

Democracy as a Universal Value

Amartya Sen

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In the summer of 1997, I was asked by a leading Japanese newspaper what I thought was the most important thing that had happened in the twentieth century. I found this to be an unusually thought-provoking question, since so many things of gravity have happened over the last hundred years. The European empires, especially the British and French ones that had so dominated the nineteenth century, came to an end. We witnessed two world wars. We saw the rise and fall of fascism and Nazism. The century witnessed the rise of communism, and its fall (as in the former Soviet bloc) or radical transformation (as in China). We also saw a shift from the economic dominance of the West to a new economic balance much more dominated by Japan and East and Southeast Asia. Even though that region is going through some financial and economic problems right now, this is not going to nullify the shift in the balance of the world economy that has occurred over many decades (in the case of Japan, through nearly the entire century). The past hundred years are not lacking in important events.

Nevertheless, among the great variety of developments that have occurred in the twentieth century, I did not, ultimately, have any difficulty in choosing one as the preeminent development of the period: the rise of democracy. This is not to deny that other occurrences have [End Page 3] also been important, but I would argue that in the distant future, when people look back at what happened in this century, they will find it difficult not to accord primacy to the emergence of democracy as the preeminently acceptable form of governance.

The idea of democracy originated, of course, in ancient Greece, more than two millennia ago. Piecemeal efforts at democratization were attempted elsewhere as well, including in India.¹ But it is really in ancient Greece that the idea of democracy took shape and was seriously put into practice (albeit on a limited scale), before it collapsed and was replaced by more authoritarian and asymmetric forms of government. There were no other kinds anywhere else.

Thereafter, democracy as we know it took a long time to emerge. Its gradual--and ultimately triumphant--emergence as a working system of governance was bolstered by many developments, from the signing of the Magna Carta in 1215, to the French and the American Revolutions in the eighteenth century, to the widening of the franchise in Europe and North America in the nineteenth century. It was in the twentieth century, however, that the idea of democracy became established as the "normal" form of government to which any nation is entitled--whether in Europe, America, Asia, or Africa.

The idea of democracy as a universal commitment is quite new, and it is quintessentially a product of the twentieth century. The rebels who forced restraint on the king of

England through the Magna Carta saw the need as an entirely local one. In contrast, the American fighters for independence and the revolutionaries in France contributed greatly to an understanding of the need for democracy as a general system. Yet the focus of their practical demands remained quite local--confined, in effect, to the two sides of the North Atlantic, and founded on the special economic, social, and political history of the region.

Throughout the nineteenth century, theorists of democracy found it quite natural to discuss whether one country or another was "fit for democracy." This thinking changed only in the twentieth century, with the recognition that the question itself was wrong: A country does not have to be deemed fit for democracy; rather, it has to become fit through democracy. This is indeed a momentous change, extending the potential reach of democracy to cover billions of people, with their varying histories and cultures and disparate levels of affluence.

It was also in this century that people finally accepted that "franchise for all adults" must mean all--not just men but also women. When in January of this year I had the opportunity to meet Ruth Dreyfuss, the president of Switzerland and a woman of remarkable distinction, it gave me occasion to recollect that only a quarter century ago Swiss women could not even vote. We have at last reached the point of recognizing that the coverage of universality, like the quality of mercy, is not strained. [End Page 4]

I do not deny that there are challenges to democracy's claim to universality. These challenges come in many shapes and forms--and from different directions. Indeed, that is part of the subject of this essay. I have to examine the claim of democracy as a universal value and the disputes that surround that claim. Before I begin that exercise, however, it is necessary to grasp clearly the sense in which democracy has become a dominant belief in the contemporary world.

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.

This is a historic change from not very long ago, when the advocates of democracy for Asia or Africa had to argue for democracy with their backs to the wall. While we still have reason enough to dispute those who, implicitly or explicitly, reject the need for democracy, we must also note clearly how the general climate of opinion has shifted from what it was in previous centuries. We do not have to establish afresh, each time, whether such and such a country (South Africa, or Cambodia, or Chile) is "fit for democracy" (a question that was prominent in the discourse of the nineteenth century); we now take that for granted. This recognition of democracy as a universally relevant system, which moves in the direction of its acceptance as a universal value, is a major

revolution in thinking, and one of the main contributions of the twentieth century. It is in this context that we have to examine the question of democracy as a universal value.

The Indian Experience

How well has democracy worked? While no one really questions the role of democracy in, say, the United States or Britain or France, it is still a matter of dispute for many of the poorer countries in the world. This is not the occasion for a detailed examination of the historical record, but I would argue that democracy has worked well enough.

India, of course, was one of the major battlegrounds of this debate. In denying Indians independence, the British expressed anxiety over the Indians' ability to govern themselves. India was indeed in some disarray in 1947, the year it became independent. It had an untried government, an undigested partition, and unclear political alignments, combined with widespread communal violence and social disorder. It was hard to have faith in the future of a united and democratic India. [End Page 5] And yet, half a century later, we find a democracy that has, taking the rough with the smooth, worked remarkably well. Political differences have been largely tackled within the constitutional guidelines, and governments have risen and fallen according to electoral and parliamentary rules. An ungainly, unlikely, inelegant combination of differences, India nonetheless survives and functions remarkably well as a political unit with a democratic system. Indeed, it is held together by its working democracy.

India has also survived the tremendous challenge of dealing with a variety of major languages and a spectrum of religions. Religious and communal differences are, of course, vulnerable to exploitation by sectarian politicians, and have indeed been so used on several occasions (including in recent months), causing massive consternation in the country. Yet the fact that consternation greets sectarian violence and that condemnation of such violence comes from all sections of the country ultimately provides the main democratic guarantee against the narrowly factional exploitation of sectarianism. This is, of course, essential for the survival and prosperity of a country as remarkably varied as India, which is home not only to a Hindu majority, but to the world's third largest Muslim population, to millions of Christians and Buddhists, and to most of the world's Sikhs, Parsees, and Jains.

Democracy and Economic Development

It is often claimed that nondemocratic systems are better at bringing about economic development. This belief sometimes goes by the name of "the Lee hypothesis," due to its advocacy by Lee Kuan Yew, the leader and former president of Singapore. He is certainly right that some disciplinarian states (such as South Korea, his own Singapore, and postreform China) have had faster rates of economic growth than many less authoritarian ones (including India, Jamaica, and Costa Rica). The "Lee hypothesis," however, is based on sporadic empiricism, drawing on very selective and limited information, rather than on any general statistical testing over the wide-ranging data that are available. A general relation of this kind cannot be established on the basis of very selective evidence. For example, we cannot really take the high economic growth of Singapore or China as "definitive proof" that authoritarianism does better in promoting economic growth, any more than we can draw the opposite conclusion from the fact that

Botswana, the country with the best record of economic growth in Africa, indeed with one of the finest records of economic growth in the whole world, has been an oasis of democracy on that continent over the decades. We need more systematic empirical studies to sort out the claims and counterclaims.

