell are so routine that they are not even recognized as hypocrisy. For these reasons I insist that contentious debate is the surest way of converting liberal democracy to true democracy, and ensuring that political leaders are kept on their toes.

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The United States, one of the champion promoters and imposers of liberal democracy, will hold presidential elections shortly. In the last election, when George Bush Jr. won the presidency for the second time, the percentage of voter abstention was quite high at 42 percent. Indonesia as a newly liberalized and democratized country—only since the fall of Suharto's authoritarian regime in 1998—will have its third democratic general election also in the coming year. In the last 2004 general election for legislative members, percentage of vote abstention in Indonesia was 24 percent (Apriyanto 2007). Based on several local elections from 2005 to 2008, in which the average abstention level was more than 30 percent, the level of voter abstention in this country is presumed to increase in the 2009 national election. A congruent phenomenon happened in post-apartheid South Africa, where the percentage of voter abstention in the 2002 election was about 23 percent (Electoral Commission of South Africa 2004).

In European countries—France, United Kingdom, and Spain, for instance—voter abstention rates are also quite high. In the United Kingdom, abstention levels stood at 41 percent in the 2001 election and 39 percent in 2005 (Bartle 2002); in France, voter abstention in the presidential election rose from 20 percent in 1995 to 28 percent in 2002, while that for legislative election increased from 31 percent in 1997 to 37 percent in 2002 (Abrial, Cautrès, and Mandran 2003). In Spain, the abstention levels were around 31 percent and 24 percent in the 2002 and 2004 general elections, respectively (Blakeley 2006). Surprisingly, citizens of European countries seemed to have contended against regional authority as reflected by the 54.5 abstention rate in the last 2004 election for the European Parliament (Torreblanca 2004).

A trend of more than 20 percent voter abstention, besides being a minor technical and administrative matter, can be read from two interrelated sides. First, it reflects a form of citizens' contentious action to systematically challenge political elites within the procedural democracy. Second, this phenomenon shows that the liberal democratic system cannot work as a vehicle for the absentees to convey their interests. There is a strong reluctance and distrust to elect their representatives or government leaders. The existing system has been deemed inadequate to provide a way to express their aspiration, especially to urge fundamental social changes.

In Indonesia, many poor rural villagers—including landless or near-landless peasants—usually vote for dominant political parties, although these parties neither have implemented programs to improve people's livelihood nor resolved their basic problems to access means of production. These poor people hardly formally convey their demand for land to the parties they have voted into office. They prefer to use other mechanisms, i.e., marches, rallies, and demonstrations in the city streets, or by directly occupying public spaces in what is usually called "street democracy." The Workers Party, which participated again in the elections in the post-authoritarian regime, has never won significant voters in the last three democratic elections, although there are huge numbers of working-class families in Indonesia. Workers' strikes, either to demand fair wages and other compensations or to protest against current trends in free-market employment system, are always organized by autonomous labor unions. The wave of protests involving millions of workers intensified right after political changes took place in 1998 (in the era of democratization), which should have provided opportunities for this population group to gain significant positions in the parliament had they translated this mass-based power into a political party.

Why do these people, both in rural and urban areas, prefer "street democracy" to mechanisms in an institutionalized democracy to express their demands and claims? Likewise, any attempt to demand environment-friendly policies, either in the advanced capitalist societies or developing countries, are still being conducted by social movement groups although some Green parties have themselves run in elections. Green parties have in fact been involved in many extra-parliamentary movements and extra-institutional routines to advance their claims.

Some elucidations on these phenomena can be put forward. First, by using de Geus's (2001) explanation, the liberal democratic system dominated by free market ideology led politicians and political parties to take the interests of trade and industry into account at the expense of the interests of the poor and the voiceless. Rather than risk defeat and/or their reelection, these politicians would prefer to represent the interests of the status quo, i.e., competition and consumption. The system is therefore more "reactive" than "proactive." The liberal democracy problem-solving mechanism, essentially based on political bargaining processes that tend to lead this system, has been far less efficacious in dealing with fundamental policy changes (de Geus 2001, 21-22).

