

Chapter 2

Opening Remarks on

Defending the Gains?

Transatlantic Responses When

Democracy is Under Threat¹

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Let me first thank and congratulate Esther for having conceived the idea for this meeting, and for having organized and convened it. I am glad to have been associated with its preparation, and the Centre Thucydide welcomes this new opportunity to cooperate with SAIS, for the second time in two years. We are also proud to be associated for this conference with the prestigious European Studies Center of the University of Oxford, and with its Director, Professor Timothy Garton Ash.

We will now be dealing with a very difficult topic: the promotion and protection of democracy around the world, by those States which belong to the Transatlantic axis, that is to say to North America or the European Union. Such an identification is already a constraint, because we could have dealt with a broader area, namely the OSCE, which encompasses, in addition to the States just mentioned, Russia and Caucasian or Central Asian States. In a way, we are adhering to a Western approach, in the classical meaning of the term, and we consider that other States are not so much the topic as the actors of our endeavor to encourage democratization—they are the problem, we are the solution.

In this respect, I would like to quickly make two sets of—provocative—remarks. Firstly, what kind of democracy are we willing to promote or defend? Is it possible for us to be considered as a model, are we entitled to patronize other States? Secondly, is not democracy basi-

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cally a vernacular process which requires local social, cultural and ideological roots, which are not easily exportable, and how can we work towards such a promotion without practicing a kind of imperialism, benign imperialism if we like, but nevertheless imperialism? After all, colonization was undertaken in good faith, or at least with the nice feeling that we were expanding the universal values of civilization—“la mission sacrée de civilisation” was even a legal concept. And, before colonization, at the time of the French Revolution at the end of the XVIIIth century, France developed the policy of the “Républiques soeurs,” which paved the way for Napoleonic imperialism—which was neither peaceful, nor democratic.

My first point is *to put into question the value of our democratic practices*, which we apparently consider worth expanding. I am afraid that, in our various countries, in different respects, we have to face nowadays, maybe not a crisis, but at least a weakening of our standards—and I do not presume to put into accusation one State or another, because all of us have flaws and problems when it comes to evaluating the current state of our democracies.

Let me take a few examples, beginning with *France*. Whether we like it or not (and for my part I strongly dislike it), there is, in France, a political party, a legal one, able to compete in regular elections, the Front National. This party gets around 10-15 percent of the votes, whether in parliamentary or in the presidential elections. But this party is not able to obtain a single deputy at the National Assembly, when, at the same time, the Communist party, which gets between 3-5 percent, obtains around 20 seats... So, given this, what is the meaning of the representative institutions?

If we now look at *Germany*, there are two main parties, the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats. They compete against each other in the elections. There should therefore be a majority and an opposition, and the electors should make their choice according to the government they seek to obtain—but we can see that, after the recent elections, both parties have decided to govern together, apparently ignoring the will of their electors.

Take now a glance at the *United Kingdom*, the mother of bipartism and a haven of democratic institutions. It remains a model, but we all know that it is quite impossible for voters to escape the collective

domination of the Conservative party on the one hand, or the Labor Party on the other hand. It is quite impossible for any new party to emerge and to have any prospect of gaining a majority: the democratic game is closed, and the system is locked with strong keys.

I could also deal with *Italy*, in a different respect. We have recently seen, and fortunately it is no longer the case, the risk of a plutocratic regime establishing itself in the name of democracy. The country and the votes could well have been up for sale, given the personal control exercised by the Prime Minister over the media and over powerful economic firms. Is such a risk definitely eliminated? That remains to be seen.

Finally, last but not least, the *United States*. I don't want to go back to the 2000 presidential elections, about which some questions remain unsolved. But, on two grounds, we currently may keep some concerns. First, the modalities of the vote, with a lot of uncertainties remaining concerning the electoral lists and concerning the way the votes are counted. Unfortunately, the Federal Rules in this respect are weak at the very least. Second, after the 9/11 attacks, several new rules and practices have put into question some basic requirements of democratic institutions, altering the balance of power which is one of the main conditions for a democratic regime.

All these remarks are not intended to conclude that the West is not basically a democratic area, and that the culture of democracy is declining. On the contrary, in the end, democracy is able to overcome these difficulties. One of the main advantages of democratic regimes is their ability to criticize and correct themselves. But, even in the Western world, democracy asks for concerned and vigilant citizens. And we should remain modest and cautious when we seek to promote and export these values.

This leads me to a second set of observations which specifically address our topic. *How should we promote, export and defend democracy?* I will be brief, because it will be precisely the focus of our forthcoming discussions. Five short remarks.

My first remark is obvious: *we cannot pretend to have a unique model of democracy*. If we consider the diversity of our institutions, traditions and political systems, all of which deserve to be called democracies, there is no single democratic standard or criterion. On the contrary,

each one of our regimes is rooted in a specific culture, history and sociology. So there is a need to take into consideration the specific characteristics of every State, to use them as a basis, and not to try to just export our rules and processes.

My second remark is that the *implementation of democratic institutions is a process which requires time*. Our countries have needed more than a century to deserve the name of democracy, with its civil liberties, universal vote, equality of votes, competitive and fair elections, rotation of majorities to power, balance of power. We cannot expect some kind of instantaneous democratic revolution to occur. Even in the former European communist countries which are now members of the European Union, and where the process is well advanced, some progress still needs to be made. Indeed the willing participation of these countries in the EU was a great boost for democracy, but it would be a mistake to take this democracy for granted on a permanent basis.

A third remark deals with the result we seek to obtain with States which are not currently democratic—and there are still many in various parts of the world, despite the universal reference to the values of democracy, as the rule of people by people and for the people. Do we seek *policy change or regime change*? Can we consider that internal reforms undertaken by the depositaries of power are the best way to proceed, even if it is slow, or do we think that there must be a more stringent change, implying a new political personnel, a kind of revolution in the institutions? Probably there cannot be a single and universal answer, but we should be aware that a process which is not rooted in the demands of the people themselves, and imported from outside, is likely to fail.

A fourth remark is linked to this: we should not consider the legal rules and institutions alone, *separately* from the *sociological and cultural realities of any given country*. Education, effective practice of civil rights, equality of rights among groups and individuals, internalization of democratic values, are essential for the rooting of a democratic process.

Lastly, it derives from all the precedent observations that *the worst way to expand and protect democracy is coercion and/or war*. Democracy is neither implemented nor protected by the power of guns. Basically, such means hurt nationalism, which is a strong component of any col-

lective identity—and you cannot have democracy if you do not have, and if you do not respect, a collective identity.

Which leads me to a concluding observation, even if it is not directly related to our topic: despite its current fashion, *democratic peace should not be considered as a given*. Look for instance at the recent Lebanon war: Israel and Lebanon were both democracies, and Hezbollah indeed has democratic roots. It did not prevent the war, and, whether we like it or not, the question of international peace and security cannot only be solved by the universal expansion of democracy.