There is, in fact, no convincing general evidence that authoritarian [End Page 6] governance and the suppression of political and civil rights are really beneficial to economic development. Indeed, the general statistical picture does not permit any such induction. Systematic empirical studies (for example, by Robert Barro or by Adam Przeworski) give no real support to the claim that there is a general conflict between political rights and economic performance.² The directional linkage seems to depend on many other circumstances, and while some statistical investigations note a weakly negative relation, others find a strongly positive one. If all the comparative studies are viewed together, the hypothesis that there is no clear relation between economic growth and democracy in either direction remains extremely plausible. Since democracy and political liberty have importance in themselves, the case for them therefore remains untarnished.³

The question also involves a fundamental issue of methods of economic research. We must not only look at statistical connections, but also examine and scrutinize the causal processes that are involved in economic growth and development. The economic policies and circumstances that led to the economic success of countries in East Asia are by now reasonably well understood. While different empirical studies have varied in emphasis, there is by now broad consensus on a list of “helpful policies” that includes openness to competition, the use of international markets, public provision of incentives for investment and export, a high level of literacy and schooling, successful land reforms, and other social opportunities that widen participation in the process of economic expansion. There is no reason at all to assume that any of these policies is inconsistent with greater democracy and had to be forcibly sustained by the elements of authoritarianism that happened to be present in South Korea or Singapore or China. Indeed, there is overwhelming evidence to show that what is needed for generating faster economic growth is a friendlier economic climate rather than a harsher political system.

To complete this examination, we must go beyond the narrow confines of economic growth and scrutinize the broader demands of economic development, including the need for economic and social security. In that context, we have to look at the connection between political and civil rights, on the one hand, and the prevention of major economic disasters, on the other. Political and civil rights give people the opportunity to draw attention forcefully to general needs and to demand appropriate public action. The response of a government to the acute suffering of its people often depends on the pressure that is put on it. The exercise of political rights (such as voting, criticizing, protesting, and the like) can make a real difference to the political incentives that operate on a government.

I have discussed elsewhere the remarkable fact that, in the terrible history of famines in the world, no substantial famine has ever occurred [End Page 7] in any independent and

democratic country with a relatively free press.⁴ We cannot find exceptions to this rule, no matter where we look: the recent famines of Ethiopia, Somalia, or other dictatorial regimes; famines in the Soviet Union in the 1930s; China's 1958-61 famine with the failure of the Great Leap Forward; or earlier still, the famines in Ireland or India under alien rule. China, although it was in many ways doing much better economically than India, still managed (unlike India) to have a famine, indeed the largest recorded famine in world history: Nearly 30 million people died in the famine of 1958-61, while faulty governmental policies remained uncorrected for three full years. The policies went uncriticized because there were no opposition parties in parliament, no free press, and no multiparty elections. Indeed, it is precisely this lack of challenge that allowed the deeply defective policies to continue even though they were killing millions each year. The same can be said about the world's two contemporary famines, occurring right now in North Korea and Sudan.

Famines are often associated with what look like natural disasters, and commentators often settle for the simplicity of explaining famines by pointing to these events: the floods in China during the failed Great Leap Forward, the droughts in Ethiopia, or crop failures in North Korea. Nevertheless, many countries with similar natural problems, or even worse ones, manage perfectly well, because a responsive government intervenes to help alleviate hunger. Since the primary victims of a famine are the indigent, deaths can be prevented by recreating incomes (for example, through employment programs), which makes food accessible to potential famine victims. Even the poorest democratic countries that have faced terrible droughts or floods or other natural disasters (such as India in 1973, or Zimbabwe and Botswana in the early 1980s) have been able to feed their people without experiencing a famine.

Famines are easy to prevent if there is a serious effort to do so, and a democratic government, facing elections and criticisms from opposition parties and independent newspapers, cannot help but make such an effort. Not surprisingly, while India continued to have famines under British rule right up to independence (the last famine, which I witnessed as a child, was in 1943, four years before independence), they disappeared suddenly with the establishment of a multiparty democracy and a free press.

I have discussed these issues elsewhere, particularly in my joint work with Jean Dr'eze, so I will not dwell further on them here.⁵ Indeed, the issue of famine is only one example of the reach of democracy, though it is, in many ways, the easiest case to analyze. The positive role of political and civil rights applies to the prevention of economic and social disasters in general. When things go fine and everything is routinely good, this instrumental role of democracy may not be particularly missed. It is when things get fouled up, for one [End Page 8] reason or another, that the political incentives provided by democratic governance acquire great practical value.

There is, I believe, an important lesson here. Many economic technocrats recommend the use of economic incentives (which the market system provides) while ignoring political incentives (which democratic systems could guarantee). This is to opt for a deeply unbalanced set of ground rules. The protective power of democracy may not be missed

much when a country is lucky enough to be facing no serious calamity, when everything is going quite smoothly. Yet the danger of insecurity, arising from changed economic or other circumstances, or from uncorrected mistakes of policy, can lurk behind what looks like a healthy state.

The recent problems of East and Southeast Asia bring out, among other things, the penalties of undemocratic governance. This is so in two striking respects. First, the development of the financial crisis in some of these economies (including South Korea, Thailand, Indonesia) has been closely linked to the lack of transparency in business, in particular the lack of public participation in reviewing financial arrangements. The absence of an effective democratic forum has been central to this failing. Second, once the financial crisis led to a general economic recession, the protective power of democracy--not unlike that which prevents famines in democratic countries--was badly missed in a country like Indonesia. The newly dispossessed did not have the hearing they needed.

A fall in total gross national product of, say, 10 percent may not look like much if it follows in the wake of a growth rate of 5 or 10 percent every year over the past few decades, and yet that decline can decimate lives and create misery for millions if the burden of contraction is not widely shared but allowed to be heaped on those--the unemployed or the economically redundant--who can least bear it. The vulnerable in Indonesia may not have missed democracy when things went up and up, but that lacuna kept their voice low and muffled as the unequally shared crisis developed. The protective role of democracy is strongly missed when it is most needed.

The Functions of Democracy

I have so far allowed the agenda of this essay to be determined by the critics of democracy, especially the economic critics. I shall return to criticisms again, taking up the arguments of the cultural critics in particular, but the time has come for me to pursue further the positive analysis of what democracy does and what may lie at the base of its claim to be a universal value.

What exactly is democracy? We must not identify democracy with majority rule. Democracy has complex demands, which certainly [End Page 9] include voting and respect for election results, but it also requires the protection of liberties and freedoms, respect for legal entitlements, and the guaranteeing of free discussion and uncensored distribution of news and fair comment. Even elections can be deeply defective if they occur without the different sides getting an adequate opportunity to present their respective cases, or without the electorate enjoying the freedom to obtain news and to consider the views of the competing protagonists. Democracy is a demanding system, and not just a mechanical condition (like majority rule) taken in isolation.

Viewed in this light, the merits of democracy and its claim as a universal value can be related to certain distinct virtues that go with its unfettered practice. Indeed, we can distinguish three different ways in which democracy enriches the lives of the citizens. First, political freedom is a part of human freedom in general, and exercising civil and political rights is a crucial part of good lives of individuals as social beings. Political and

social participation has intrinsic value for human life and well-being. To be prevented from participation in the political life of the community is a major deprivation.

Second, as I have just discussed (in disputing the claim that democracy is in tension with economic development), democracy has an important instrumental value in enhancing the hearing that people get in expressing and supporting their claims to political attention (including claims of economic needs). Third--and this is a point to be explored further--the practice of democracy gives citizens an opportunity to learn from one another, and helps society to form its values and priorities. Even the idea of "needs," including the understanding of "economic needs," requires public discussion and exchange of information, views, and analyses. In this sense, democracy has constructive importance, in addition to its intrinsic value for the lives of the citizens and its instrumental importance in political decisions. The claims of democracy as a universal value have to take note of this diversity of considerations.

The conceptualization--even comprehension--of what are to count as "needs," including "economic needs," may itself require the exercise of political and civil rights. A proper understanding of what economic needs are--their content and their force--may require discussion and exchange. Political and civil rights, especially those related to the guaranteeing of open discussion, debate, criticism, and dissent, are central to the process of generating informed and considered choices. These processes are crucial to the formation of values and priorities, and we cannot, in general, take preferences as given independently of public discussion, that is, irrespective of whether open interchange and debate are permitted or not.

