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Review Essay

DEMOCRATIC TRIUMPH, SCHOLARLY PESSIMISM

Bruce Gilley

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Prior to 1989, the most important books and articles written about democratization asked whether democracy could take root in a largely authoritarian world. One set of volumes—*Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*¹—provided the most clinical analysis. But even earlier and more theoretical works, including Robert Dahl's *Polyarchy*² and Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*,³ shared a focus on how to get from here to there.

In the twenty years since the *Journal of Democracy* was launched in 1990, democracy has gone from being a minority regime-type to being the most common type of regime the world over. No longer is democracy the odd duck or the struggling underdog. Today, it is the reigning champion among systems of government. The leading works on democracy that have appeared during this two-decade span have all been written within the context of democratic ascendancy. Without knowing anything about what they say, a prescient observer might guess that many of them have trafficked in worries about whether the good times can last.

“Worry” is perhaps an understatement. A rereading of the great works on democratization of the last twenty years reveals a pessimism that has been largely overlooked. Democracy's vaunted status since 1989 has contributed to a growing sense of insecurity, one grounded in an underlying suspicion that history moves in cycles or waves. Even the most allegedly triumphalist works of this period reveal authors who have tossed and turned over democracy's fate. Most have argued that democracy rests on unstable foundations and that, if a few variables wobble ever so slightly, we will quickly find ourselves back in an authoritarian world. Indeed,

the hottest books on democratization these days concern not democratic advance but authoritarian resurgence.

If there was ever a triumphalist period, it was short-lived and muted. Samuel P. Huntington's 1991 book *The Third Wave*⁴ gave the worldwide spate of democratizations that had begun in Portugal in 1974 a catchy label and provided the first broad-brush explanation of why they had happened. Earlier, Huntington had cast doubt on prospects for global democratic advance⁵ and coauthored a deeply pessimistic book on Western democracies.⁶ Now he stressed the inability of authoritarian regimes, even "orderly" ones, to legitimate their rule in the face of increasingly educated, self-respecting, and therefore assertive citizens.

Still, Huntington's earlier pessimism about democracy remained. Indeed, the final third of the book is devoted to threats to the new democracies and to the "reverse wave" that these threats portended. Restive militaries, authoritarian nostalgia, democratic disenchantment, unresolved human-rights cases, and authoritarian political cultures all stalked the new regimes. The external drivers of democratization—the liberated Catholic Church and the Soviet collapse—were exhausted, and no other factor seemed likely to play the same role. Indeed, early signs of backsliding in Russia were already giving comfort to entrenched leaders in the former Soviet Union. Elected leaders would clamp down on civil liberties and emerge as new authoritarians. Presaging his coming concerns with culture, Huntington also doubted whether countries without "substantial Western influence" could sustain a form of government that had Western origins. Liberalization in the Arab world, for instance, was empowering not democrats but Islamist radicals.

If Huntington's lingering democratic pessimism has been overlooked, the worrisome tones in Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*⁷ have been virtually erased from memory. In the wake of communism's collapse, the world needed a democratic triumphalist to ridicule. Fukuyama's ponderous philosophical-comparative work fit the role admirably, especially for those who did not read it. The term "end of history," originally used by Hegel, became synonymous with excessive democratic optimism. What critics forgot was the second part of the title: Friedrich Nietzsche's pathetic "last man," a creature stripped of all vitality by the material comforts and formal equality that democracy provides.

The *least* serious threats to democracy, Fukuyama believed, would come from economic and governance failures. Some authoritarian regimes would persist in poor countries because of their failure to join what he called the "wagon train" of modernization. In other places, gaping material inequalities would give rise to antidemocratic movements. But those problems could usually be solved with straightforward policies and institutions—the familiar "good-governance" agenda.

Democracy's ultimate fate, Fukuyama believed, would not hinge on the size of Gini coefficients. What really worried him, and took up the final

KEY WORKS DISCUSSED IN THIS ESSAY

Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.

Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*. Penguin, 1992.

Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton University Press, 1993.

Robert D. Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital" *Journal of Democracy* 6 (January 1995): 65–78.

Juan J. Linz and Alfred C. Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," *Foreign Affairs* 76 (November–December 1997): 22–43.

