

BOOKS

By John Bellamy Foster

William I. Robinson, *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, U.S. Intervention, and Hegemony* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 466 pp., \$59.95 (cloth). \$22.95 (paper).

Neoliberalism is usually thought of as a purely economic philosophy, stemming from the work of the arch-conservative economist Friedrich Hayek and other twentieth century economists (particularly those associated with the University of Chicago), and involving an attempt to construct a much more complete justification for a pure, self-regulating market economy than could be found in the work of Adam Smith himself. Yet, neoliberalism—it is important to understand—also has its political component in the dominant model of liberal democracy, termed “polyarchy” by one of its leading proponents, Robert Dahl.

The first systematic presentation of this neoliberal or free market model of democracy emanated from the pen of another Austrian economist and social theorist, Joseph Schumpeter, who had emigrated to the United States in the early 1930s to teach at Harvard. It was Schumpeter who first challenged “classical” conceptions of democracy, arguing that democracy should not be conceived as government of/by/for the people (as it had been from time immemorial), or as a means to the end of the development of the individual (as in John Stuart Mill), but should be seen as a method of political organization akin to that of the market

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within the economic realm, involving political entrepreneurship, competition for scarce votes, and generally passive consumers. In this view the general population had no relation to democracy other than the one of voting periodically for politicians competing for elected office. "Democracy," Schumpeter wrote, "means only that the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them."¹ Indeed, Schumpeter stipulated that one of the preconditions for the exercise of the democratic method was that politicians be free from interference from the population in between elections. Another precondition was that the power of government be limited so that it could not easily intervene into the realm of the economic marketplace.

Schumpeter looked around and said in effect that classic notions of democracy did not describe extant democracies in Europe or the United States. The concept of democracy should therefore be redefined, he argued, to bring it into line with the institutional characteristics of actually existing democracies. Democracy should be cleansed of outdated moral considerations and defined purely in institutional or procedural terms, focusing on form rather than substantive content. In this spirit he offered his well-known definition that "the role of the people is to produce a government, ... the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote."²

Subsequent pluralist thinkers were to expand this into a full-fledged model of polyarchy, or a concept of actually existing democracy, understood as an institutional form that mirrored the economic marketplace. Although Schumpeter, with his characteristic realism, had conceded that the political outcomes of such a system very seldom reflected the actual interests of voters—but were affected by the "manufacturing" of consent through the mass media in a manner similar to the role of advertising in the market—later thinkers like Robert Dahl and Anthony Downs were to insist that the genuine preferences of voters were accurately reflected in the results, which produced a kind of political equilibrium between the demand and supply for political elites not unlike the economic equilibrium of the marketplace.³

At the time Schumpeter was writing, democracy was still commonly viewed as consisting of both means and ends/form and content. Schumpeter boldly attacked such complex views of de-

mocracy, arguing that democratic method was logically consistent with social injustice and the annihilation of human rights—the “persecution of Christians, the burning of witches and the slaughtering of Jews”—and that, in such cases, even the most ardent democrat would be forced to put other ideals above mere democracy.⁴ Democracy could not be considered an end in itself, it followed, but was merely a political method that was to be supported insofar as it was deemed useful in serving other ends, such as social justice, individual freedoms, decent government, etc.

Adopting an elitist view that hearkened back to the work of such earlier proponents of “the theory of democratic elitism” as Alexis de Tocqueville and Gaetano Mosca Schumpeter indicated that the greatest danger to democracy was “the rabble” with its “criminality or stupidity,” and that the democratic method was useful primarily if it were so curtailed that such extremes, which made democracy as an end in itself rather than simply a method, were restrained by the development of more limiting democratic institutions.⁵

It is only in the context of this elitist, neoliberal conception of democracy that one can understand the response of mainstream political scientists to the popular rebellions of the 1960s and early '70s. This is best illustrated by the well-known Trilateral Commission report on the “Governability of Democracies,” entitled *The Crisis of Democracy* (1975), co-authored by Michel Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington, and Joji Watanuki. As Huntington, who authored the report’s discussion of political conditions in the United States, put it, the main threat to democracy was “an excess of democracy” in the sense of the growth of mass movements that pose “the danger of overloading the political system with demands which extend its functions and undermine its authority.” The “crisis of democracy” for these thinkers was thus a crisis of elitist, neoliberal democracy, leading Huntington to the conclusion that democracy can be undermined through “overindulgence”; that “there are potentially desirable limits to the indefinite extension of political democracy.”⁶