In fact, the reach and effectiveness of open dialogue are often underestimated in assessing social and political problems. For example, [End Page 10] public discussion has an important role to play in reducing the high rates of fertility that characterize many developing countries. There is substantial evidence that the sharp decline in fertility rates in India's more literate states has been much influenced by public discussion of the bad effects of high fertility rates on the community at large, and especially on the lives of young women. If the view has emerged in, say, the Indian state of Kerala or of Tamil Nadu that a happy family in the modern age is a small family, much discussion and debate have gone into the formation of these perspectives. Kerala now has a fertility rate of 1.7 (similar to that of Britain and France, and well below China's 1.9), and this has been achieved with no coercion, but mainly through the emergence of new values--a process in which political and social dialogue has played a major part. Kerala's high literacy rate (it ranks higher in literacy than any province in China), especially among women, has greatly contributed to making such social and political dialogue possible.

Miseries and deprivations can be of various kinds, some more amenable to social remedies than others. The totality of the human predicament would be a gross basis for identifying our "needs." For example, there are many things that we might have good reason to value and thus could be taken as "needs" if they were feasible. We could even want immortality, as Maitreyee, that remarkable inquiring mind in the Upanishads, famously did in her 3000-year old conversation with Yajñvalkyā. But we do not see

immortality as a “need” because it is clearly unfeasible. Our conception of needs relates to our ideas of the preventable nature of some deprivations and to our understanding of what can be done about them. In the formation of understandings and beliefs about feasibility (particularly, social feasibility), public discussions play a crucial role. Political rights, including freedom of expression and discussion, are not only pivotal in inducing social responses to economic needs, they are also central to the conceptualization of economic needs themselves.

Universality of Values

If the above analysis is correct, then democracy's claim to be valuable does not rest on just one particular merit. There is a plurality of virtues here, including, first, the intrinsic importance of political participation and freedom in human life; second, the instrumental importance of political incentives in keeping governments responsible and accountable; and third, the constructive role of democracy in the formation of values and in the understanding of needs, rights, and duties. In the light of this diagnosis, we may now address the motivating question of this essay, namely the case for seeing democracy as a universal value. [End Page 11]

In disputing this claim, it is sometimes argued that not everyone agrees on the decisive importance of democracy, particularly when it competes with other desirable things for our attention and loyalty. This is indeed so, and there is no unanimity here. This lack of unanimity is seen by some as sufficient evidence that democracy is not a universal value.

Clearly, we must begin by dealing with a methodological question: What is a universal value? For a value to be considered universal, must it have the consent of everyone? If that were indeed necessary, then the category of universal values might well be empty. I know of no value--not even motherhood (I think of *Mommie Dearest*)--to which no one has ever objected. I would argue that universal consent is not required for something to be a universal value. Rather, the claim of a universal value is that people anywhere may have reason to see it as valuable.

When Mahatma Gandhi argued for the universal value of non-violence, he was not arguing that people everywhere already acted according to this value, but rather that they had good reason to see it as valuable. Similarly, when Rabindranath Tagore argued for “the freedom of the mind” as a universal value, he was not saying that this claim is accepted by all, but that all do have reason enough to accept it--a reason that he did much to explore, present, and propagate.⁶ Understood in this way, any claim that something is a universal value involves some counterfactual analysis--in particular, whether people might see some value in a claim that they have not yet considered adequately. All claims to universal value--not just that of democracy--have this implicit presumption.

I would argue that it is with regard to this often implicit presumption that the biggest attitudinal shift toward democracy has occurred in the twentieth century. In considering democracy for a country that does not have it and where many people may not yet have had the opportunity to consider it for actual practice, it is now presumed that the people involved would approve of it once it becomes a reality in their lives. In the nineteenth

century this assumption typically would have not been made, but the presumption that is taken to be natural (what I earlier called the “default” position) has changed radically during the twentieth century.

It must also be noted that this change is, to a great extent, based on observing the history of the twentieth century. As democracy has spread, its adherents have grown, not shrunk. Starting off from Europe and America, democracy as a system has reached very many distant shores, where it has been met with willing participation and acceptance. Moreover, when an existing democracy has been overthrown, there have been widespread protests, even though these protests have often been brutally suppressed. Many people have been willing to risk their lives in the fight to bring back democracy. [End Page 12]

Some who dispute the status of democracy as a universal value base their argument not on the absence of unanimity, but on the presence of regional contrasts. These alleged contrasts are sometimes related to the poverty of some nations. According to this argument, poor people are interested, and have reason to be interested, in bread, not in democracy. This oft-repeated argument is fallacious at two different levels.

First, as discussed above, the protective role of democracy may be particularly important for the poor. This obviously applies to potential famine victims who face starvation. It also applies to the destitute thrown off the economic ladder in a financial crisis. People in economic need also need a political voice. Democracy is not a luxury that can await the arrival of general prosperity.

Second, there is very little evidence that poor people, given the choice, prefer to reject democracy. It is thus of some interest to note that when an erstwhile Indian government in the mid-1970s tried out a similar argument to justify the alleged “emergency” (and the suppression of various political and civil rights) that it had declared, an election was called that divided the voters precisely on this issue. In that fateful election, fought largely on this one overriding theme, the suppression of basic political and civil rights was firmly rejected, and the Indian electorate--one of the poorest in the world--showed itself to be no less keen on protesting against the denial of basic liberties and rights than on complaining about economic deprivation.

To the extent that there has been any testing of the proposition that the poor do not care about civil and political rights, the evidence is entirely against that claim. Similar points can be made by observing the struggle for democratic freedoms in South Korea, Thailand, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Burma, Indonesia, and elsewhere in Asia. Similarly, while political freedom is widely denied in Africa, there have been movements and protests against such repression whenever circumstances have permitted them.

The Argument from Cultural Differences

There is also another argument in defense of an allegedly fundamental regional contrast, one related not to economic circumstances but to cultural differences. Perhaps the most famous of these claims relates to what have been called “Asian values.” It has been claimed that Asians traditionally value discipline, not political freedom, and thus the

attitude to democracy must inevitably be much more skeptical in these countries. I have discussed this thesis in some detail in my Morgenthau Memorial Lecture at the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs.⁷

It is very hard to find any real basis for this intellectual claim in the history of Asian cultures, especially if we look at the classical [End Page 13] traditions of India, the Middle East, Iran, and other parts of Asia. For example, one of the earliest and most emphatic statements advocating the tolerance of pluralism and the duty of the state to protect minorities can be found in the inscriptions of the Indian emperor Ashoka in the third century B.C.

Asia is, of course, a very large area, containing 60 percent of the world's population, and generalizations about such a vast set of peoples is not easy. Sometimes the advocates of "Asian values" have tended to look primarily at East Asia as the region of particular applicability. The general thesis of a contrast between the West and Asia often concentrates on the lands to the east of Thailand, even though there is also a more ambitious claim that the rest of Asia is rather "similar." Lee Kuan Yew, to whom we must be grateful for being such a clear expositor (and for articulating fully what is often stated vaguely in this tangled literature), outlines "the fundamental difference between Western concepts of society and government and East Asian concepts" by explaining, "when I say East Asians, I mean Korea, Japan, China, Vietnam, as distinct from Southeast Asia, which is a mix between the Sinic and the Indian, though Indian culture itself emphasizes similar values."⁸

Even East Asia itself, however, is remarkably diverse, with many variations to be found not only among Japan, China, Korea, and other countries of the region, but also within each country. Confucius is the standard author quoted in interpreting Asian values, but he is not the only intellectual influence in these countries (in Japan, China, and Korea for example, there are very old and very widespread Buddhist traditions, powerful for over a millennium and a half, and there are also other influences, including a considerable Christian presence). There is no homogeneous worship of order over freedom in any of these cultures.