Second, liberal democracy can indeed be described simply as a system based on individual rights and freedom, competition and consensus, and representation. Nevertheless, power is needed to access, participate in, deliberate on, and exercise all of those bases. In some cases, access, which is integral to participatory freedom (Raskin 2004), takes only the appearance of access. "Unless [a] person is part of an organization of political power, usually an interest group, or happens to be rich and so is able to use that wealth in the public space, access is severely limited" (Raskin 2004, 21). So, even in democracies, not every citizen can enjoy this freedom to the same extent, and such inequalities remain important issues of contestation.

Third, although social movements are often openly mobilized for democracy; they have overthrown authoritarian regimes and brought about the transition to democracy toward whose consolidation there are many digressions. Such a transition was experienced recently in some countries like Indonesia, for instance, where it was hijacked immediately by pro-status quo groups that had actually enjoyed some economic and political facilitation during the previous authoritarian regime. These hijackers who quickly got involved in institutionalized political processes include "bandits." Together with pro-status quo politicians, they wore new jackets as politico-businessmen and got themselves involved in controlling government assets, state budgets, and public policy-making processes to either expedite their businesses or make money through corruption. Other parties involved in controlling and dictating the processes of change in this transition were foreign capital forces that attempted to develop new mechanisms and legal structures both at the national and local levels to exploit natural and human resources; together with local capitalists, they took control of the economy.

Democracy, with breaks and irregularities, however, has decreased inequalities and protection from arbitrary government interventions (Tilly 2004, 127). This limitation of democracy, in this case liberal democracy, has often led to a fundamental question: Is liberal democracy a solution or problem? It is true that democracy provides the possibility for members of society to express their political aspirations through and in available formal procedures. Moreover, democracy as a system might open political opportunities for groups of people who consider those conventional procedures inadequate, or perhaps even as an obstacle that keeps them from expressing their aspirations and challenging the authority. Nevertheless, capitalist forces that ride this system for their own limited interests have caused liberal democracy as a political system to be questioned in the development of a just society.

Many studies have shown that even in consolidated democracies, the above characteristic has given rise to more, rather than fewer, social movements (Ruch 1989; Kriesi et al. 1995; Meyer and Tarrow 1998; Buechler 2000; Goldstone 2004). In this context, a significant contribution of social movements to democracy, either in political processes and practice or theory, is to urge the development of a new conception of democracy (della Porta and Diani 2006, 39). Offe (1985) asserts that social movements tend to expound a fundamental critique to conventional politics and shifting its endeavors from politics to meta-politics. Della Porta and Diani noted:

> From this point of view, social movements affirm the legitimacy (if not the primacy) of alternatives to parliamentary democracy, criticizing both liberal democracy and the "organized democracy" of the political parties . . . social movements assert that a system of direct democracy is closer to the interests of the people than liberal democracy, which is based on delegation to representative who can be controlled only at the moment of election and who have total authority to decide between one election and another. Moreover, as bearers of a neocommunitarian conception of democracy, social movements criticize the "organized" democratic model, based on the mediation by mass political parties and the structuring of "strong" interests, and seek to switch decision making to more transparent and controllable sites. (2006, 239-40)

It is not superfluous to say that social movements constitute an essential element of normal politics in modern society. As Goldstone said, "social movement activity is not so much an alternative to institutionalized politics . . . it is a complimentary mode of political action, which increases even as democratic politics spread" (2004, 336).

It has been shown that even in a procedural democracy, forms of contentious action might appear through a silent dissent of abstention. Moreover, social movements took on an important role as agents of a complimentary mode of political action, both in democratic societies and in societies still in transition to democracy. It has brought "participation," "direct democracy," and "democracy from below" back into stages that can push democracy as a more consolidated system in the end. In this vein, we can say that social movement is a form of contentious politics by itself and has the potential to contribute significantly in the process of consolidation to democracy.

