

# Democracy And Its Global Roots

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**T**here 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 cautery 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.