Furthermore, Confucius himself did not recommend blind allegiance to the state. When Zilu asks him "how to serve a prince," Confucius replies (in a statement that the censors of authoritarian regimes may want to ponder), "Tell him the truth even if it offends him."⁹ Confucius is not averse to practical caution and tact, but does not forgo the recommendation to oppose a bad government (tactfully, if necessary): "When the [good] way prevails in the state, speak boldly and act boldly. When the state has lost the way, act boldly and speak softly."¹⁰

Indeed, Confucius provides a clear pointer to the fact that the two pillars of the imagined edifice of Asian values, loyalty to family and obedience to the state, can be in severe conflict with each other. Many advocates of the power of "Asian values" see the role of the state as an extension of the role of the family, but as Confucius noted, there can be tension between the two. The Governor of She told Confucius, [End Page 14] "Among my people, there is a man of unbending integrity: when his father stole a sheep,

he denounced him." To this Confucius replied, "Among my people, men of integrity do things differently: a father covers up for his son, a son covers up for his father--and there is integrity in what they do."¹¹

The monolithic interpretation of Asian values as hostile to democracy and political rights does not bear critical scrutiny. I should not, I suppose, be too critical of the lack of scholarship supporting these beliefs, since those who have made these claims are not scholars but political leaders, often official or unofficial spokesmen for authoritarian governments. It is, however, interesting to see that while we academics can be impractical about practical politics, practical politicians can, in turn, be rather impractical about scholarship.

It is not hard, of course, to find authoritarian writings within the Asian traditions. But neither is it hard to find them in Western classics: One has only to reflect on the writings of Plato or Aquinas to see that devotion to discipline is not a special Asian taste. To dismiss the plausibility of democracy as a universal value because of the presence of some Asian writings on discipline and order would be similar to rejecting the plausibility of democracy as a natural form of government in Europe or America today on the basis of the writings of Plato or Aquinas (not to mention the substantial medieval literature in support of the Inquisitions).

Due to the experience of contemporary political battles, especially in the Middle East, Islam is often portrayed as fundamentally intolerant of and hostile to individual freedom. But the presence of diversity and variety within a tradition applies very much to Islam as well. In India, Akbar and most of the other Moghul emperors (with the notable exception of Aurangzeb) provide good examples of both the theory and practice of political and religious tolerance. The Turkish emperors were often more tolerant than their European contemporaries. Abundant examples can also be found among rulers in Cairo and Baghdad. Indeed, in the twelfth century, the great Jewish scholar Maimonides had to run away from an intolerant Europe (where he was born), and from its persecution of Jews, to the security of a tolerant and urbane Cairo and the patronage of Sultan Saladin.

Diversity is a feature of most cultures in the world. Western civilization is no exception. The practice of democracy that has won out in the modern West is largely a result of a consensus that has emerged since the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, and particularly in the last century or so. To read in this a historical commitment of the West--over the millennia--to democracy, and then to contrast it with non-Western traditions (treating each as monolithic) would be a great mistake. This tendency toward oversimplification can be seen not only in the writings of some governmental spokesmen [End Page 15] in Asia, but also in the theories of some of the finest Western scholars themselves.

As an example from the writings of a major scholar whose works, in many other ways, have been totally impressive, let me cite Samuel Huntington's thesis on the clash of civilizations, where the heterogeneities within each culture get quite inadequate recognition. His study comes to the clear conclusion that "a sense of individualism and a

tradition of rights and liberties” can be found in the West that are “unique among civilized societies.”¹² Huntington also argues that “the central characteristics of the West, those which distinguish it from other civilizations, antedate the modernization of the West.” In his view, “The West was West long before it was modern.”¹³ It is this thesis that--I have argued--does not survive historical scrutiny.

For every attempt by an Asian government spokesman to contrast alleged “Asian values” with alleged Western ones, there is, it seems, an attempt by a Western intellectual to make a similar contrast from the other side. But even though every Asian pull may be matched by a Western push, the two together do not really manage to dent democracy's claim to be a universal value.

Where the Debate Belongs

I have tried to cover a number of issues related to the claim that democracy is a universal value. The value of democracy includes its intrinsic importance in human life, its instrumental role in generating political incentives, and its constructive function in the formation of values (and in understanding the force and feasibility of claims of needs, rights, and duties). These merits are not regional in character. Nor is the advocacy of discipline or order. Heterogeneity of values seems to characterize most, perhaps all, major cultures. The cultural argument does not foreclose, nor indeed deeply constrain, the choices we can make today.

Those choices have to be made here and now, taking note of the functional roles of democracy, on which the case for democracy in the contemporary world depends. I have argued that this case is indeed strong and not regionally contingent. The force of the claim that democracy is a universal value lies, ultimately, in that strength. That is where the debate belongs. It cannot be disposed of by imagined cultural taboos or assumed civilizational predispositions imposed by our various pasts.

Amartya Sen, winner of the 1998 Nobel Prize for Economics, is Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, and Lamont University Professor Emeritus at Harvard University. The following essay is based on a keynote address that he delivered at a February 1999 conference in New Delhi on “Building a Worldwide Movement for Democracy,” cosponsored by the National Endowment for Democracy, the Confederation of Indian Industry, and the Centre for Policy Research (New Delhi). This essay draws on work more fully presented in his book *Development as Freedom*, to be published by Alfred Knopf later this year.

Notes

1. In Aldous Huxley's novel *Point Counter Point*, this was enough to give an adequate excuse to a cheating husband, who tells his wife that he must go to London to study democracy in ancient India in the library of the British Museum, while in reality he goes to see his mistress.
2. Adam Przeworski et al., *Sustainable Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Robert J. Barro, *Getting It Right: Markets and Choices in a Free Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996).

3. I have examined the empirical evidence and causal connections in some detail in my book *Development as Freedom*, forthcoming from Knopf in 1999.
4. See my "Development: Which Way Now?" *Economic Journal* 93 (December 1983); *Resources, Values, and Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984); and my "Rationality and Social Choice," presidential address to the American Economic Association, published in *American Economic Review* in March 1995. See also Jean Dr'eze and Amartya Sen, *Hunger and Public Action* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987); Frances D'Souza, ed., *Starving in Silence: A Report on Famine and Censorship* (London: Article 19 International Centre on Censorship, 1990); Human Rights Watch, *Indivisible Human Rights: The Relationship between Political and Civil Rights to Survival, Subsistence and Poverty* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1992); and International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, *World Disaster Report 1994* (Geneva: Red Cross, 1994).
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WHY DEMOCRATIZATION IS NOT THE SAME AS WESTERNIZATION.

Democracy and Its Global Roots

By Amartya Sen

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- I. There is no mystery in the fact that the immediate prospects of democracy in Iraq, to be ushered in by the American-led alliance, are being viewed with increasing skepticism. The evident ambiguities in the goals of the occupation and the lack of clarity about the process of democratization make these doubts inescapable. But it would be a serious mistake to translate these uncertainties about the immediate prospects of a democratic Iraq into a larger case for skepticism about the general possibility of--and indeed the need for--having democracy in Iraq, or in any other country that is deprived of it. Nor is there a general ground here for uneasiness about providing global support for the struggle for democracy around the world, which is the most profound challenge of our times. Democracy movements across the globe (in South Africa and Argentina and Indonesia yesterday, in Burma and Zimbabwe and elsewhere today) reflect people's determination to fight for political participation and an effective voice. Apprehensions about current events in Iraq have to be seen in their specific context; there is a big world beyond.