Social movement and other forms of contentious politics—such as revolutions, strike waves, communal conflicts, and nationalism—essentially do not depart from some political system in which the challengers expressed their claims (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001; Tilly and Tarrow 2007). Contentious politics can occur in any form of political system. One can raise further questions about the end-result of these complex political actions, which will reflect a relationship between contenders' claims in contentious politics and an existing political system: What kind of society and its social structure and political system can be achieved by certain contentious actions? Is democracy, or any of its variants, an ideal type of society? Can democracy, specifically liberal democracy, and its possibilities answer claims advanced in a contentious action? Do challengers' claims only relate to some changes in mechanisms, procedures, orientation, and a specific subsystem within an existing political system or go beyond that?

For the radical challengers of democracy, specifically liberal democracy that developed in almost all countries in the world recently, this system is not a destination. For the fundamentalist internationalist Islamic groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir,[1] for instance, democracy, specifically western-type democracy, is not the answer to but the source of problem in the declining quality of life in Muslim societies (Hizb al-Tahrir 1995).[2] This movement upholds the revitalization of an ideal Islamic society with the *khilafah* as a prerequisite system.[3]

For marginalized people like the suffering peasants and workers, democracy, insofar as it fails to provide better livelihoods, is not the answer to their problems. For indigenous peoples, a liberal democratic system that has facilitated capital expansion to grab and control their customary land is an unfair system. Defenders of liberal democracy are people and groups that can control the democratic system and enjoy its political facilities in the service of their economic and political interests.

Many claims advanced in current contentious politics are questioning recent developments in liberal democracy that could not guarantee solutions to many problems, specifically related to poverty, social inequality, environmental degradation, and dehumanization. Liberal democracy was not considered to afford agendas for radical social change. Many radical challengers of democracy believe that there is no space for those agendas; thus democracy, especially liberal democracy, is not a system that can provide answers to those fundamental problems. The problem of who is dominating this system still haunted appropriation of this system to the fundamental social change agendas.

Contentious politics is praxis set in motion unconventional ways to engage with political agendas in either democratic or nondemocratic systems. Although unwarranted, at least a democratic system has the potential to open political opportunities for challenger groups to advance their claims.

NOTES

1. For sympathetic analysis of this movement organization, see Taji-Farouki 1996 and Mayer 2004. For nonsympathetic article, see Cohen 2003.
2. For a critical comment on Hizb ut-Tahrir's ideology of anti-western democracy, see also Rabbimov 2004.
3. *Khilafah* describes the government of Moslem state, headed by the *khalifah* (caliph). The word *khalifah* means "one who replaces someone who left or died." In this sense, the *khalifah* act as successor to Prophet Muhammad as the military and political leader of the Moslem state.

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I will make three claims about the ways in which liberal democracies have been shaped by contentious politics, extremely contentious politics, in fact. The first is centered on the contentious histories out of which democracy has often emerged or advanced; the second addresses the forms of contention that democracy inherently fosters; the third speculates about emerging patterns of contention that will be part of a democratic future (if there is to be one).

Democratic history—both advances and retreats—has been shaped by the most intense kinds of conflict there are, including war and revolution. Let us glance at the more stable democratic regimes around, as of the early twenty-first century. Consider Robert Dahl's (2002, 186) list of "countries steadily democratic since at least 1950," which turns out be precisely twenty-two. Had the outcome of the Second World War been different (and a democratic outcome did not look very probable in 1940), a minimum of ten of these would be most unlikely to be very democratic places today (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, Netherlands, and Norway). The United States was born in revolution and its democracy was significantly advanced in the bloodiest war in its entire history. French democracy underwent so many advances and retreats in revolutionary upheavals of various kinds that a major late-twentieth-century French historian was being provocative in entitling an essay "The Revolution Is Over" (Furet 1983, 11-109). Many countries on Dahl's list participated in bloody interstate wars that were widely understood as, at least in part, wars for and against democracy. Significant advances in democratization in other countries came about in settling civil wars (not just the United States but also—happily a lot less bloodily—in Switzerland and Costa Rica). Some countries on this list owe even their independent existence to the aftermath of wars (Austria, Belgium, Finland, Israel). Major advances in the political rights of workers and women occurred in a cluster of these countries as a result of the First World War, giving enormous boost to democratizing social movements; in other countries, women's voting rights came with the end of the next war (Markoff 1996, 73-75). Still, others underwent major episodes of antidemocratization that halted or reversed prior democratizing episodes. Tremendous shocks, not just incremental alterations, have been part and parcel of the history of democracy. Many scholars have been focused on explaining stable democracy, an important scholarly agenda because stability is worth understanding, but we must not lose sight of the many storms before the calm.