It was not just popular democratic ferment in the most advanced capitalist states of Western Europe and the United States that induced Huntington and his co-authors to decry “an excess of democracy,” but also developments on the periphery and semi-periphery of the system, most notably the election of a socialist government in Chile, and the emergence of mass-based revolutionary movements in Portugal in Southern Europe in the context of

the short-lived Portuguese revolution. However by the 1990s—if Huntington is to be believed—the specter of “an excess of democracy” had been vanquished both practically and theoretically. As he states in *The Third Wave* (1991): “For some time after World War II a debate went on between those determined, in the classic vein, to define democracy by source or purpose, and the growing number of theorists adhering to a procedural concept of democracy in the Schumpeterian mode. By the 1970s, the debate was over, and Schumpeter had won.”⁷

What took place between the 1970s and the early 1990s that caused Huntington, a proponent of democratic elitism, to shift from despair to triumphalism? The answer is to be found—in very detailed form—in William Robinson’s indispensable work, *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, U.S. Intervention and Hegemony*, recently published by Cambridge University Press. Robinson is the author previously of a number of works on U.S. intervention in Central America. In his most recent study however he has moved to issues on a broader canvas, exploring what Huntington has called “the third wave” of “democratization” (that is the rise of neoliberal democracy) in the 1980s and ’90s in countries such as the Philippines, Chile, Nicaragua and Haiti. What Robinson’s study conclusively demonstrates is that capital’s promotion of neoliberal economic restructuring in recent decades, in response both to economic stagnation and to popular uprisings, has had its counterpart in the neoliberal promotion of polyarchy, a policy carefully articulated and implemented by the U.S. imperial state with the goal of reinforcing the global hegemony of the capitalist class based in the rich nations.

Robinson does not himself use the terms “neoliberal democracy” or “free market democracy” to define this phenomenon (terms introduced by the present author), but relies on other terms such as “regimented democracy,” “low intensity democracy” or simply “polyarchy”—terms that have cropped up in various ways within the neoliberal literature itself. The use of liberal democracy in one form or another as a means of staving off popular insurgency is not new, but has occurred repeatedly during the last two centuries. But the story Robinson tells is of the growth of a more sophisticated conception among political elites and the U.S. foreign policy establishment of ways in which “low intensity democracy” could be used to obtain the consent of the governed while excluding more “excessive” or high intensity forms of democracy. As Michel Crozier

had written in the Trilateral Commission report on *The Crisis of Democracy*, the object was to use polyarchic institutions in preference to more authoritarian forms of government in order to "produce more social control with less coercive pressure," in accordance with the view of Mosca and others that limited democracy was a better means of social regimentation and elite control than authoritarian rule.⁸

For Robinson, what has distinguished the 1970s, '80s and '90s in the political realm was what might be called the "Italianization" of political theory and practice (particularly within the international realm) as described by such critics as Stephen Gill and Robert Cox (both of whom have played leading roles in bringing Gramscian notions of hegemony into international relations theory).⁹ Italian political theorists, representing viewpoints stretching from fascism to communism, have long been noteworthy for their recognition of the importance of civil society and of the consensual basis of politics. In the case of right-wing theorists such as Pareto, Michels and Mosca, a central theme in their works was that of determining the means of maintaining elite dominance over society.¹⁰ For Gramsci, on the left, the goal was to challenge bourgeois cultural hegemony. This emphasis on the consensual basis of politics was most highly developed in the work of Gramsci. Fundamental to his analysis was the notion of extended state, in the sense that the "State = political society + civil society, in other words hegemony protected by the armor of coercion." Hegemony, which itself stood for the possibility of political rule based on the consent of the governed backed up by coercion, could only be secure if rooted in institutions of civil society: "the ensemble of organizations commonly called 'private.'" Gramsci's analysis thus led to the conception of an "extended state," encompassing civil society as well, by means of which the hegemony of a given ruling class was secured. At the same time, Gramsci pointed to a theory of counter-hegemony, whereby a revolutionary class might challenge the hegemonic ruling class by means of a long march through civil society.¹¹

When "a crisis of authority" is spoken of, Gramsci contended, what is really at issue is a crisis of ruling class hegemony, rooted in the dissension of "the broad masses" and groups of intellectuals, sometimes raising the question of revolution.¹² After the release of the Trilateral Commission report, U.S. elites began to deal with what they saw as the crisis of authority and threat of unregimented democracy abroad by engaging systematically in "democracy pro-