It is important to consider, in the broader arena, two general objections to the advocacy of democracy that have recently gained much ground in international debates and which tend to color discussions of foreign affairs, particularly in America and Europe. There are, first, doubts about what democracy can achieve in poorer countries. Is democracy not a barrier that obstructs the process of development and deflects attention from the priorities of economic and social change, such as providing adequate food, raising income per head, and carrying out institutional reform? It is also argued that democratic governance can be deeply illiberal and can inflict suffering on those who do not belong to the ruling majority in a democracy. Are vulnerable groups not better served by the protection that authoritarian governance can provide?

The second line of attack concentrates on historical and cultural doubts about advocating democracy for people who do not, allegedly, "know" it. The endorsement of democracy as a general rule for all people, whether by national or international bodies or by human rights activists, is frequently castigated on the ground that it involves an attempted imposition of Western values and Western practices on non-Western societies. The argument goes much beyond acknowledging that democracy is a predominantly Western practice in the contemporary world, as it certainly is. It takes the form of presuming that democracy is an idea of which the roots can be found exclusively in some distinctively Western thought that has flourished uniquely in Europe--and nowhere else--for a very long time.

These are legitimate and cogent questions, and they are, understandably, being asked with some persistence. But are these misgivings really well-founded? In arguing that they are not, it is important to note that these lines of criticism are not altogether unlinked. Indeed, the flaws in both lie primarily in the attempt to see democracy in an unduly narrow and restricted way--in particular, exclusively in terms of public balloting and not much more broadly, in terms of what John Rawls called "the exercise of public reason." This more capacious concept includes the opportunity for citizens to participate in political discussions and so to be in a position to influence public choice. In understanding where the two lines of attack on democratization respectively go wrong, it is crucial to appreciate that democracy has demands that transcend the ballot box.

Indeed, voting is only one way--though certainly a very important way--of making public discussions effective, when the opportunity to vote is combined with the opportunity to speak, and to listen, without fear. The force and the reach of elections depend critically on the opportunity for open public discussion. Balloting alone can be woefully inadequate, as is abundantly illustrated by the astounding electoral victories of ruling tyrannies in authoritarian regimes, from Stalin's Soviet Union to Saddam Hussein's Iraq. The problem in these cases lies not just in the pressure that is brought to bear on voters in the act of balloting itself, but in the way public discussion of failures and transgressions is thwarted by censorship, suppression of political opposition, and violations of basic civil rights and political freedoms.

The need to take a broader view of democracy--going well beyond the freedom of elections and ballots--has been extensively discussed not only in contemporary political philosophy, but also in the new disciplines of social choice theory and public choice theory, influenced by economic reasoning as well as by political ideas. The process of decision-making through discussion can enhance information about a society and about individual priorities, and those priorities may respond to public deliberation. As James Buchanan, the leading public choice theorist, argues, "The definition of democracy as 'government by discussion' implies that individual values can and do change in the process of decision-making."

All this raises deep questions about the dominant focus on balloting and elections in the literature on world affairs, and about the adequacy of the view, well articulated by Samuel P. Huntington in *The Third Wave*, that "elections, open, free and fair, are the essence of democracy, the inescapable sine qua non." In the broader perspective of public reasoning, democracy has to give a central place to guaranteeing free public discussion and deliberative interactions in political thought and practice--not just through elections nor just for elections. What is required, as Rawls observed, is the safeguarding of "diversity of doctrines--the fact of pluralism," which is central to "the public culture of

modern democracies," and which must be secured in a democracy by "basic rights and liberties."

The broader view of democracy in terms of public reasoning also allows us to understand that the roots of democracy go much beyond the narrowly confined chronicles of some designated practices that are now seen as specifically "democratic institutions." This basic recognition was clear enough to Tocqueville. In 1835, in *Democracy in America*, he noted that the "great democratic revolution" then taking place could be seen, from one point of view, as "a new thing," but it could also be seen, from a broader perspective, as part of "the most continuous, ancient, and permanent tendency known to history." Although he confined his historical examples to Europe's past (pointing to the powerful contribution toward democratization made by the admission of common people to the ranks of clergy in "the state of France seven hundred years ago"), Tocqueville's general argument has immensely broader relevance.

The championing of pluralism, diversity, and basic liberties can be found in the history of many societies. The long traditions of encouraging and protecting public debates on political, social, and cultural matters in, say, India, China, Japan, Korea, Iran, Turkey, the Arab world, and many parts of Africa, demand much fuller recognition in the history of democratic ideas. This global heritage is ground enough to question the frequently reiterated view that democracy is just a Western idea, and that democracy is therefore just a form of Westernization. The recognition of this history has direct relevance in contemporary politics in pointing to the global legacy of protecting and promoting social deliberation and pluralist interactions, which cannot be any less important today than they were in the past when they were championed.

In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela describes how impressed he was, as a young boy, by the democratic nature of the proceedings of the local meetings that were held in the regent's house in Mqhekezweni: *Everyone who wanted to speak did so. It was democracy in its purest form. There may have been a hierarchy of importance among the speakers, but everyone was heard, chief and subject, warrior and medicine man, shopkeeper and farmer, landowner and laborer....The foundation of self-government was that all men were free to voice their opinions and equal in their value as citizens.*

Meyer Fortes and Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, the great anthropologists of Africa, argued in their classic book *African Political Systems*, published more than sixty years ago, that "the structure of an African state implies that kings and chiefs rule by consent." There might have been some over-generalization in this, as critics argued later; but there can be little doubt about the traditional role and the continuing relevance of accountability and participation in African political heritage. To overlook all this, and to regard the fight for democracy in Africa only as an attempt to import from abroad the "Western idea" of democracy, would be a profound misunderstanding. Mandela's "long walk to freedom" began distinctly at home.

Nowhere in the contemporary world is the need for more democratic engagement stronger than in Africa. The continent has suffered greatly from the domination of authoritarianism and military rule in the late twentieth century, following the formal closure of the British, French, Portuguese, and Belgian empires. Africa also had the misfortune of being caught right in the middle of the Cold War, in which each of the superpowers cultivated military rulers friendly to itself and hostile to the enemy. No military usurper of civilian authority ever lacked a superpower friend, linked with it in a military alliance. A continent that seemed in the 1950s to be poised to develop democratic politics in newly independent countries was soon being run by an assortment of strongmen who were linked to one side or the other in the militancy of the Cold War. They competed in despotism with apartheid-based South Africa.

That picture is slowly changing now, with post-apartheid South Africa playing a leading part. But, as Anthony Appiah has argued, "ideological decolonization is bound to fail if it neglects either endogenous 'tradition' or exogenous 'Western' ideas." Even as specific democratic institutions developed in the West are welcomed and put into practice, the task requires an adequate understanding of the deep roots of democratic thought in Africa itself. Similar issues arise, with varying intensity, in other parts of the non-Western world as they struggle to introduce or consolidate democratic governance.

- II. The idea that democracy is an essentially Western notion is sometimes linked to the practice of voting and elections in ancient Greece, specifically in Athens from the fifth century B.C.E. In the evolution of democratic ideas and practices it is certainly important to note the remarkable role of Athenian direct democracy, starting from Cleisthenes's pioneering move toward public balloting around 506 B.C.E. The term "democracy" derives from the Greek words for "people" (demos) and "authority" (kratia). Although many people in Athens--women and slaves in particular--were not citizens and did not have the right to vote, the vast importance of the Athenian practice of the sharing of political authority deserves unequivocal acknowledgment.