The Second World War was an important storm not merely for its effects in Europe and Japan, but for raising the question of democracy in a new way in many other places. The war enormously weakened the centers of European empire and ended with the crushing of Japan's attempt to supplant European and US domination in Asia. At the same time, anticolonial movements grew stronger. Over the next generation, the centuries-long history of colonial rule came to an end in most of the planet, opening the possibility of democratic self-governance in the former colonies.

In brief, the reality and even the mere possibility of democratic government have, with some frequency, emerged from war and revolution in many parts of the world.

Democracy has not only been born out of extreme conflict; it has also nurtured social movements and therefore has been deeply connected to some forms of contentious politics. Democracy has been a fertile soil for social-movement activism for a variety of reasons, of which I will briefly indicate five.

First, when governments claim their authority reposes on popular will, they thereby invite actions that claim to manifest that will. Democracy encourages social-movement activism.

Second, the pivotal role of electoral contests in modern democracies easily suggests to participants in conflict that they attempt to demonstrate that they have many adherents by staging "demonstrations" and organizing petition drives, powerful ways of getting attention from power holders concerned about the next election.

Third, the sorts of political rights and freedoms without which claims to democratic government would be empty—such things as freedoms of speech, publishing, and association—are also vehicles for social-movement action.

Fourth, electoral contests and social-movement activism draw on many of the same skills (organizing meetings, publicizing one's case, fund-raising, gathering information on rival parties, holding rallies, and much else besides). So the culture surrounding democratic-party competition sustains skills on which social movement organizations may draw, just as election-contesting parties do.

Fifth, the lobbying that accompanies electoral democracy also nurtures organizational skills quite similar to those useful to movement causes. At times, it may not even be possible to distinguish a lobbying organization that is maneuvering for influence with political leaders from a nongovernment organization (NGO) that is part of an activist network.

For such reasons, democracy generates movements on behalf of a wide variety of causes. But democracy also generates a particular sort of grievance that some of these movements come to espouse. The broad claim of equality, so vital a part of democratic ideology, is always in conflict with the reality of a wide variety of inequalities. If all are supposed to be "equal," social movements quickly discover the potency of claiming that in reality some are more equal than others and that this needs to be corrected. The meanings of equality, then, prove to be highly contentious in all democracies and a major catalyst for social-movement activism. Thus there is a very important class of social movements—movements about the character of democracy itself, which have continued to alter democratic practice.

The histories of democracy and empire have been deeply intertwined since the eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century, workers in the centers of world economic and military power obtained rights at home, but also manufactured the guns and warships, built and staffed the communications networks, and enlisted in (or were conscripted into) the armies that fostered and maintained colonial rule over subject peoples. Expanding economic power and the confidence that came from conquest made it easier for dominant strata to make concessions to their workers and accept or even encourage the expansion of democratic rights at home. Working-class parties in Europe might therefore support imperial projects. And peoples marginalized at home might find the lure of overseas adventure very promising—consider, for example, the greatly disproportionate role of the Irish and Scots in forging British rule abroad.