motion" policies. As Howard Wiarda, a leading proponent of "democracy promotion," put it in 1990: "the democracy agenda enables us ... to merge and fudge over some issues that would otherwise be troublesome. It helps bridge the gap between our fundamental geopolitical and strategic interests ... and our need to clothe those security concerns in moralistic language ... The democracy agenda, in short, is a kind of legitimacy cover for our more basic strategic objectives" (quoted in Robinson, p. 73). One of the earliest advocates of the deliberate promotion of polyarchy as a means of stabilizing third world governments was William A. Douglas, whose ideas were influential in inducing the U.S. National Security Council (NSC) to create the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). In his work, *Developing Democracy* (1972) Douglas introduced the term "regimented democracy" to refer to the type of regime that the United States should promote in the third world. The populations in third world countries, Douglas argued in traditional imperialist language, were children who needed "tutelage." "That a firm hand is needed," he wrote, "is undeniable.... Democracy can provide a sufficient degree of regimentation, if it can build up the mass organizations needed to reach the bulk of the people on a daily basis. Dictatorship has no monopoly on the tutelage principle" (quoted in Robinson, p. 84). His recommendations on "transplanting" democracy to the third world, as Robinson explains, included "the establishment of a specialized agency (later to become the NED); the participation of the private sector ... in government-supervised 'democracy promotion' abroad; and the modification of existing government institutions and programs so as to synchronize overall foreign policy with 'political development'" (p. 85). Douglas went on to become a senior consultant to the NSC's Project Democracy, which resulted in the establishment of the NED and other U.S. state organs devoted to promoting polyarchy as a political counterpart to neo-liberal economic restructuring.

Political manipulation, and "political aid," have long been aspects of U.S. foreign policy and a key part of its interventionist strategy. Up through the Vietnam War period, however, these activities fell under the jurisdiction of the CIA. As Robinson explains, "The new, post-Vietnam breed of political professionals lobbied for the transfer of crucial aspects of the CIA's political operations—namely 'political aid'—to a new agency"—one that would use sophisticated electoral techniques, political aid, and

other political operations to achieve its results. The result was to be the National Endowment for Democracy, introduced by the Reagan administration in 1983. The NED was set up by the NSC as part of the same Project Democracy that included (as its covert arm) Oliver North's secret operations that were to lead to the Iran-Contra scandal. According to *The New York Times*, these were "'the open and secret parts' of Project Democracy, 'born as twins' in 1982 with NSDD 77 [National Security Decision Directive 77]" (Robinson, p. 92). Although the NED is frequently described as an "independent," "private," or "nongovernmental" organization, it is funded entirely by Congress with funds channeled through the Department of State. And even though it is presented as a vehicle for public diplomacy, the NED frequently engages in covert activities.

The NED is only the best known of a number of U.S. government agencies that have been given responsibility for "democracy promotion." Another was the Office of Democratic Initiatives (ODI) established by the State Department in 1984. "In the division of labor, the NED conducted such overtly political activities as 'party-building,' whereas the ODI managed government-to-government 'democracy enhancement' programs, such as sponsoring judicial system reforms, training legislators of national parliaments, and financing electoral tribunals in intervened countries" (p. 98). NED works closely with various intermediaries or what are known as the "NED core groups." These include the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) and the National Republican Institute for International Affairs (NRI—now the International Republican Institute, or IRI)—the international wings of the Democratic and Republican parties; the Center for International Private Enterprise (an extension of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce); and the Free Trade Union Institute (FTUI), an international branch of the AFL-CIO. The blurring of public and private within the NED core group is reflected in the nongovernmental organization (NGO) front that these organizations exhibit, despite the fact that they are vehicles of U.S. foreign policy. It is then possible to present such activities of "democracy promotion" as the product of organizations outside the sphere of the U.S. government. As former Secretary of State George Schultz, a participant in Project Democracy, indicated, for most of the work in "strengthening the institutions of democracy" in target countries "we will rely on American nongovernmental organizations to carry most of the load" (p. 107). The Clinton administration, in coming into office,

immediately enhanced the NED and other "democracy promotion" programs, increasing the 1993 NED budget by 40 percent and replacing the ODI with the Center for Democracy and Governance, the aim of which, according to the new administration, was "to centralize and globalize all democratization policies and programs" (p. 100).

These political interventions in foreign countries for the purpose of "democracy promotion" are aimed at not simply encouraging democracy, but at producing "regimented" or "low intensity" forms of democracy, i.e. elitist-polyarchic systems geared to the needs of the U.S. imperial order. The central emphasis is on building hegemony within civil society through the penetration of and cooptation of labor movements, media, women's and youth movements, and peasant organizations. As Robinson admirably sums up these actions:

The aim is to construct in intervened countries an exact replica of the structure of power in the United States. This is done by strengthening existing political parties and other organizations identified as congenial to U.S. interests, or by creating from scratch new organizations where ones do not already exist. With few exceptions, the leaders of these organizations are drawn from the local elite and their efforts are aimed at competing with, or eclipsing, existing broad-based popular organizations and neutralizing efforts by popular sectors to build their own organizations in civil society (p. 105).