But to what extent does this make democracy a basically Western concept? There are two major difficulties in taking this view. The first problem concerns the importance of public reasoning, which takes us beyond the narrow perspective of public balloting. Athens itself was extremely distinguished in encouraging public discussion, as was ancient Greece in general. But the Greeks were not unique in this respect, even among ancient civilizations, and there is an extensive history of the cultivation of tolerance, pluralism, and public deliberation in other societies as well.

The second difficulty concerns the partitioning of the world into discrete civilizations with geographical correlates, in which ancient Greece is seen as part and parcel of an identifiable "Western" tradition. Not only is this a difficult thing to do given the diverse history of different parts of Europe, but it is also hard to

miss an implicit element of racist thinking in such wholesale reduction of Western civilization to Greek antiquity. In this perspective, no great difficulty is perceived in seeing the descendants of, say, Goths and Visigoths and other Europeans as the inheritors of the Greek tradition (“they are all Europeans”), while there is great reluctance to take note of the Greek intellectual links with ancient Egyptians, Iranians, and Indians, despite the greater interest that the ancient Greeks themselves showed--as recorded in contemporary accounts--in talking to them (rather than in chatting with the ancient Goths).

Such discussions often concerned issues that are directly or indirectly relevant to democratic ideas. When Alexander asked a group of Jain philosophers in India why they were paying so little attention to the great conqueror, he got the following reply, which directly questioned the legitimacy of inequality: “King Alexander, every man can possess only so much of the earth's surface as this we are standing on. You are but human like the rest of us, save that you are always busy and up to no good, traveling so many miles from your home, a nuisance to yourself and to others! ... You will soon be dead, and then you will own just as much of the earth as will suffice to bury you.” Arrian reports that Alexander responded to this egalitarian reproach with the same kind of admiration as he had shown in his encounter with Diogenes, even though his actual conduct remained unchanged (“the exact opposite of what he then professed to admire”). Classifying the world of ideas in terms of shared racial characteristics of proximate populations is hardly a wonderful basis for categorizing the history of thought.

Nor does it take into account how intellectual influences travel or how parallel developments take place in a world linked by ideas rather than by race. There is nothing to indicate that the Greek experience in democratic governance had much immediate impact in the countries to the west of Greece and Rome--in, say, France or Germany or Britain. By contrast, some of the contemporary cities in Asia--in Iran, Bactria, and India--incorporated elements of democracy in municipal governance, largely under Greek influence. For several centuries after the time of Alexander, for example, the city of Susa in southwest Iran had an elected council, a popular assembly, and magistrates who were proposed by the council and elected by the assembly. There is also considerable evidence of elements of democratic governance at the local level in India and Bactria over that period.

It must be noted, of course, that such overtures were almost entirely confined to local governance, but it would nevertheless be a mistake to dismiss these early experiences of participatory governance as insignificant for the global history of democracy. The seriousness of this neglect has to be assessed in light of the particular importance of local politics in the history of democracy, including the city-republics that would emerge more than a millennium later in Italy, from the eleventh century onward. As Benjamin I. Schwartz pointed out in his great book *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, “Even in the history of the West, with its memories of Athenian 'democracy,' the notion that democracy cannot be

implemented in large territorial states requiring highly centralized power remained accepted wisdom as late as Montesquieu and Rousseau.”

Indeed, these histories often play inspirational roles and prevent a sense of distance from democratic ideas. When India became independent in 1947, the political discussions that led to a fully democratic constitution, making India the largest democracy in the twentieth century, not only included references to Western experiences in democracy but also recalled India's own traditions. Jawaharlal Nehru put particular emphasis on the tolerance of heterodoxy and pluralism in the political rules of Indian emperors such as Ashoka and Akbar. The encouragement of public discussion by those tolerant political orders was recollected and evocatively linked to India's modern multi-party constitution.

There was also, as it happens, considerable discussion in the early years of Indian independence of whether the organization of “the ancient polity of India” could serve as the model for India's constitution in the twentieth century, though that idea was actually even less plausible than would have been any attempt to construct the constitution of the United States in 1776 in line with Athenian practices of the fifth century B.C.E. The chair of the committee that drafted the Indian constitution, B.R. Ambedkar, went in some detail into the history of local democratic governance in India to assess whether it could fruitfully serve as a model for modern Indian democracy. Ambedkar's conclusion was that it should definitely not be given that role, particularly because localism generated “narrow-mindedness and communalism” (speaking personally, Ambedkar even asserted that “these village republics have been the ruination of India”). Yet even as he firmly rejected the possibility that democratic institutions from India's past could serve as appropriate contemporary models, Ambedkar did not fail to note the general relevance of the history of Indian public reasoning, and he particularly emphasized the expression of heterodox views and the historical criticism of the prevalence of inequality in India. There is a direct parallel here with Nelson Mandela's powerful invocation of Africa's own heritage of public reasoning in arguing for pluralist democracies in contemporary Africa.

- III. The established literature on the history of democracy is full of well-known contrasts between Plato and Aristotle, Marsilius of Padua and Machiavelli, Hobbes and Locke, and so on. This is as it should be; but the large intellectual heritages of China, Japan, East and Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent, Iran, the Middle East, and Africa have been almost entirely neglected in analyzing the reach of the ideal of public reasoning. This has not favored an adequately inclusive understanding of the nature and the power of democratic ideas as they are linked to constructive public deliberation.

The ideal of public reasoning is closely linked with two particular social practices that deserve specific attention: the tolerance of different points of view (along with the acceptability of agreeing to disagree) and the encouragement of public discussion (along with endorsing the value of learning from others). Both tolerance and openness of public discussion are often seen as specific--and

perhaps unique--features of Western tradition. How correct is this notion? Certainly, tolerance has by and large been a significant feature of modern Western politics (leaving out extreme aberrations like Nazi Germany and the intolerant administration of British or French or Portuguese empires in Asia and Africa). Still, there is hardly a great historical divide here of the kind that could separate out Western toleration from non-Western despotism. When the Jewish philosopher Maimonides was forced to emigrate from an intolerant Europe in the twelfth century, for example, he found a tolerant refuge in the Arab world and was given an honored and influential position in the court of Emperor Saladin in Cairo--the same Saladin who fought hard for Islam in the Crusades.

Maimonides's experience was not exceptional. Even though the contemporary world is full of examples of conflicts between Muslims and Jews, Muslim rulers in the Arab world and in medieval Spain had a long history of integrating Jews as secure members of the social community whose liberties--and sometimes leadership roles--were respected. As María Rosa Menocal notes in her recent book *The Ornament of the World*, the fact that Cordoba in Muslim-ruled Spain in the tenth century was "as serious a contender as Baghdad, perhaps more so, for the title of most civilized place on earth" was due to the joint influence of Caliph Abd al-Rahman III and his Jewish vizier Hasdai ibn Shaprut. Indeed, there is considerable evidence, as Menocal argues, that the position of Jews after the Muslim conquest "was in every respect an improvement, as they went from persecuted to protected minority."

Similarly, when in the 1590s the great Mughal emperor Akbar, with his belief in pluralism and in the constructive role of public discussions, was making his pronouncements in India on the need for tolerance and was busy arranging dialogues between people of different faiths (including Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Parsees, Jains, Jews, and even atheists), the inquisitions were still taking place in Europe with considerable vehemence. Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake for heresy in the Campo dei Fiori in Rome in 1600 even as Akbar was speaking on tolerance in Agra.

