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Book Reviews

Tomorrow the World?

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Seymour Martin Lipset and Jason M. Lakin, The Democratic Century (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004). 480 pp., \$34.95 hardcover, ISBN: 0-8061-3618-9.

Theda Skocpol, Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004). 366 pp., \$24.95 hardcover, ISBN: 0-8061-3627-8.

There is something irresistible about the idea of progress, of a journey that takes us—and all other fellow human beings—to an ever better place. It is an item of faith for many hundreds of millions of secular people, the garden of Eden for many religious ones, a guiding light, a major source of meaning for their lives. In an age of mass communication, if the course of progress can be summed up in one word, it is even more appealing. Democratization tops the list of all such ideals. The notion that the world is democratizing—and that it is the West (especially the United States) that is destined to advance it—has gained a whole new life following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990. Its prophet, Francis Fukuyama (1989), boldly predicted that we had reached the End of History, that all nations were about to be democratized. Neoconservatives and the Bush administration made democratization their lead motive.

Actually, democracy is a delicate plant that grows slowly, only in carefully cultivated soils, after considerable patient and prolonged preparations have been made. A study conducted by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (Carothers 1999) found that out of the 18 regime changes to which American ground troops have been committed, only five resulted in sustained democratic rule. Three of the five are Germany, Japan, and Italy, where certain conditions prevailed that were lacking elsewhere. The two other countries listed as democratized, Panama and Grenada, actually have yet to earn this title. The difficulties that the United States and its allies have had in democratizing Afghanistan and Iraq are but the

most recent examples in a long list of failures that include Bosnia, Cambodia, the Dominican Republic, Kosovo, South Vietnam, and Haiti, among others.

To hold on to the sense of progress, the sense that democratization is winning all over, the requirements for what makes a democracy have been repeatedly diluted. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan used the phrase “defining deviancy down” to describe the practice of labeling as legitimate and legal items of behavior that once were considered deviant and illegal. As a result, public authorities can vastly improve their crime-reduction statistics without doing much, with little true progress. A similarly damaging tendency can be observed with regard to democratization. When the powers that be find out that it is very difficult to export or even domestically construct a democratic polity under many conditions, public policy makers and their ideological allies keep the triumphant march of democracy going by stamping “democratized” on one nation after another, nations that have only a few democratic features at best. Elections are especially used for these sleight-of-hand techniques, disregarding the fact that practically all tyrannies hold (or held) elections regularly, including the Soviet Union, Syria, and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq.

Then enters *The Democratic Century*, written by a giant of social science, Seymour Martin Lipset, and a graduate student, Jason M. Lakin. Lakin, like myself, was one of Lipset’s research assistants. Lakin composed good parts of the book after Lipset could not continue for health reasons. The book is not completely consistent. It reflects, on one hand, Lipset’s closeness to the neoconservatives. He served at the Hoover Institute as a senior fellow and considered himself close to Condoleezza Rice. (She was the provost at Stanford when Lipset was a professor of political science there.) This side of Lipset is reflected in the book’s optimism that the world is indeed awash in the third wave of democratization and in its optimistic title, *The Democratic Century*. Above all, it is evident in the book’s very lax definition of democracy, which

the authors themselves call minimalist: “An institutional arrangement in which all adult individuals have the power to vote, through free and fair competitive elections, for their chief executive and national legislature” (19). (Note that the definition does not even include the requirement that votes be taken at regular intervals, which those in power are not free to reset.)

On the other hand, Lipset is much too sound a social scientist to ignore the fact that democracy requires much more than voting. This book, like a good part of his earlier work, spells out the conditions under which democracy can thrive. It shows that economic development alone does not drive democratization; political development is also needed. Democracy is said to greatly benefit from political practice, in which people gain the experience needed to be politically active by participating in the political process. And the book adds that although the most important factor in developing democracy is economic prosperity, a suitable culture is also needed.