Robert Kaplan, "Was Democracy Just a Moment?" *Atlantic Monthly*, December 1997, 55–80.

Thomas Carothers, "The End of the Transition Paradigm," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (January 2002): 5–21.

Andrew J. Nathan, "China's Changing of the Guard: Authoritarian Resilience," *Journal of Democracy* 14 (January 2003): 6–17.

Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, "Elections Without Democracy: The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (April 2002): 51–65.

Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: International Linkage, Organizational Power, and the Fate of Hybrid Regimes*. Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Thomas Carothers, "Stepping Back from Democratic Pessimism," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Carnegie Paper No. 99, February 2009.

fifth of his book, was the sociopsychological threat: the desire that some humans will always have to dominate others. For even when democracy has solved all the problems of development, a democratic society can provide the human urge to dominate only with very limited outlets—in the worlds of sports, business, or spirited electoral politics.

This means that democracy will always be vulnerable to antidemocratic movements such as postcommunist nationalism in China and Russia or Islamist totalitarianisms in the Arab world. These are the wagons that are not content to stay with the rest of the train, but which, "having looked around a bit at their new surroundings . . . find them inadequate and set their eyes on a new and more distant journey." In the end, Fukuyama deemed world-historical evidence to be "provisionally inconclusive"⁸ as to whether democracy indeed constitutes the final form of government, a phase of political development beyond which humanity can go no further. It was hardly a triumphalist conclusion.

Shortly thereafter, Robert D. Putnam's *Making Democracy Work*,⁹ a comparative study of the performance of Italy's twenty regional governments, was published to great acclaim. The book is subject-catalogued

under “Italian politics,” but its findings have been studied by every country specialist worth his or her salt. Putnam defined performance mainly in terms of bureaucratic effectiveness, but as he and his collaborators showed, satisfaction with democracy itself was closely linked to this sort of performance, hence the title. In effect, the message was that only those places with long, historically grounded traditions of civic involvement and social solidarity stand a chance of generating effective bureaucracy, and thus successful democracy. Putnam found that most of the twenty regional governments, especially those in southern Italy, lacked such social supports and therefore performed badly. Social conflict, exploitation, criminality, poverty, corruption, clientelism, lawlessness, and degraded public services would be their fate. The book could easily have been titled *Making Democracy Fail*.

Even if most readers failed to grasp or forgot about the pessimistic implications, Putnam did not. “The fate of the Mezzogiorno [southern Italy] is an object lesson for the Third World today and the former Communist lands of Eurasia tomorrow, moving uncertainly towards self-government,” he wrote. “The ‘always defect’ [noncooperative] social equilibrium may represent the future of much of the world where social capital is limited or nonexistent. . . . This is a depressing observation for those who view institutional reform as a strategy for political change.” One Italian leader, he noted, called his book “a counsel of despair.”¹⁰ More shocking still was Putnam’s announcement in his January 1995 *Journal of Democracy* article “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital,” the most-accessed article in this journal’s history, that a similar fate or worse awaited the United States if the trends since 1970 continued: “Two generations’ decline at the same rate would leave the United States at the level of today’s Chile, Portugal, and Slovenia.”¹¹

Not long after, Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan published their influential *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*,¹² a book whose title alone reflected the uncertainties that troubled its authors as they surveyed the state of the democratic project around the globe. Eighteen years earlier, in 1978, the pair had coedited and contributed to an influential series titled *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*,¹³ which was an exercise in preemptive pessimism undertaken as the democratic age dawned. Returning to those themes here, they emphasized not social but political inheritances and how these affected democracy’s chances of taking root and succeeding. Although theirs was not exactly a counsel of despair, it was a prognosis whose hue was far from rosy: “It is probable that in some of the countries we have analyzed, democracy will never be consolidated. . . . In this context, democratic triumphalism is not only uncalled for but dangerous.”¹⁴

By the late 1990s, authors whose fears closely tracked those of Huntington, Fukuyama, Putnam, and Linz and Stepan were appearing in print seemingly everywhere. The former Yugoslavia had descended into internal warfare early in the decade, and had been rescued only by a U.S.-led alliance (working ultimately through NATO and not the UN) that was forced

to act in the face of bitter opposition from a supposedly democratic Russia. Elected autocrats such as Peru's Alberto Fujimori and Belarus's Alyaksandr Lukashenka were cropping up all over. In the Philippines, democracy had descended into farce under the presidency of the populist movie star Joseph Estrada. Even in India, democracy seemed suddenly mortal as the Hindu-sectarian Bharatiya Janata Party came to power in 1998.

