Editorial
Non-Western Theories of Democracy

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A conventional story is often told about democracy. It is a story that begins somewhere in the West, some millennia ago. From there, or so this telling goes, democracy spread across the continents; traversing from the familiar epicenters of Western civilization — Athens, London, Washington, Versailles — to the exotic and sometimes alien cultural landscapes in the East. The idea that such a model of democracy, based on an essentially Western set of ideals and practices, could one day become universal was perhaps unthinkable to most democrats before the twentieth century. However, today there is very little doubt that democracy on a global scale is both assured and desirable. But there should be no confusion here: this story of democratization, and the projection of democracy's global future, is one premised on "the export of democratic institutions, developed within a particular cultural context in the West," that has as its culmination "the end of history" and the triumph of Western liberal democracy in all corners of the globe (Lamont et al. 2015: 1).

There is no version of this story where the West has not played a leading role in the formation and development of democracy. However expansive its present reach and far-flung current demands for its extension, democracy's source, center and conceptual limits are seen to lie in the West (Muhlberger and Paine 1993: 25). Both historians and theorists of democracy have by and large recited a well-worn tale that is punctuated, from the assemblies of ancient Greece to the representative liberal democracies of the contemporary West, with key moments of Western civilization and the particular subset of norms and concepts that emerged from them (Gagnon 2014; Isakhan 2012: 8). As a result of this theoretical repetition, some scholars firmly believe that "there are no *democratic* alternatives to what is routinely called the Western model of democracy, only non-democratic ones" (Alexander 2005: 159). As such theorizing has translated into common sense, or at least into what is deemed legitimate to think and say in policy circles, it has become equally difficult to imagine a democratic past and future that can somehow be divorced from the Western iteration of democracy (Zakaria 1997: 26).

This Western account of democracy has proved not only inaccurate, but also highly problematic. Scholars have shown — for some time now — that democracy has as much a non-Western as a Western lineage. In fact, the supposed birth of democracy in ancient Athens is perhaps only the birth of what would become the West's first great democracy. Before it, there is evidence to suggest that democracy also existed in one form or another throughout the Middle East, India, China, and Africa, for example (Isakhan and Stockwell 2011). The nascent field of comparative political theory has drawn critical attention to long-established non-Western conceptions of core democratic principles such as the rule of law, popular sovereignty and freedom, as well as rich alternative foundations for democratic theorizing (Jenco 2010; March 2013; Soroush 2000). So much so that today there is increasing data to suggest that democratic configurations are taking shape within non-Western contexts and in ways that have very little to do with the conventional Western story of democracy. The West remains prominent in some of these experiments, but much of what is occurring defies Western theoretical conceptions and categories. The dictate that democracy must be wedded to liberalism, for one, has been subjected to serious scrutiny in a number of emerging democratic configurations that have had very little association with the West (Ackerly 2005). What is emerging, whether in theory or in practice, demands theoretical recognition and concerted analysis.

This issue of *Democratic Theory* features a number of important voices on the rise of democracy and democratic theory in the non-Western world. In particular, the issue draws attention to the various theoretical innovations coming out of Africa, the Middle East, Asia, the Pacific, and Indigenous Australia, exploring in each instance how democracy has been developed, received, applied, and adapted. The contributions demonstrate that while one strand of democracy's story may certainly have its origins rooted in the West's political discourse, more and more stories are now emerging about new and previously inexplicable traditions of democratic theory and practice. Engaging with these diverse traditions of thought is both important in its own right but also from a comparative perspective.

Challenging the Western-Centric Nature of Democratic Theory

As the discipline of political theory begins to expand its attention and relax its boundaries to engage non-Western scholarship, three arguments for such engagement emerge from a distinctly democratic perspective.

First is what we might call the *normative* demand, in light of democratic principles of equality and inclusion: exclusions borne of the presumed universality of Western democratic norms and practices mirror other forms of marginalization that democracy toils to redress. If what distinguishes democracy from other systems is its institutionalization of the contingency, conflict and change that the inclusion of social difference entails, this demands we challenge the dominance of Western accounts of democracy and foster curiosity regarding what lies beyond it.

Second, there is the *practical* argument that such engagements might raise critical attention to alternative foundations and expressions of democracy which, in turn, could inform, invigorate and even provide unanticipated resources for current challenges in Western democracies. This potential is nowhere more apparent than in the striking contradiction of the surge of democratic practices, innovations, and discourse beyond the West at precisely a time when Western liberal democracies are proclaimed to be in crisis (Ercan and Gagnon 2014). Melissa Williams and Mark E. Warren (2014: 28) articulate this practical contribution of non-Western scholarship as the "*democratic* argument" for comparative political theory, noting that at a time when globalization defies the West's territorially bounded model of democracy, comparative theory "provides some of the architecture of translation that enables self-constituting publics to form across boundaries of linguistic and cultural difference." This might indeed be only one way in which engagement with non-Western theory might shed practical light on the ailments and hypocrisies that have beset our own democratic traditions. But it is nonetheless important. As Isakhan and Stockwell write (2011: 223), "opening awareness of the breadth of democratic forms gives people the means to deepen, strengthen and develop democratic practice and the opportunity to promulgate democracy more widely."