Any history of European democracy will devote many pages to Britain, France, and the Netherlands. But as late as the eve of the Second World War, most of the people under British, French, or Dutch rule had no voice in choosing those countries' parliaments. John Stuart Mill may be taken as an emblematic thinker at the nexus of democracy and domination, a champion of democratic rights in Britain and of imperial rule over India. But democratic notions could circulate among and be deployed by colonial subjects, too, and provided important ammunition to some of the movements for independence.

With the end of European domination, the radical decline in European birth rates, and the continuing poverty of now formerly colonial peoples, the ties forged by empire established the tracks along which those former subjects now flowed into Europe (and one could add analogous processes concerning the United States), posing new arenas for contention around the never-settled boundaries of inclusion and exclusion.

But the end of colonial rule did more than introduce new sources of contention into the former imperial centers. The postcolonial world has begun to reveal a wholly new arena that will be increasingly contentious as the twenty-first century advances. While a large portion of humanity lived in the colonial zone, a democrat could dream of a more democratic world advancing by, first, securing the national independence of subjugated peoples and, second, securing democracy in the new sovereign states. Democracy would advance state by state. We are beginning to see that the problem of future democratization, however, is not identical to expanding the number of democratic states for two main reasons:

First, *the separate states are vastly different in wealth and power*. The wealthy and powerful states can make critical decisions on which the lives of large numbers outside their borders depend. Consider the significance for Latin America and Africa of the agricultural policies of the United States and the European Union that spell ruin for already poor farmers elsewhere. In the early twenty-first century, the claims to a decent life of literally billions of people are threatened by, among other things, the market power of rich-country citizens to withdraw land from cultivation of food in order to produce biofuels to feed their cars. The democratization of the states of the global south will not be adequate to assure the realization of the core democratic notion that people collectively can shape their conditions of existence. I would expect, therefore, that the vast wealth and power gaps are going to generate great contention along with considerable rethinking of what one might mean by a more democratic world, not just a more democratic national state.

Second, *transnational organs of decision making are challenging notions of national sovereignty*. Not only are the states greatly unequal, but many consequential decisions of vast import are made beyond the states: by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, the United Nations, the European Union, and by other such bodies almost certain to be created in the years ahead to manage the numerous critical issues that humanity now confronts from environmental threats of a radically serious kind to the challenges of globalized criminality. Europeans commonly complain that not only is the European Union (EU) itself less democratic than its member-states but also that participation in the European Union has eroded those states' democratic character because much of their national legislation amounts to working out the details of EU rules. If the European Union raises questions about European democracy, what of the IMF or World Bank in relation to the many people for whom their decisions are profoundly consequential? So the power and probable proliferation of such organizations will, in the years ahead, also be raising the question of what we might imagine a more democratic world to be and whether the further democratization of the states is enough. As one sign of the beginnings of these debates, some of the recent scholarship on democracy and on social movements is beginning to address the question of democracy beyond the states (for example, Goodhart 2005; Morrison 2004; Smith 2008).

I have asserted that the achievement in some of the national states of our day of a considerable measure of democracy over the past few centuries has been profoundly characterized by conflict. I have also suggested that functioning democracies inherently generate the very specific forms of conflict associated with social-movement activism. There is no reason at all to think that the debates to come over a more democratic world will be any less contentious.

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The insight of classic political liberalism was that tolerating political conflict, even welcoming it, was an effective strategy to ensure the stability of the political system. Institutionalizing dissent was a way, quite literally, of containing it and its effects. States in Europe and North America came to organize around this principle through very different routes, more or less gradually, more or less deliberately, and arriving at a range of institutional solutions to the problem of incorporating diverse interests and constituencies.

Certainly, American founder James Madison was as self-conscious and explicit about this challenge as anyone who ever drafted a constitution. Madison started with a theory of human nature that posited selfish individuals veering toward a dangerous solipsism. He saw individuals asking an essential question about politics over and over again: what is in it for me? (This formulation will doubtless ring familiar to readers of neoclassical economics.) Unless proper precautions were taken, he argued, organized groups would seek to seize the state and use it to their own purposes, to the complete disregard of others, who would then, in various combinations, suffer, defect, and/or rebel. He sought to place viable precautions deep in the institutional structure of government. A few of his strategies have been recreated continually around the world (Meyer 2006).