The U.S. preference for polyarchy, Robinson points out, does not mean that authoritarian regimes are no longer supported. "As a general rule, authoritarian regimes are supported until or unless a polyarchic alternative is viable and in place" (p. 113). For example, the U.S. strongly supported Marcos in the Philippines, even declaring his regime "democratic," until a popular democratic movement began to topple his regime, leading the United States to intervene politically to create polyarchic organizations that would limit democracy.

The Philippines is just one of four detailed case studies that constitute the bulk of Robinson's analysis in his book—the others are Chile, Nicaragua and Haiti. These were all high profile "democratic transitions" in which the United States was heavily engaged. The Philippines and Chile experienced transitions from right-wing dictatorships to conservative civilian regimes. Nicaragua underwent a transition from a popular revolutionary government to a conservative polyarchic regime. Haiti saw a

transition from a dictatorship to a popular government and then to an unstable polyarchy within a brief six-year period. Each of these cases of democratic transition have been heavily promoted as success stories of U.S. foreign policy.

One characteristic of Robinson's study that sharply distinguishes it from other recent books on democratic transition is that Robinson in each case places these events in the larger historical context of U.S. imperialism. Huntington, in contrast, manages to discuss the Chilean transition without devoting a single entire sentence to the U.S.-sponsored coup against the Allende government (Allende's name appears only once in his book). Likewise, the names of Samozá and the Duvaliers each appear only once in Huntington's book (in the same sentence), despite his emphasis on the transitions in Nicaragua and Haiti. Huntington sums up the history of U.S. military interventions in Central America and the Caribbean by stating, "On occasion, in support of democracy the United States Navy has sailed into the waters of the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Panama and Grenada. It might conceivably at some point sail into Cuban waters on that mission."¹³

What Robinson discovered with respect to the democratic transitions in the four countries he studied is that: "In all four countries, cross-class majorities had coalesced into national democratization movements against U.S.-backed authoritarian regimes, yet behind these majoritarian movements were distinct visions of what type of social order should follow dictatorship. Opposition elites sought the establishment of polyarchic political systems and free market capitalism" (p. 334). It was to such opposition elites rather than to the more popular democratic organizations and movements that the U.S. channeled its political aid. "Chile's new polyarchic rulers," Robinson tells us, "were, if anything, more committed than their authoritarian predecessors to neo-liberalism" (p. 199). In Nicaragua, the Sandinistas, struggling to survive in the context of a U.S.-sponsored military intervention, sought international legitimacy by institutionalizing polyarchy at the expense of participatory democracy, giving the conservative elite elements of the society additional institutional leverage and facilitating further U.S. political intervention. This contributed to a dramatic decline in popular support for the Sandinista cause. Indeed, as Robinson explains, U.S. strategy to unseat the Sandinistas can be explained in Gramscian terms:

The overall goal became to create in Nicaraguan civil society a counter-hegemonic bloc, in the Gramscian sense, to the hegemony won by Sandinismo in the anti-dictatorial struggle. The war of attrition was a powerful, ongoing war of destruction. It was not enough to destroy the revolution; a viable alternative had to be constructed. The new forms of internal political intervention brandished by US operatives would develop such an alternative. Between 1987 and 1990, the crucial battle for hegemony was waged in Nicaraguan civil society between the Sandinistas and a transnational alliance led by the United States and a reorganized Nicaraguan elite. This battle climaxed in the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas as the culmination of the war of attrition (p. 221).

U.S. spending to influence the Nicaraguan elections in this period totaled "\$30 million, or some \$20 per voter. In contrast, George Bush spent less than \$4 per voter in his own 1988 campaign" (p. 226). Despite all of its efforts to politically shape these countries, however, the United States was less than successful in creating stable neoliberal democracies in Nicaragua and Haiti, where popular resistance remained strong and where elites were "unable to coalesce effectively" (p. 337).

At the end of his book Robinson also provides discussions of U.S. political interventions into the transitions in Russia and South Africa. Between 1984 and 1992 alone, the NED spent \$50.5 million in the former Soviet bloc. A month after the collapse of the USSR *The Washington Post* declared: "Preparing the ground for last month's triumph was a network of overt operatives who during the last 10 years have quietly been changing the rules of international politics. They have been doing in public what the CIA used to do in private—providing money and moral support for pro-democracy groups, training resistance fighters, working to subvert communist rule" (p. 323).