In the United States, there appeared a string of influential articles meant to persuade policy makers to lay aside any democratic optimism once and for all. These works included Fareed Zakaria's "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy,"¹⁵ Robert Kaplan's "Was Democracy Just a Moment?"¹⁶ and Thomas Carothers's "The End of the Transition Paradigm."¹⁷ They shared some common themes: Democracy's advance had been a broad but shallow phenomenon; democratic culture had in most places failed to put down deep roots, perhaps because it lacked just the sorts of foundations that scholars had long been saying it would need; the world was not inexorably moving toward liberal democracy. As the influential journalist and commentator Zakaria put it: "Far from [what we see before us] being a temporary or transitional stage, it appears that many countries are settling into a form of government that mixes a substantial degree of democracy with a substantial degree of illiberalism."¹⁸

The seemingly Panglossian belief that all countries were transitioning toward democracy was the target of Carothers's skeptical contribution—which has become the second-most frequently accessed article in the online history of the *Journal of Democracy*. He suggested that the whole democratization paradigm was hopelessly teleological—a giant exercise in wishful thinking—that should be replaced by something else (what, exactly, he never said). The academic and policy communities swiftly and eagerly embraced Carothers's critique. Kaplan, a saturnine essayist at the best of times, had earlier gone so far as to warn that the authoritarian resurgence would not be confined to non-Western countries: "Marxism's natural death in Eastern Europe is no guarantee that subtler tyrannies do not await us, here and abroad." Any effort to overthrow the Saddam Hussein dictatorship in Iraq, he presciently warned, would leave "a mess."¹⁹

By the mid-2000s, attention had decisively shifted away from bestowing laurels on the democratizers to explaining the new authoritarians. Andrew J. Nathan's "Authoritarian Resilience"²⁰ became the touchstone for a revived interest in the Chinese Communist Party's post-Tiananmen vigor. Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way's "The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism,"²¹ the fourth-most accessed *Journal of Democracy* article, also set the new tone. (The third-most accessed is Larry Diamond's related "Thinking About Hybrid Regimes" from the same issue, a taxonomy of the imperfect democracies stalking the globe.) Taking up the challenge posed by Carothers, Levitsky and Way sought to develop an account of regime trajectories that did not rest on the tacit assumption that democracy must somehow always be the destination at the end

of the line. “Research on nondemocratic outcomes is critical to gaining a better understanding of the full (rather than hoped for) set of alternatives open to post–Cold War transitional regimes,” they wrote.²² Their particular contribution was the notion of a “competitive authoritarian” regime, where political competition through elections, legislatures, the legal system, and the media is “real but unfair.”

Yet something began to change here, imperceptibly at first but then more visibly. Having spent the better part of two decades hammering away at the alloyed new democracies, scholars and policy makers who sought to forge gleaming new theories out of the world’s residual authoritarian regimes found little that was pure and simple. The reasons for authoritarian optimism seemed shakier once you began to study actually existing authoritarianism. In a forthcoming book²³ based on their original essay, for instance, Levitsky and Way identify 34 “competitive authoritarian” regimes that were founded between 1990 and 1995, and find that 15 have since democratized (Croatia, Mexico, and Taiwan are among their number); another ten, thanks to the rise of effective oppositions, have progressed enough to become borderline democracies. Only nine competitive authoritarian regimes (or 26 percent) have remained clearly in this category, and at least two of these, Malaysia and Zimbabwe, no longer seem stable (which would bring the truly durable proportion down to 21 percent). The full set of alternatives, then, turns out to be not much different from the hoped-for set.

In other words, democratization is starting to look like a pretty good teleology again. Attempts to build alternative paradigms of authoritarian regime trajectories have delivered limited results. Stable authoritarianism like that found in China is nearly miraculous in our democratic age.