First, the American government offered to include all with stake in the system and the appearance of sobriety the opportunity to influence government by extending the franchise. The definitions of stake and sobriety have changed over time, almost universally toward greater inclusiveness. Exclusions based on property ownership, gender, racial or ethnic identity, education, and age have gradually given way around the world to exclusion based on age and citizenship alone. With the franchise, those disenchanted with government policy always had a prospective strategy for redressing their grievances: joining with others similarly situated to elect sympathetic officials and lobby them. Rather than seizing storehouses or courtrooms and assassinating authorities, they could, conceivably, run those institutions, distribute food or justice, and become those authorities.

Second, by including a wide range of interests and constituencies in the ranks of those with a stake in the system, liberal democracy exponentially multiplies the number of potential challengers and the terms of those challenges. Paradoxically, this makes it harder for any one interest to capture the critical mass outside of government and launch an effective challenge. In order to win anything, all competitors have to go into the business of building alliances with others. The savvy activist, recognizing the fluid and temporary nature of these alliances, and that she may one day be able to find an ally among her current opponents, serves to temper political combat. (Tocqueville [1966] astutely made this observation 150 years ago, describing it as the principle of "self-interest, rightly understood.") Pistols give way to polemics, sabers to sarcasm, and bullets to ballots. Losers can continue to play the game, perhaps to win next time. The genius of liberalism was the recognition that by inviting dissent into conventional politics, authorities could go a long way toward channeling dissenters toward less disruptive activities.

Third, by incorporating a vast array of interests into government, and by creating divisions within the state (e.g., checks and balances, judicial or legislative reviews, constitutional restrictions or guarantees, multiple layers of government), liberal democracy offers putative reformers a shell game of targets, while simultaneously making it difficult for the State to deliver *enough* to *anyone*. All claimants recognize competitors everywhere, seeing that through political engagement they might be able to do a little better, and that without such efforts, they could be doing substantially worse. In essence, the system invites participation, providing threats for opting out and incentives for those who buy in.

Charles Tilly (1990) describes this process of buying allegiance as less toward an abstract goal of democracy or stability than more instrumentally as a means to defend borders and conduct war. Confronting populations understandably reluctant to part with their sons and dollars, authorities offered not only political inclusion but also social and economic benefits. Rather than subsisting on the thin soup of Spartan warriors, war-making states developed social welfare policies that demonstrated the benefits of inclusion, ultimately including some mix of civil rights and social subsidies. These reforms did not produce a coherent consensus on the content of public policy but, more important, institutionalized a means and location for doing politics. Political struggle moved from the provinces to focus on national capitols, and from groups taking direct control of their political fates and effecting redress (e.g., seizing grain, occupying property) to mobilizing the power and authority of the state on their own behalf. He called this "parliamentarization" (Tilly 1997). In liberal democracies, dissenters became dramatically less likely to seek to topple the state than to influence or even enter it. In a successful liberal democracy, all viable contenders develop a stake in the survival of the major political institutions in the polity. Demonstrators go from marching *on* Washington, for example, to marching *in* Washington. (As governance appears increasingly to take place above the level of the nation-state, the locus of protest about or against globalization has sometimes shifted to location of supranational institutions or decisions, such as Brussels or Geneva; see Tarrow 2005.)

Importantly, however, these developments did not end contention so much as change its form and location. It is risky to fetishize, intellectually, the form of contention. Constantly, we see analysts comparing (usually unfavorably) contemporary political struggle to a past example. Failing to find, for example, a revolutionary vanguard *or* identifiably charismatic leadership *or* an armed group controlling a geographic territory *or* a student strike *or* a worker-peasant alliance *or* large-scale public civil disobedience *or* virtually any other previous episode of contention, the analyst pronounces a puzzling absence of dissent. In fact, contention takes different forms at different places as employed by different constituencies. We need to embrace a more abstract and inclusive conceptualization of contention.

McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001, 5) offer a broad and useful, if perhaps wordy, conceptualization of contentious politics as "episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when (a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claims and (b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants" (also see Tarrow and Tilly 2006). Political contention involves collective action on policy that deviates from, or more commonly, augments, routine politics. Even as the major institutions in contemporary liberal democracies continue to function (e.g., states levy and collect taxes, courts make binding decisions about disputes, parties mobilize citizen concerns, contest elections, run governments, and dispense benefits), they do not come close to containing all politics. Those dissatisfied with their government's management of an important policy issue are likely to find others who agree with them, and to try to effect change through both routine and nonroutine ways. Throughout the liberal democracies of the North, for example, advocates of alternative approaches to immigration have embraced the full panoply of political strategies, including voting for (or against) nationalist parties, burning automobiles, beating immigrants, and staging large demonstrations. In effect, the dramatic and unusual contestation punctuates and adds emphasis to more contained forms of political dispute such as parliamentary debates. The social movement has become a staple form of political organization in liberal democracies, and movements gain their influence from linking the margins to the mainstream of politics (Meyer and Tarrow 1998).

Activists employ the full range of political tactics developed in the past, but they also innovate continually. Dramatically improved access to direct communication with faraway allies, most visibly through computer networks, and even international travel, organizers can now facilitate a kind of protest that does not require partisans to travel very far at all. National and international organizations can—and do—organize simultaneous demonstrations in hundreds of localities so that no one has to go very far from home to express an opinion; indeed, on-line petitions allow partisans to register their sympathies without leaving their desks. Thinly staffed on-line groups disseminate information and raise money, both for activist groups and candidates for office. Such efforts may be larger—and oddly less visible to outsiders—than the storied mass demonstrations of the past.

Contentious politics surely has not disappeared from liberal democracies. Indeed, as governments are less and less able to satisfy the diverse (and mobilized) constituencies they have created and sought to serve, more and more people resort to less conventional politics. The percentage of people who have participated in such outdoor politics has continually increased, as has the number of issues whose advocates employ protest as *part* of their political strategies. In recent years, practitioners of contentious politics have included advocates of diverse issues and positions, often including opposing movements (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996) on more than one side of many issues, including immigration, animal rights, climate change, foreign military intervention, environmental protection, and gay and lesbian rights.

At the same time, the conduct of most of these efforts has become, generally, less disruptive. Partly, it is because the forms of protest have become more familiar to both activists and authorities so that novelty and surprise are minimized. Partly, it is because states have continued to learn effective ways to allow protest without reacting in such a way to encourage it to spread. Police negotiate in advance with activists, designate safe spaces for demonstrators and their opponents, and even choreograph dramatic events and arrests (della Porta and Reiter 1998). Partly, it is because contentious politics has become so frequent and safe that its partisans have institutionalized, building large and often relatively stable organizations staffed with professionals committed to keeping their organizations large and stable (Staggenborg 1988). More generally, its function of contention becomes so routine that, in some ways, it has become routinized.

Important questions remain, of course, but they are less about whether contentious politics continues in liberal democracies than about how it does so, and how much it matters. Can the mobilization of opposing movements on the same issues paralyze states, oddly creating political stalemate rather than satisfaction? Does the adoption of less costly and less risky forms of political contention—signing an on-line petition or participating in a vigil at a local community center, rather than marching to the capital city carrying a placard or a gas mask—represent not only less disruption but also less commitment and investment? Does raising money to produce and distribute documentaries or television commercials about a contested issue increase purposeful public awareness and activism or self-satisfying entertainment? I do not think there are easy answers here, and I suspect the balance between vigorous and vicarious contention will vary across movements and over time. I am sure that the answers will define the politics of this new century.

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