We must not fall into the trap of arguing that there was in general more tolerance in non-Western societies than in the West. For no such generalization can be made. There were great examples of tolerance as well as of intolerance on both sides of this allegedly profound division of the world. What needs to be corrected is the underresearched assertion of Western exceptionalism in the matter of tolerance; but there is no need to replace it with an equally arbitrary generalization of the opposite sort.

A similar point can be made about the tradition of public discussion. Again, the Greek and Roman heritage on this is particularly important for the history of public reasoning, but it was not unique in this respect in the ancient world. The importance attached to public deliberation by Buddhist intellectuals not only led to extensive communications on religious and secular subjects in India and in East and Southeast Asia, but also produced some of the earliest open general

meetings aimed specifically at settling disputes regarding different points of view. These Buddhist “councils,” the first of which was held shortly after Gautama Buddha's death, were primarily concerned with resolving differences in religious principles and practices, but they dealt also with demands of social and civic duties, and they helped to establish the practice of open discussion on contentious issues.

The largest of these councils--the third--occurred, under the patronage of Emperor Ashoka in the third century B.C.E., in Pataliputra, then the capital of India, now called Patna (perhaps best known today as a source of a fine long-grain rice). Public discussion, without violence or even animosity, was particularly important for Ashoka's general belief in social deliberation, as is well reflected in the inscriptions that he placed on specially mounted stone pillars across India--and some outside it. The edict at Erragudi put the issue forcefully: *... the growth of essentials of Dharma [proper conduct] is possible in many ways. But its root lies in restraint in regard to speech, so that there should be no extolment of one's own sect or disparagement of other sects on inappropriate occasions, and it should be moderate even on appropriate occasions. On the contrary, other sects should be duly honoured in every way on all occasions.... If a person acts otherwise, he not only injures his own sect but also harms other sects. Truly, if a person extols his own sect and disparages other sects with a view to glorifying his own sect owing merely to his attachment to it, he injures his own sect very severely by acting in that way.*

On the subject of public discussion and communication, it is also important to note that nearly every attempt at early printing in China, Korea, and Japan was undertaken by Buddhist technologists, with an interest in expanding communication. The first printed book in the world was a Chinese translation of an Indian Sanskrit treatise, later known as the “Diamond Sutra,” done by a half-Indian and half-Turkish scholar called Kumarajeeva in the fifth century, which was printed in China four and half centuries later, in 868 C.E. The development of printing, largely driven by a commitment to propagate Buddhist perspectives (including compassion and benevolence), transformed the possibilities of public communication in general. Initially sought as a medium for spreading the Buddhist message, the innovation of printing was a momentous development in public communication that greatly expanded the opportunity of social deliberation.

The commitment of Buddhist scholars to expand communication in secular as well as religious subjects has considerable relevance for the global roots of democracy. Sometimes the communication took the form of a rebellious disagreement. Indeed, in the seventh century Fu-yi, a Confucian leader of an anti-Buddhist campaign, submitted the following complaint about Buddhists to the Tang emperor (almost paralleling the current official ire about the “indiscipline” of the Falun Gong): “Buddhism infiltrated into China from Central Asia, under a strange and barbarous form, and as such, it was then less dangerous. But since the Han period the Indian texts began to be translated into Chinese. Their publicity began to adversely affect the faith of the Princes and

filial piety began to degenerate. The people began to shave their heads and refused to bow their heads to the Princes and their ancestors." In other cases, the dialectics took the form of learning from each other. In fact, in the extensive scientific, mathematical, and literary exchanges between China and India during the first millennium C.E., Buddhist scholars played a major part.

In Japan in the early seventh century, the Buddhist Prince Shotoku, who was regent to his mother Empress Suiko, not only sent missions to China to bring back knowledge of art, architecture, astronomy, literature, and religion (including Taoist and Confucian texts in addition to Buddhist ones), but also introduced a relatively liberal constitution or *kempo*, known as "the constitution of seventeen articles," in 604 C.E. It insisted, much in the spirit of the Magna Carta (signed in England six centuries later), that "decisions on important matters should not be made by one person alone. They should be discussed with many." It also advised: "Nor let us be resentful when others differ from us. For all men have hearts, and each heart has its own leanings. Their right is our wrong, and our right is their wrong." Not surprisingly, many commentators have seen in this seventh-century constitution what Nakamura Hajime has called Japan's "first step of gradual development toward democracy."

There are, in fact, many manifestations of a firm commitment to public communication and associative reasoning that can be found in different places and times across the world. To take another illustration, which is of particular importance to science and culture, the great success of Arab civilization in the millennium following the emergence of Islam provides a remarkable example of indigenous creativity combined with openness to intellectual influences from elsewhere--often from people with very different religious beliefs and political systems. The Greek classics had a profound influence on Arab thinking, and, over a more specialized area, so did Indian mathematics. Even though no formal system of democratic governance was involved in these achievements, the excellence of what was achieved--the remarkable flourishing of Arab philosophy, literature, mathematics, and science--is a tribute not only to indigenous creativity but also to the glory of open public reasoning, which influences knowledge and technology as well as politics.

The idea behind such openness was well articulated by Imam Ali bin abi Taleb in the early seventh century, in his pronouncement that "no wealth can profit you more than the mind" and "no isolation can be more desolate than conceit." These and other such proclamations are quoted for their relevance to the contemporary world by the excellent "Arab Human Development Report 2002" of the United Nations. The thesis of European exceptionalism, by contrast, invites the Arabs, like the rest of the non-Western world, to forget their own heritage of public reasoning.

- IV. To ignore the centrality of public reasoning in the idea of democracy not only distorts and diminishes the history of democratic ideas, it also detracts attention from the interactive processes through which a democracy functions and on

which its success depends. The neglect of the global roots of public reasoning, which is a big loss in itself, goes with the undermining of an adequate understanding of the place and the role of democracy in the contemporary world. Even with the expansion of adult franchise and fair elections, free and uncensored deliberation is important for people to be able to determine what they must demand, what they should criticize, and how they ought to vote.

Consider the much-discussed proposition that famines do not occur in democracies, but only in imperial colonies (as used to happen in British India), or in military dictatorships (as in Ethiopia, Sudan, or Somalia, in recent decades), or in one-party states (as in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, or China from 1958 to 1961, or Cambodia in the 1970s, or North Korea in the immediate past). It is hard for a government to withstand public criticism when a famine occurs. This is due not merely to the fear of losing elections, but also to the prospective consequences of public censure when newspapers and other media are independent and uncensored and opposition parties are allowed to pester those in office. The proportion of people affected by famines is always rather small (hardly ever more than 10 percent of the total population), so for a famine to become a political nightmare for the government it is necessary to generate public sympathy through the sharing of information and open public discussion.

Even though India was experiencing famines until its independence in 1947--the last one, the Bengal famine of 1943, killed between two and three million people--these catastrophes stopped abruptly when a multi-party democracy was established. China, by contrast, had the largest famine in recorded history between 1958 and 1961, in which it is estimated that between twenty-three and thirty million people died, following the debacle of collectivization in the so-called "Great Leap Forward." Still, the working of democracy, which is almost effortlessly effective in preventing conspicuous disasters such as famines, is often far less successful in politicizing the nastiness of regular but non-extreme undernourishment and ill health. India has had no problem in avoiding famines with timely intervention, but it has been much harder to generate adequate public interest in less immediate and less dramatic deprivations, such as the quiet presence of endemic but non-extreme hunger across the country and the low standard of basic health care.

