

## **Europeanisation and Americanisation: Rival Projects or Synonyms?**

*From the receiving end: The experience of exported models*

By Marc F. Plattner

Presented in Oxford (4/17/05)

In discussing “The experience of exported models” I intend to focus on the question of democratization: To what extent does it involve Europeanization or Americanization? Are these similar goals or competing ones? Are there fundamental differences in the way Americans and Europeans understand democracy and democratization or in the nature of the policies and activities they pursue in providing democracy assistance?

But before turning directly to trans-Atlantic similarities and differences, I want to discuss the whole concept of exported models. There is a good deal of debate today about whether democracy can or should be exported. Some claim that democracy can take root only if it is homegrown, and therefore attempts to export or, worse still, “impose” it must be futile or even counterproductive. There is, of course, a kernel of truth in this argument. Democracy, by its very nature, is a political system that is founded on the consent of the governed. Obviously, if the people of a given country do not consent to be governed democratically, no outside efforts to implant democracy can succeed. One may go even farther, and say that unless the people are willing to support and even defend democracy, no democratic system can long survive.

But none of this means that outside assistance cannot be useful. In the first place, in every country of the world one can find people who long for democracy. Where they have some space in which to operate, such people form groups and work toward the goal of introducing or strengthening democratic government. What democracy assistance (at least of the sort I have been involved with) does is to help these people and groups by providing them with resources and training that can improve their effectiveness. Though the assistance may come from abroad, the real work must be done by people who are citizens of the country in question. In this sense, democracy assistance is not very different from economic development assistance. Resources and skills may be brought to bear from outside, but success can be attained only if the people of the country themselves do what needs to be done.

There is a deeper dimension, however, to the critique of efforts to “export” democracy. Some critics claim that democracy is an American or European or Western idea that may not fit other cultures or civilizations and thus is always in some sense imposed on other peoples. Others say that democracy can only arise “organically,” that it requires a long gestation period of social, economic, and cultural change of the sort that first gave rise to democratic (or at least protodemocratic) government in Britain and the United States. Still others emphasize the importance of socioeconomic “prerequisites” for democracy—a certain level of economic development, a substantial middle class, and the like. Once again, there is something to these arguments—the correlation between levels of economic development and democratic stability certainly remains—but they are ultimately unpersuasive. In recent decades, the success of democracy in countries with a wide variety of different

cultures and different levels of economic development has demonstrated the limitations of this view.

I would say that the very notion of “exported” political models is somewhat dubious, especially given the high degree of international connectivity in today’s world. Even in the past, various kinds of models that first arose in one society have often been adopted by others. All the great world religions have been exported in this way, and in the last century communism proved to be a remarkably successful export item almost all over the world. Since the demise and discrediting of communism, democracy has become the only political system with a plausible claim to universal legitimacy. As Amartya Sen has put it,

In any age and social climate, there are some sweeping beliefs that seem to command respect as a kind of general rule--like a "default" setting in a computer program; they are considered right *unless* their claim is somehow precisely negated. While democracy is not yet universally practiced, nor indeed uniformly accepted, in the general climate of world opinion, democratic governance has now achieved the status of being taken to be generally right. The ball is very much in the court of those who want to rubbish democracy to provide justification for that rejection.

A recent attempt to make an explicit and forthright case against democracy appeared in a remarkable document by Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi, but there are relatively few people, even in the Arab world, who would endorse his view.

Another arresting formulation of the present-day attractions of democracy comes from the Georgian philosopher Ghia Nodia:

[W]hy do transitions occur? A major reason is imitation (which is what political scientists are talking about when they use terms like "demonstration effect" and "diffusion").<sup>5</sup> The greatest victory of democracy in the modern world is that--for one reason or another--it has become fashionable. To live under autocracy, or even to *be* an autocrat, seems backward, uncivilized, distasteful, not quite *comme il faut*--in a word, "uncool." In a world where democracy is synonymous less with freedom than with civilization itself, nobody can wait to be "ready" for democracy.

Even apart from its intrinsic appeal, the global legitimacy of democracy means that it is an object of aspiration for people across the globe. Just as most people in most places today want economic growth and equality of treatment, they also want to be able to choose their own government and to have their rights respected. As Ghia Nodia puts it, “Democratic . . . models are not so much imposed by the West as sought by local elites. . . . The West need not feel guilty about ‘imposing’ its models on ‘the rest’: It is ‘the rest’ who recognize the centrality of the modern Western democratic project and want to participate in it.”

The constellation of goals characteristic of modernity—self-government, individual freedom, political equality, the rule of law, and economic prosperity—along with the

institutions that serve them, may indeed have first emerged in Britain and America, but can hardly be considered their preserve. The British and American political models were, early on, presented most forcefully to the rest of the world by two Frenchman—Montesquieu and Tocqueville, respectively. Clearly, the fact that democracy is now rooted in the rest of Europe and in much of the Western Hemisphere is due to the spread of these models, adjusted in various ways to national circumstances. So the export of democracy is an old, old story.