Finally, there is an *epistemological* need to update the limited and at times flawed Western conceptions of democracy, in order to grasp the complexity, diversity, and cultural specificity of non-Western democratic principles and practices. The persistence of parochialism in political theory has led to unnecessary oversight and misrecognition of a wealth of democratic theories and practices as they appear in non-Western contexts (Gagnon 2013). As the study of such fields grows, it requires renewed sensitivity to potential projections of and conflations with Western terms: *are* core democratic values such as equality, freedom, popular sovereignty, and representation shared in the histories of non-Western political thought as they are in the West? Are these concepts understood differently, infused with cultural meaning and memory such that we must learn to code-switch to avoid silencing the potential epistemolog-

ical differences? What do these readings do to complicate, refine, and expand definitions of such terms in the West? And what does the migration and translation of democratic principles across such contexts entail?

For Isakhan, that democracy has typically been associated with the triumph of Western civilization has meant that only a certain mold of theorists will speak its name. Only those who identify with the Western narrative, in other words, will speak about democracy and undertake to theorize its existence in the name of the West. For those less uncomfortable with this historical narrative, however, the tendency has been to steer clear of democracy – even when they "have practised or lived under or fought for democracy" (Isakhan 2012: 9–10). When this occurs, it is little wonder that democracy has been drawn together with political proclamations seeking to affirm the discourse of "the West is best" (Bell 2006: 6).

A regrettable consequence of this state of affairs is that new experiments and practices that would otherwise have claims to being democratic can find themselves being unjustly labeled as non- or anti-democratic. Conceptual labels such as "illiberal," "imperfect," "flawed," and "immature" democracies are used, for example, to differentiate new and "half-baked" models of governance appearing in Asia, the Middle East and Africa from the supposed "benchmark democracies of the West" (Armony and Schamis 2005: 113). For Fareed Zakaria (1997: 22), the rise of these regimes – which typically occur in non-Western societies – represent a "disturbing phenomenon in international life." In many instances, Western scholars have even ridiculed the talk of democracy in these contexts as merely being a mask for the advent of a new form of despotism which, as we have seen in countries such as China, Egypt, Russia, Singapore, and Pakistan, is both harder to identify and harder yet to understand. Certainly there is something in these contexts resembling democracy, but also many things that do not.

Despite the fear and apprehension exhibited by many Western democratic theorists toward the rise of these new hybridized regimes, Zakaria argues the phenomenon of illiberal democracies may ultimately demonstrate a democratic future that is neither wedded to liberalism nor the West. "Just as nations across the world have become comfortable with many variations of capitalism," he contends that "they could well adopt and sustain varied forms of democracy" (Zakaria 1997: 24). In this way, "Western liberal democracy might prove to be not the final destination on the democratic road, but just one of the many possible exits" (ibid.). Continuing to peg democracy to standards established by the Western powers in the twentieth-century will only limit our understanding of what democracy already is, and can be. As such, there is a need now to look beyond the West, to see what the broader story (or stories) of democ-

racy (or democracies) can tell us about governance, representation, and political participation in the twenty-first century. This is as much about acknowledging cultural diversity as it is about the need to democratize democratic theory. In doing this, the objective is to tear down conceptual and cultural walls currently separating the "model democratic regimes in the industrialized world from the residual class of emerging democracies elsewhere" (Armony and Schamis 2005: 127).

This Issue

This issue of *Democratic Theory* is dedicated to the tearing down of democracy's conceptual and cultural walls. It begins with a contribution about democracies in Southern Africa by Stephen Chan, who offers a conceptual history that challenges the one underpinning Huntington's three waves thesis. Drawing particularly on the use of democracy and history by Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe, Chan claims that Mugabe's "version of history may be as selective and self-validating as Huntington's is of the American experience, both at its inception and in its 'victory' in the Cold War." Yet we see important insights from this use — and Chan's reading — that this alternate theory of democracy is not without its merits, particularly "in many parts of Africa and, with ameliorations, in other parts of the world" as well.

From there, Jack Corbett takes us to the Pacific, a geographic and political setting not often explored in the literature on democratic theory. In his article, Corbett draws out Ian Shapiro's three traditions of democratic thought — aggregative, deliberative, and minimalist — and argues that all three are apparent in the politics of the Pacific Islands. This, he contends, goes against conventional assumptions that paint democracy's meaning as being fixed. He shows that there is arguably a fourth tradition of democratic thought also applied in the Pacific context: one based on the governance concept and the need for violence as a precursor to any development-oriented democratic state. Lawrence Hamilton's contribution, like Corbett's analyses deliberative and aggregative theories of democracy, but returns us again to the African continent. Specifically, Hamilton explores South Africa, arguing that post-Apartheid political configurations have not managed to produce freedom, democracy, or consolidation. Indeed, neither deliberative nor aggregative accounts of democracy, Hamilton argue, have generated their intended outcomes when applied to his South African context.

The fourth contribution comes from Ramin Jahanbegloo who explores the Gandhian vision of democracy. Jahanbegloo argues that Gandhi

was a central innovator of democracy in India. Attributed to him were a number of important conceptions about citizenship, duty, and self-rule. But that aside, Gandhi also advanced a unique and largely forgotten illiberal form of democratic rule that sought to limit individualism, greed, and a laissez-faire approach to politics and economics. In its place, as Jahanbegloo points out, is a duty-oriented and spiritually empowered participative democratic ethos worth revisiting in the twenty-first century.

We also have in this issue a special book symposium featuring responses to John Keane's 2013 book, *Democracy and Media Decadence,* a review essay on democratic theory and Islam by Michaelle Browers, a book review of Nick Bromell's *The Time Is Always Now: Black Thought and the Transformation of US Democracy* by Jess O'Connor, as well as critical commentary from Kim Huynh reporting on his impressions of the first academic democracy conference to be held in Vietnam.

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