While democracy is not without success in India, its achievements are still far short of what public reasoning can do in a democratic society if it addresses less conspicuous deprivations such as endemic hunger. A similar criticism can also be made about the protection of minority rights, which majority rule does not guarantee until and unless public discussion gives these rights enough political visibility and status to produce general public support. This certainly did not happen in the state of Gujarat last year, when politically engineered anti-Muslim riots led to unprecedented Hindu sectarian militancy and an electoral victory for the Hindu-chauvinist state government. How scrupulously secularism and minority rights will be guarded in India will depend on the reach and the vigor of public discussion on this subject. If democracy is construed not merely in

terms of public balloting, but also in the more general form of public reasoning, then what is required is a strengthening of democracy, not a weakening of it.

To point to the need for more probing and more vigorous public reasoning even in countries that formally have democratic institutions must not be seen as a counsel of despair. People can and do respond to generally aired concerns and appeals to tolerance and humanity, and this is part of the role of public reasoning. Indeed, it is not easy to dismiss the possibility that to a limited extent just such a response may be occurring in India in the wake of the Gujarat riots and the victory of Hindu sectarianism in the Gujarat elections in December 2002. The engineered success in Gujarat did not help the Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP, in the state elections in the rest of India that followed the Gujarat elections. The BJP lost in all four state elections held in early 2003, but the defeat that was particularly significant occurred in the state of Himachal Pradesh, where the party had actually been in office but was routed this time, winning only sixteen seats against the Congress Party's forty. Moreover, a Muslim woman from the Congress Party won the mayoral election in Ahmadabad, where some of the worst anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat had occurred only a few months earlier. Much will depend on the breadth and the energy of public reasoning in the future--an issue that takes us back to the arguments presented by exponents of public reasoning in India's past, including Ashoka and Akbar, whose analyses remain thoroughly relevant today.

The complex role of public reasoning can also be seen in the comparisons between China's and India's achievements in the field of health care and longevity over recent decades. This happens to be a subject that has interested Chinese and Indian public commentators over millennia. While Faxian (Fa-Hien), a fifth-century Chinese visitor who spent ten years in India, wrote admiringly in effusive detail about the arrangements for public health care in Pataliputra, a later visitor who came to India in the seventh century, Yi Jing (I-Ching), argued in a more competitive vein that "in the healing arts of acupuncture and cauterization and the skill of feeling the pulse, China has never been surpassed [by India]; the medicament for prolonging life is only found in China." There was also considerable discussion in India on chinachar--Chinese practice--in different fields when the two countries were linked by Buddhism.

By the middle of the twentieth century, China and India had about the same life expectancy at birth, around forty-five years or so. But post-revolution China, with its public commitment to improve health care and education (a commitment that was carried over from its days of revolutionary struggle), brought a level of dedication in radically enhancing health care that the more moderate Indian administration could not at all match. By the time the economic reforms were introduced in China in 1979, China had a lead of thirteen years or more over India in longevity, with the Chinese life expectancy at sixty-seven years, while India's was less than fifty-four years. Still, even though the radical economic reforms introduced in China in 1979 ushered in a period of extraordinary economic growth, the government slackened on the public

commitment to health care, and in particular replaced automatic and free health insurance by the need to buy private insurance at one's own cost (except when provided by one's employer, which happens only in a small minority of cases). This largely retrograde movement in the coverage of health care met with little public resistance (as it undoubtedly would have in a multi-party democracy), even though it almost certainly had a role in slowing down the progress of Chinese longevity. In India, by contrast, unsatisfactory health services have come more and more under public scrutiny and general condemnation, with some favorable changes being forced on the services offered.

Despite China's much faster rate of growth since the economic reforms, the rate of expansion of life expectancy in India has been about three times as fast, on the average, as that in China. China's life expectancy, which is now just about seventy years, compares with India's figure of sixty-three years, so that the life expectancy gap in favor of China has been nearly halved, to seven years, over the last two decades. But note must be taken of the fact that it gets increasingly harder to expand life expectancy further as the absolute level rises, and it could be argued that perhaps China has now reached a level at which further expansion would be exceptionally difficult. Yet this explanation does not work, since China's life expectancy of seventy years is still very far below the figures for many countries in the world--indeed, even parts of India.

At the time of the economic reforms, when China had a life expectancy of about sixty-seven years, the Indian state of Kerala had a similar figure. By now, however, Kerala's life expectancy of seventy-four years is considerably above China's seventy years. Going further, if we look at specific points of vulnerability, the infant-mortality rate in China has fallen very slowly since the economic reforms, whereas it has continued to fall extremely sharply in Kerala. While Kerala had roughly the same infant mortality rate as China--thirty-seven per thousand--in 1979, Kerala's present rate, between thirteen and fourteen per thousand, is considerably less than half of China's thirty per thousand (where it has stagnated over the last decade). It appears that Kerala, with its background of egalitarian politics, has been able to benefit further from continued public reasoning protected by a democratic system. The latter on its own would seem to have helped India to narrow the gap with China quite sharply, despite the failings of the Indian health services that are widely discussed in the press. Indeed, the fact that so much is known--and in such detail--about the inadequacies of Indian health care from criticisms in the press is itself a contribution to improving the existing state of affairs.

The informational role of democracy, working mainly through open public discussion, can be pivotally important. It is the limitation of this informational feature that has come most sharply to attention in the context of the recent SARS epidemic. Although cases of SARS first appeared in southern China in November 2002 and caused many fatalities, information about the deadly new disease was kept under wraps until this April. Indeed, it was only when that highly infectious disease started spreading to Hong Kong and Beijing that the

news had to be released, and by then the epidemic had already gone beyond the possibility of isolation and local elimination. The lack of open public discussion evidently played a critical part in the spread of the SARS epidemic in particular, but the general issue has a much wider relevance.

- V. The value of public reasoning applies to reasoning about democracy itself. It is good that the practices of democracy have been sharply scrutinized in the literature on world affairs, for there are identifiable deficiencies in the performance of many countries that have the standard democratic institutions. Not only is public discussion of these deficiencies an effective means of trying to remedy them, but this is exactly how democracy in the form of public reasoning is meant to function. In this sense, the defects of democracy demand more democracy, not less.

The alternative--trying to cure the defects of democratic practice through authoritarianism and the suppression of public reasoning--increases the vulnerability of a country to sporadic disasters (including, in many cases, famine), and also to the whittling away of previously secured gains through a lack of public vigilance (as seems to have happened, to some extent, in Chinese health care). There is also a genuine loss of political freedom and restrictions of civil rights in even the best-performing authoritarian regimes, such as Singapore or pre-democratic South Korea; and, furthermore, there is no guarantee that the suppression of democracy would make, say, India more like Singapore than like Sudan or Afghanistan, or more like South Korea than like North Korea.

Seeing democracy in terms of public reasoning, as “government by discussion,” also helps us to identify the far-reaching historical roots of democratic ideas across the world. The apparent Western modesty that takes the form of a humble reluctance to promote “Western ideas of democracy” in the non-Western world includes an imperious appropriation of a global heritage as exclusively the West's own. The self-doubt with regard to “pushing” Western ideas on non-Western societies is combined with the absence of doubt in viewing democracy as a quintessentially Western idea, an immaculate Western conception.

This misappropriation results from gross neglect of the intellectual history of non-Western societies, but also from the conceptual defect in seeing democracy primarily in terms of balloting, rather than in the broader perspective of public reasoning. A fuller understanding of the demands of democracy and of the global history of democratic ideas may contribute substantially to better political practice today. It may also help to remove some of the artificial cultural fog that obscures the appraisal of current affairs.

AMARTYA SEN is Master of Trinity College, Cambridge. He received the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1998.