The Future of “Democracy Promotion”: Lessons from the Setbacks of 2000-16

NOTES FOR ANTWERP UNIVERSITY DEBATE (6th December 2016).

1. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, for at least a decade, the “democracy promotion industry” grew rapidly in size, confidence, resources, and ambition. At least in the “old” democracies of the developed capitalist world it was discursively almost unchallenged. Elsewhere I have referred to this as the heyday of “liberal internationalism”, ( “International democracy Promotion : Upsurge and Retreat” *Journal* *of Political Ideologies, 2014)*. This way of thinking still has considerable momentum, in part because it is backed by a considerable infrastructure of treaty, aid programme, bureaucratic and ngo commitments. Nevertheless, as one of the leading analysts of this policy cycle (Thomas Carothers) said at a conference in Hamburg last week, it has become like the “road runner” in the Disney cartoon- rushing ahead over the cliff as if the road was still there, until it looks down and finds there is a void below. So, what went wrong? What could happen if no lessons are learnt? And what rectifications might be needed to put a revised variant of this approach back on track? This note concerns future prospects, in particular following the Trump election in the US, and the current unraveling of EU capacities in this area. But to speculate in an informed manner about the future we first to specify our terms, then to assess past experience, then to attempt a rough evaluation of present trends. Since all this risks too high a level of generality, I have agreed with co-debater to illustrate with a specific (though possibly somewhat atypical) case that we know well, and that is currently in the news- the future political regime in Cuba.
2. There is considerable debate over the terminology in question. At one extreme are those who view “democracy promotion” as a form of coercive intervention- the “export” of an political model or dogma, with no more than passive involvement of the inhabitants of the “target” society, regardless of whether they really understand or accept the new dispensation. Even if they do not before they have been “liberated” from authoritarian rule it may be assumed that after the event they will learn to love their new freedoms. Examples quoted to support this view include Japan and Germany after 1945, and East Germany after 1989. Mr Blair certainly entertained the conviction that Iraq after 2003 would conform to this model. The discredit of democracy promotion after the turn of the century has much to do with cumulative experiences that contradict this evangelical variant of the process. But not all exercises of this kind have proved equally flawed. The 1983 Grenada “rescue mission”, for example, seems a vindication of the model. Concerning today’s Cuba there is still deep division over whether Grenada or Iraq provides the more pertinent reference point. Moving beyond that pole of the debate, there is also a strong (EU-based) position which advocates a detailed and prescriptive version of democracy promotion, but to be carried out through conditionality (notably the “Copenhagen Criteria” for admission to the Union) rather than by military imposition. This too has its positive examples (notably Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary) and also its apparent failures (Erdogan’s Turkey is very much in view at present). But of course there are also many societies where the community of democracies would like to promote shared values (including respect for human rights, the rule of law, freedom of expression, and competitive elections) although neither military intervention nor membership of a supra-sovereign regional organization is in prospect. In Cuba, for example, the costs of an invasion deterred Washington ever since the Bay of Pigs, and the US is most unlikely ever to offer the island entry into its union. In such cases “democracy promotion” can only be sought be less intrusive means. (Sarah Bush has recently estimated that over 50% of current “democracy promotion” policies are “regime compatible”- that is they are designed to pose no threat to regime stability for incumbent rulers). The Obama administration’s recent “normalization” of relations with Cuba provides an illustration of this kind of possibility. Once the level of perceived external threat has been lowered it is thought that the conditions for a gradual evolution(from within) should favour democratization. At a more theoretical level I have advocated the imagery of “cultivation” rather than imposition as the more appropriate route in most cases-both on consequentialist and on deontological grounds (in *The Conceptual Politics of Democracy Promotion,* edited by Christopher Hobson and Milja Kurki (Routledge, 2012). Even that is too strong a position for some. There has been a growing tendency to reject the term “democracy promotion” altogether, and to prefer “democracy support”- a set of gentle initiatives that may advance limited features of a more open political system (a fair count, an independent judiciary, anti- corruption provisions) without necessarily requiring that these separate fragments necessarily come together in a structured package that would meet the standard ingredients of a“democratization”. In the case of Cuba, for example, it is possible that the regime will accept certain suggestions (provided they are not imposed) such as the abolition of the death penalty, increased freedom to travel, more internet access, etc. Some in Brussels would be glad to welcome such advances (now that the “Common Position” has been relaxed) but many in Miami and Washington would regard this as appeasement of a dictatorship, not the promotion of democracy. (Bearing in mind that the US congress adopted in 1996 a highly prescriptive “Helms- Burton” law to specify what the US government must require before describing Cuba as a “democracy”). In short, then, democracy promotion remains a terrain of definitional struggle. My proposal here is to limit the term to attempts to affect the holistic politics of a nation. But experience also reveals that imposition and conditionality may well prove counter-productive ( and indeed anti-democratic) so “cultivation” should move to centre stage.