So is it time to renew optimism about the democratic project? Throughout the 2000s, important democratic gains have been seen not only in Croatia and Mexico, but also in Burundi, Ghana, Indonesia, Peru, and Turkey. Statistically, there is evidence of a small overall *gain* for democracy worldwide in the last decade: In 2000, the global average score for “political rights” and “civil liberties” reported by Freedom House was 3.5 (on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 means “most free”); in 2008, that score had improved slightly, to 3.3 on the Freedom House scale. Japan, which Fukuyama ventured in his book “would feel profoundly uncomfortable with more ‘open’ contestation or the alternation of parties in power,”²⁴ delivered a first-ever majority mandate to the opposition Democratic Party of Japan in 2009. The same year, India continued its unbroken record of foiling democratic-doomsayers by holding yet another successfully run free election, turning back the BJP, and keeping the Congress party in power. With an estimated 714 million voters taking part, it was the biggest free and peaceful exercise of self-government by balloting in all of human history.

Ironically, Carothers himself has recently warned about excessive “democratic pessimism.”²⁵ Perhaps, as he suggests, democracy has become

a victim of its own success. It has set higher expectations for how rulers should rule and thus, with the shortfalls amplified by information technology, has made it less likely that any regime will succeed. The battle for democracy is nothing new in our world. But it is being waged in more places and in a jungle of higher expectations. Meanwhile, according to public-opinion surveys, there has been no change in the virtually universal popular preference for democracy as the ideal form of government.

Fukuyama's opening chapter bore the title "Our Pessimism." There had been a loss of faith in progress he lamented, even as "the world as a whole . . . has gotten better in certain distinct ways." The world needed to revise "the pessimistic lessons about history that our century supposedly taught us."²⁶ The post-1989 era also has taught us to be pessimistic about democracy, even as global democracy has advanced in certain distinct ways. Perhaps the positive electoral events in India and Japan will be seen as a turning point. Looking beyond the reverse wave that he expected would come, Huntington argued that a fourth wave of democratic advance would follow. Good times follow bad times, even when the bad times turn out to have been not so bad. Iran? Iraq? Malaysia? Zimbabwe? Even China, with its one-fifth of all the people on the planet? The world is set for a continued advance of democracy, an advance that we may one day be willing to call a triumph.

NOTES

1. Guillermo A. O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead, eds., *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*, 5 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

2. Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971).

3. Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon, 1966).

4. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

5. Samuel P. Huntington, "Will More Countries Become Democratic?" *Political Science Quarterly* 99 (Summer 1984): 193–218.

6. Michel Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington, and Joji Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission* (New York: New York University Press, 1975).

7. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 1992).

8. Fukuyama, *End of History*, 339.

9. Robert D. Putnam, Robert Leonardi, and Raffaella Y. Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

10. Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work*, 183.

11. Robert D. Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy* 6 (January 1995): 74.
12. Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).
13. Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*, 5 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).
14. Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition*, 457.
15. Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," *Foreign Affairs* 76 (November–December 1997): 22–43. He later turned the article into a book titled *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003).
16. Robert Kaplan, "Was Democracy Just a Moment?" *Atlantic Monthly*, December 1997, 55–80. Available at www.theatlantic.com/issues/97dec/democ.htm.
17. Thomas Carothers, "The End of the Transition Paradigm," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (January 2002): 5–21.
18. Zakaria, "Rise of Illiberal Democracy," 24.
19. Kaplan, "Was Democracy Just a Moment?" 55.
20. Andrew J. Nathan, "China's Changing of the Guard: Authoritarian Resilience," *Journal of Democracy* 14 (January 2003): 6–17.
21. Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, "Elections Without Democracy: The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (April 2002): 51–65.
22. Levitsky and Way, "Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism," 64.
23. Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: International Linkage, Organizational Power, and the Fate of Hybrid Regimes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
24. Fukuyama, *End of History*, 241.
25. Thomas Carothers, "Stepping Back from Democratic Pessimism," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Carnegie Papers No. 99, February 2009. Available at http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/democratic_pessimism.pdf.
26. Fukuyama, *End of History*, 12.

BOOKS RECEIVED

The books listed below were recently received by the editors. A listing here does not preclude a review in a future issue.

Advanced Democracies

Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics. By Marc J. Hetherington and Jonathan D. Weiler. Cambridge University Press, 2009. 234 pp.