Culture is not often listed among the prerequisites for democracy because those who invoke it are sometimes considered prejudiced and those who adhere to rationalist schools of social science—according to which self-interests and hardheaded calculation dominate—are blind to it. The notion that cultural factors are at work is an expression of a prejudiced mind holds only if one assumes there are inherent, genetic factors that make it impossible for some nations or people to become democratic, as has been said of the Arabs (a stance known as *Arab exceptionalism*). However, as another sociological giant, Max Weber, pointed out, some cultures make economic and political development much more difficult than others. The argument is not that Arabs are congenitally unable to develop a democracy; it is merely that given their culture, it is likely to take much longer and be more difficult to achieve than in several other cultures. Indeed, as Lipset and Lakin point out, the same arguments made about the difficulties Catholicism faced in embracing democratic values are now being made about Arabs, but they, too, will find their way. Moreover, the authors use cultural factors to explain “the hemispheric divide,” that is, to show why Latin America was slower to democratize than the United States. (In the process, they make numerous insightful comments on the differences among Latin American countries such as Uruguay and Argentina.) Additionally, Lipset and Lakin find other factors that democratization requires but are not included in the definition—for example, elites who accept the outcome of the elections, competitive political parties, and a free media, among others. They pay little mind to the question of whether outsiders can rush it on, or even just make it happen.

I have argued elsewhere that it is particularly difficult for outside forces to introduce democracy at the point

of a missile or bayonet or by foreign aid (Etzioni 2004). As Lipset and Lakin see it, democracy is “primarily” a domestic product, but it can be *undermined* by international forces. Outside influence might be able to egg on democracy a bit, but only if domestic development prepares the ground.

To sum up, we may conclude that if we leave our rosy sunglasses on the beach and see the difficult road ahead, we may have the fortitude to support democratization’s long journey, often sliding back as it moves forward. It may well be a democratic century, but it may also take a century to democratize the world.

In *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life*, Theda Skocpol focuses with great skill and force on one of the issues Lipset and Lakin deal with, namely, civic participation. She goes beyond simplistic notions of social capital, asking that, if Americans’ civic participation has declined, what are the reasons, what are the consequences, and what might be done?

Skocpol shows that since the 1960s, people have been increasingly shut out of membership in voluntary associations, which have largely become professionally managed organizations concerned more with gaining donors than members. This change, Skocpol finds, undermines democracy by curtailing the public’s power and greatly increasing that of professional and moneyed elites and, above all, the policies their class favors.

Skocpol draws on historical data rather than survey data, studying membership associations such as the Masons, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, the American Legion, as well as labor unions and the PTA. In depicting how these associations worked to enhance democracy, she reaches well beyond Lipset and Lakin’s description of democratic participation. She shows that these associations recruited members from a wide range of social and economic backgrounds and elected delegates for short terms, sending them to various levels of meetings (local, statewide, and national), developing their members’ democratic muscle by exercising it, first in their associations and then in the political realm. This contrasts sharply with new organizations that are not managed democratically, many of which have no members. They rely on paid staff and focus on issues selected by experts and favored by donors, thus providing neither democratic experience nor practice.

Skocpol closes not with the wild pessimism one might expect from her analysis, but with a rich and subtle set of recommendations about what might be done (as well as warnings about remedies that are harmful, such as relying on faith-based services). I cannot do justice to her suggestions because they are extensive

and multilayered. However, I can provide some samples of what she holds ought to be done. She argues that there is an increasing awareness of the distortions that professional organizations introduce and the merits of membership-based organizations. Hence, she sees all over the political spectrum new attempts to involve members, sometimes even by professionals. She points out efforts by labor unions to expand recruitment. (She cites the AFL-CIO, but since her book was published, most activist unions have broken with the AFL-CIO precisely because of its unwillingness to focus on recruitment.) Howard Dean's youth campaign also fits into her model. Other suggestions concern a return to a "federated" structure rather than a unitary, national one, which provides more opportunities for democratic practice. There is much more, from a national holiday to ease voting to recommendations for the media. Even those who cannot find

the time to read all of her book should pay mind to her concluding chapter.

Indeed, Skocpol's book, which is well documented and carefully crafted, strongly suggests that democracy is not merely difficult to attain but a framework one must constantly labor to nurture.

References

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