3. I regard Iraq as the archetypal instance of liberal internationalist over-reach, which goes far to explain the cumulative discursive retreats that ensued. (*Losing the Force: The Dark Side of Democratization since Iraq* in Democratization 2009). But clearly that was only one episode in a much larger sequence. For some it was NATO’s forcible detachment of Kosovo from Serbia in 1999 that changed the climate (certainly Moscow vacillated at the time, and then took a much less co-operative attitude thereafter- as signaled in Georgia, Libya, and finally Crimea). For others it was 9/11 and the ensuing shift to an open-ended “war on terror” which included the overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the proxy war in Somalia, the search for military allies in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and so forth- perhaps culminating with an intervention in Libya dressed up as a “humanitarian” act under the “responsibility to protect” but in retrospect all too visible as a further example of coercive regime change with no plausible post- invasion political project . All this is enough to over-determine discredit of the “military” model of democracy promotion. But we also need to trace the parallel over-reach and discredit of EU “conditionality”. To simplify a complex story, it may suffice to recall that beyond the accession agreements that enlarged the union to 28 “democratic” states by 2007, there was also the Barcelona Process, intended to reward Middle Eastern states that were willing to edge in a more democratic direction. The “Arab Spring” of 2011 cruelly exposed the inadequacy and in many cases even the hypocrisy of these policies. Similarly, the “Maidan” upheaval in Kiev in 2012 underlined the myopia and feebleness of EU policies in the Ukraine. Subsequent developments concerning Turkey, Syrian refugees, and prospective retreats on democratic principle in various member states show that it is not only in the USA that the “road runner” metaphor can be applied. But, of course, the Nov 2016 US election does take this unraveling process to a higher level. It would be possible to elaborate much more on this historical thumbnail sketch, but since there are so many diverse features to consider let me one again turn to Cuba. Neither the Bush Administration ( with its retrograde intensification of pressures on Cuba) nor the EU ( with the Common Position adopted under Czech and Spanish encouragement in 2003) proved capable of changing political realities on the island, despite Fidel Castro’s health crisis and withdrawal after 2006. The Obama administration had other issues higher on its agenda between 2009 and 2012, but once he was re-elected (and had carried Florida) there was some reconsideration of half a century of failed policymaking. That more constructive approach could well prove at risk from the Trump administration. In any case, if “democracy promotion” is about the promotion of human rights and the rule of law, the treatment of prisoners in Guantanamo (under Bush but also Obama and also prospectively Trump) did nothing to enhance Washington’s moral authority. If “freedom of expression” and “fair electoral competition” are the touchstones of good democratic practice, then there is plenty of scope for the US to set a better example by the way it operates at home. Likewise for “black lives matter” and “freedom to travel”, etc.
4. The “evaluation of current trends” is always a tricky task, and it is particularly uncertain at this point in the US transition ( and these moments of stress in the EU) to sort out the signal from the noise. Here is the perspective offered from Washington by Tom Carothers, with due acknowledgement, and recognition of his courage in risking a provisional view: “After more than two decades of expansion… the field of international support for democracy is at a difficult crossroads. The field was built on a series of foundational assumptions….every one of (which)..is seriously in question or already overturned”. He itemized six (while recognizing that there are more) a) democracy is spreading; b) the Western liberal democratic model has powerful global appeal; c) the US and Europe hold a sufficient portion of global power; d) the spread of new communications technology will fuel democratic progress; e) democratization will lead countries to become better political and economic partners of the West; f) barriers to politically related assistance are steadily lowering. But if all of these are either in doubt, or indeed proving false, where does that leave the democracy promotion industry?

Carothers is not yet convinced that what we are witnessing is a definitive reversal of all these props- it may be that there is a plateau rather than a downward spiral. He also notes that it is not solely the US and Europe that have a stake in democracy promotion. In the “global south” there are also increasing involvements by such states as Brazil, India, and South Africa. I would add that the regional commitments now taken up by such groupings as the OAS and the OAU are also potentially durable forms of support. But what this argument does seem to show is that more of the heavy lifting for democracy promotion will have to comes (if at all) from new democracies- and that in that event only a “very soft” approach is likely to gain much traction. Applying this to the case of Cuba, for example, it is certainly of interest to many states in Latin America that the post-Castro evolution on the island should progress smoothly and steadily, with as much international support as possible. But from that standpoint the “Helms-Burton” framework of pressure and intervention is no help at all. Quite different, more patient and respectful approaches, in particular those recognizing shared difficulties and mutual support, are more likely to prove acceptable and effective. It would seem to me, then, that if we are serious about democracy promotion around the world we will need to place various forms of “cultivation” centre stage, and to resist liberal internationalist evangelism of the kind that has proved so inadequate over the past two decades.

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