

**Democratic Values: A Universal Heritage or Western Preserve?****Remarks to a Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Conference on Western Values & Trans-Atlantic Alliance**

(Cadenabbia, Italy June 24, 2013)

Over the past few days we have asked ourselves whether global democratic aspirations reflect universal principles that are the common heritage of all men or are the specific patrimony limited to the Western experience and that are not easily exportable. This is a critical question to answer as we try to understand the nature and implications of the Arab Spring and whether we *ought* to view it as a democratically-inspired socio-political movement and, if so, to desire trans-Atlantic support for it. But let us examine this issue within a broader, historical perspective of Western democracy promotion.

Let us take a look back at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. What is striking is that in 1900 there were only a dozen democracies. In the aftermath of World War I and collapse of European empires, the number doubled. However this democratic trend was soon eclipsed during the 1930s with the emergence of the totalitarian ideologies of Fascism, Nazism and Communism reflecting the collapse of confidence in an international liberal order that was blamed for the global devastation of WWI and Great Depression.<sup>1</sup>

Then, to borrow from Huntington<sup>2</sup>, another wave of democratization ensued in the aftermath of the Allied victory during WWII with 30 democracies emerging only to again see a reversal soon thereafter and intensified during the period of decolonization as Marxist-Leninist movements sprouted throughout the developing world. However, 1974 initiated a third wave of democratization starting with Portugal and on its heels Spain and the Latin American continent. This wave continued as the Soviet Union collapsed and Eastern Europe broke free, consolidating a global consensus that democratic-capitalism is the only viable political and economic system with no ideological competitor in sight. Or, as Francis Fukuyama would theorize, we had reached “the end of history.”<sup>3</sup> By the early 1990s a domino effect saw over 120 democracies take root, even in Africa, for what turned out to be a dramatically happy conclusion to a tumultuous and brutal century.<sup>4</sup>

We like to congratulate ourselves on the victory of Western values over man’s totalitarian impulses. As well we should. It came at great sacrifice and human cost. But this state of affairs was anything but inevitable. The post-World War I doubling of democracies was portrayed at the time as a natural trend reflecting a general law of social progress. Then arrived the totalitarian ideologies of the 1930s that looked convincingly ascendant at the time.

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<sup>1</sup> See Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (New York: Random House, 1932). Spengler’s prediction of the West’s inevitable collapse is typical of a genre of intellectual inquiry that appears cyclically, especially during times of Western self-doubt such as the 1930s, 1970s, 1990s and currently.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Larry Diamond, *The Spirit of Democracy: The Struggle to Build Free Societies Throughout the World* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2008).

Far from representing some inexorable Hegelian historical process as Fukuyama suggests, it required the deliberate and unhesitating commitment of a global super-power, the United States, during two world wars and to offset the rise of an aggressive and hostile Soviet Union. America's dramatic turnabout from entrenched isolationism to full scale international leadership would come to shape the international order of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Kagan argues persuasively that the global spread of democracy depends directly on the power and proactive influence of the United States, absent which we can expect a commensurate decline in the fortunes of global democracy.<sup>5</sup> But it also goes to the heart of the moral impulse that animates and shapes Western debates on how to define our collective national interests and the manner in which we conduct our foreign policy. And that impulse, as has been stated by others here, is the precept of "man created in the image of God" which has served as the font from which flows our shared universalistic trans-Atlantic values and cornerstone for justifying our historically robust global democracy promotion.

Nevertheless, it is hard not to want to credit some providential role. How people easily forget their past prejudices which when they are reminded stirs embarrassment but which reappear in different intellectual guise time and again, especially as regards democracy's transferability to non-Western societies.

The renowned democracy theorist Robert Dahl posited in 1971, just a few years before the third wave of democratization would erupt in Iberia, that it was "unrealistic to suppose any dramatic change in the number of democracies in a generation or two."<sup>6</sup> In 1984, not too long before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Huntington himself answered pessimistically his own posed question of "*Will More Countries Become Democracies?*" ascribing his negative assessment to the lack of the requisite democratic cultural traditions and values that we term Western.

During the 1960s it was intellectually fashionable to argue that the Latin American countries would not democratize due to their Roman Catholic culture whose political traditions mirror-imaged the super hierarchical structures of the Vatican, while the East Asians were also deemed unsuitable for it as a result of their Confucian philosophical traditions that frowned upon any questioning of authority. Lest we forget not that long ago the intellectual thesis that the collapse of the Soviet Union would unleash "ancient hatreds" and violent ethnic nationalisms among Eastern Europeans, presupposing that there was something specifically insidious about Slavic culture that was antithetical to civic-based politics. The view – factually inaccurate – paralyzed Western action in the face of Serbia's genocidal attacks upon everyone else.<sup>7</sup> This deterministic tendency to tie prospects for democratization to certain cultural prerequisites reflects a pernicious moral relativism that in effect rejects the belief in Western values as universal truths. We need to reject that.

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Kagan, *The World America Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1971) pp. 208-9.

<sup>7</sup> See Robert Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993) for the most egregious example of negative cultural stereo-typing. President Bill Clinton is said to have decided not to militarily intervene in Bosnia-Herzegovina as the Bosnians faced genocide after reading *Balkan Ghosts*. The book is replete with extremely uncharitable if not dubious (mis)characterizations of the Balkan peoples.

Actually we know the value that different peoples around the world attach to democracy. The *World Values Survey* conducted every ten years measures global attitudes and as to the question: “Do you agree or disagree that democracy may have its problems, but it is better than any other form of government?,” we see no appreciable variance in strong agreement among respondents from the West, Latin America, Asia and even Middle East.<sup>8</sup> In sum, irrespective of culture, there exists a uniform global consensus on the superiority and preferability of democratic government.

Fortunately, and eventually in the Balkans, US and Western European leaderships transformed Eastern Europe into a bastion of support for the trans-Atlantic alliance as they became full fledged members of both Nato and the European Union, including two former Yugoslav republics. In fact, in all regions in which democracy took root – Iberia, Latin America, the Asian tigers, and Eastern Europe -- the intensive engagement of Europe and the United States, particularly the proactive projection of Nato and US military power (albeit spurred on by Cold War competition), proved critical in shepherding these troubled countries’ arduous democratic transition. However, every Western leader that sought public support for foreign interventionist action in each of these cases did so by making appeals beyond a cold calculus of national interest to include moral sentiments that invariably have at their core the notion of democratic values as universal values to be applied to all human beings as human beings wherever they may live.

And here we are today witnessing another round of dictatorships falling, this time throughout the Muslim world where millions of civilians have poured onto the streets to protest regime corruption, economic stagnation and political disenfranchisement. Again, we hear the same failed intellectual arguments and cultural stereotypes dispelling the notion that democracy cannot take root there because of the political infertility of religious, cultural and historical traditions.<sup>9</sup>

However, unlike during past waves of democratization, the United States and Europe, this time, are far less engaged politically, economically and militarily. Once again, the West is exhibiting an acute loss of confidence stemming from its current economic malaise. Russia, Iran and trans-national terrorist organizations meanwhile are losing no time to aggressively exploit Western paralysis to shape the outcome of the Arab Spring to their undemocratic political liking. In this sense, the trans-Atlantic alliance is failing to hold steadfast to its traditionally held beliefs in the universality of democratic values and it does so at its own peril.

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<sup>8</sup> See Diamond.

<sup>9</sup> See Reuel Marc Gerecht, *The Wave: Man, God, and the Ballot Box in the Middle East* (Stanford, California: Hoover Institute Press, 2011) for a thoughtful discourse on the potential compatibility between Islam and democracy.