The promotion of neoliberal democracy in the third world, to complement neoliberal economic restructuring, demonstrates nothing, it would seem, so much as the long arm of the U.S. imperial state. The types of political operations described have a long history, as old as imperialism. Even promotion of polyarchy is not exactly new. What has changed, as Robinson demonstrates, is the extent and sophistication of such operations. Today "democracy promotion" has become a means of opening up states to the forces of international economic restructuring. The fact that polyarchy is essentially a system of "market democracy," means that such "democracy" offers no real protection against the harsh world of market fetishism.

To have explained how imperialism works in this respect is enough of an accomplishment for any book, and Robinson is to be thanked for so thoroughly demystifying the so-called “democracy promotion” efforts of the United States and other advanced capitalist states. He attempts, however, to do much more, organizing his book from beginning to end around the theme of globalization. Here the argument is that capitalism is rapidly becoming a globalized economic system, with hegemony within that system passing not from the United States to some new hegemonic state, but from the United States to an emerging transnational elite. In other words, the new globalized economy requires a complementary globalized politics. Yet the transnational corporate elite can only become a political reality if its global hegemony is rooted in global civil society and extends upwards to the state and transnational institutions. In Gramscian terms, what we see emerging, according to Robinson, is a global-capitalist historic bloc, which must be countered by a global counter-hegemonic movement. As he puts it: “The globalization of production involves a hitherto unseen integration of national economies and brings with it a tendency toward uniformity, not just in the conditions of production, but in the civil and political superstructure in which social relations of production unfold. A new ‘social structure of accumulation’ is emerging which is for the first time global” (p. 32).

This thesis is an interesting and provocative one. It lends unity to Robinson’s analysis in his book. But there is little in the book itself that demands that one interpret the developments he describes as constituting political globalization on behalf of a new hegemonic bloc of transnational corporate capital. One does not need the concept of globalization simply to analyze imperialism. But to raise these doubts about his argument is not to detract from the real substance of *Promoting Polyarchy*. One might well dissent from (or remain skeptical about) Robinson’s thesis that “a ‘transnational managerial class’” has appeared “at the apex of the global class structure” (p. 33) and still benefit enormously from the critical analysis that he provides. No one on the left can afford to ignore the neoliberal state, as it has developed in the advanced capitalist world, and the ominous implications of its export to the third world and Eastern Europe. “Polyarchy in the emergent global society,” Robinson concludes, “has as little to do with democracy as ‘socialism’ in the former Soviet bloc had to do with socialism.... A democratic socialism founded on a popular democracy may be humanity’s ‘last, best’ and perhaps only, hope” (p. 384).

NOTES

1. Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1942), pp. 284-85. It is of course an oversimplification to follow Schumpeter in conflating democratic theories from the time of the Greek polis to the liberal democratic theory of John Stuart Mill under the common designation of "the classical theory of democracy." But when compared to later pluralist definitions—in which democracy no longer raises issues of substance, only form—the contrast between "classical" conceptions and polyarchy is indeed stark. For more nuanced historical views of these changes in the concept of democracy see C.B. Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press); Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 204-32; and David Held, *Models of Democracy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).
2. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, p. 269.
3. See Macpherson *The Life and Times*, pp. 77-92.
4. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, p. 242. On Schumpeter's broader conception of political economy, see John Bellamy Foster, "The Political Economy of Joseph Schumpeter: A Theory of Capitalist Development and Decline," *Studies in Political Economy*, no. 15 (Fall 1984), pp. 5-42.
5. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, p. 242; Peter Bachrach, *The Theory of Democratic Elitism: A Critique* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967).
6. Samuel P. Huntington, "The United States," in Michel Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington and Joji Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), pp. 113-15.
7. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).
8. Michel Crozier, "Western Europe," in Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy*, p. 55.
9. As Robinson (p. 23) points out, the term "Italian school" has been used in international relations theory to designate the work of Cox and Gill, which relies on Gramscian notions of hegemony. See Robert Cox, *Production, Power, and World Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987); Stephen Gill, ed., *Gramsci, Historical Materialism and International Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
10. The admiration of the pluralist democratic theorist Robert Dahl for Mosca is quite evident in his analysis of the latter's work—despite Dahl's rejection of Mosca's notion that democracy (or polyarchy) is consistent with minority domination. For Dahl, the notion of hegemony—as evident in the work of Italian theorists such as Mosca and Michels on the right and (more notably) Gramsci on the left—is too "indirect" a mechanism to suggest that elites or ruling classes rule (as opposed to govern). See Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 265-79.
11. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), pp. 12, 263.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 210.
13. Huntington, *The Third Wave*, p. 285.