Reflecting the institutional differences between the British and American models, European countries mostly adopted parliamentary systems while the Latin American republics typically followed the U.S. presidential system. (although most Latin American countries later borrowed from Europe proportional representation in the legislature, which most political scientists regard as very ill-suited to presidential systems). Among the newer democracies in other continents today, one finds not only presidential and parliamentary systems but semi-presidential ones as well. And though during decolonization former colonies typically adopted the institutions of their mother countries, more recent institutional choices have been more varied. In any case, neither Americans nor Europeans any longer seem to feel invested in urging others to adopt their own systems. Indeed, the whole field of democracy advice has become internationalized, with experts from a variety of countries recommending constitutional choices from a global menu of institutional variations. Moreover, many of the institutions being adopted by newer democracies, such as independent election commissions, are borrowed not from the West but from other developing democracies.

Now let me turn to the question of European and American views of democracy and democracy promotion. My own recent writing has focused on trans-Atlantic differences over such matters as national sovereignty, international law, and the role of multilateral institutions. Contrary to those who have seen these differences as primarily due to the aberrations of the Bush administration, I have argued that these differences are much deeper. The same is probably true for trans-Atlantic disagreements about the use of force, capital punishment, and the role of religion. So I am very far from holding that the foreign policy clashes and cultural gaps between the U.S. and Europe are fleeting or superficial or that they will soon disappear.

And yet, I believe that this rift will never lead to a fundamental parting of the ways, precisely because it will always be limited by the common commitment of the two sides to the same principles of human rights and democracy. (This, of course, presupposes that democratic regimes continue to prevail on both sides of the Atlantic—otherwise, all bets are off.) These principles have always been central to America's founding documents and to its citizens' self-understanding of their country. And these same principles are resoundingly endorsed in the key documents of the European Union. The 2001 Laeken Declaration asserts, "The European Union's one boundary is democracy and human rights." And the preamble of the new constitutional treaty, in its very first paragraph, singles out "the universal values of the inviolable and inalienable rights of the human person, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law." On the level of the most basic goals and principles, then, there is simply no real trans-Atlantic division. This inevitably presents a powerful obstacle to those on either side who might like to see the current rifts turned into a chasm.

I find it helpful to conceive of trans-Atlantic relations regarding democracy and democratization on three levels: At the highest level, that of principles, there is essentially no division. By contrast, at what might be called the mid-level, that of foreign policy, the differences are sometimes deep and often sharp, as they were with regard to the war in Iraq. But if one descends to a third level of democracy assistance policy, the disagreements again become surprisingly slight. At the risk of overgeneralizing, I would say that it is quite rare for European and American democracy promoters to have serious differences about who the democrats are in a govern country and whether they are deserving of help. Cooperation in democratizing countries between Europeans and Americans, whether at the embassy level or among nongovernmental organizations, seems to be generally excellent. From all I have heard, Ukraine was an outstanding example of such cooperation.

It is true that European democracy promoters often feel some uneasiness about being too closely identified with American efforts in this area. This is no doubt partly a reflection of the trans-Atlantic disagreements that prevail at what I have called the middle level. It may also reflect the fact that European parliaments and publics are probably not as enthusiastic about democracy promotion as their American counterparts—though there are plenty of skeptics on our side of the Atlantic as well. In any case, whether justifiably or not, democracy promotion has tended to become viewed as primarily an American enterprise. Perhaps for this reason, European democracy promoters sometimes seek to distance themselves from the United States. The Swedish-based International IDEA, whose members include a number of European states and democracies from other regions of the world, seems to have been set up in part to have a distinctly non-American international organization active in this field. And the most recent meeting of the European democracy foundations in the Hague was entitled “Enhancing the European Profile in Democracy Assistance.”

Yet on the operational level, it would be hard to find any significant distinctions between the work of these organizations and American ones. Some might say that Americans organizations are somewhat bolder in terms of providing assistance that displeases local governments. That may be true on the whole, but there are plenty of timid American assistance projects, and some bold European ones, especially on the part of nongovernmental groups like Britain’s Westminster Foundation. Moreover, recent indications are that Europeans are beginning to give higher priority to democracy promotion. A clear example is the March 14 article in the *Financial Times* by Javier Solana entitled “Europe’s Leading Role in the Spread of Democracy.”

So I would conclude that, despite their deep disagreements over many foreign policy and cultural issues, democracy assistance is a field that brings together Europeans and Americans. And it does so precisely because both sides share a similar understanding and a profound commitment to the basic principles of democracy. So I would argue that democratization should be understood neither as Americanization or Europeanization, but as the adoption by other peoples of the principles and some of the institutions that first came to light in Europe and the United States.