# ON IMPERIAL RELATIONS AND THE MISSION OF DEMOCRACY

## DAVID SLATER

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Por David Slater[1]

'The opportunity for self-knowledge is certainly worthwhile, but, especially in turbulent political climates, it must take second place behind the principled and methodical cultivation of a degree of estrangement from one's own culture and history'

(Paul Gilroy 2005, p 67)

'Empire is on the move, and Democracy is its sly new war cry'

(Arundhati Roy 2004, p 109)

'Aside from being North-centric and part and parcel of an imperial epistemology, the social sciences have also been too concerned with quasi-sterile theoretical discussions, such as the relation between structure and agency or between macro- and micro-analysis ..(i)n my view, the central focus should rather be on the distinction between conformist action and rebellious action'

(Boaventura de Souza Santos 2007, p xxix)

### Introduction

Amidst a growing debate on the meanings of democracy, a well-known British journalist has suggested that 'democracy is the new Christianity' ..'it is the chosen faith of western civilisation' (Jenkins 2008). In this context of the Western promotion and diffusion of democracy, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice asserts that the United States does not accept a firm distinction between its national interests and universal ideals, and she continues, 'we must ..work to promote a freer and more democratic world – a world that will one day include a democratic Cuba, a democratic Burma and a fully democratic Middle East' (Rice 2008). Echoing this vision, British Foreign Secretary, David Miliband, in a speech which links a moral impulse of policy to supporting movements for democracy, argues for the Western promotion of democracy, in which in certain situations the 'hard power of targeted sanctions….and military intervention will be necessary', even though earlier on in the speech, it is stated that 'we cannot impose democratic norms' (Miliband 2008). A final example can be taken from a statement from President Bush in 2004, in which it is opined that

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'I've got great faith in democracies to promote peace..and that's why I'm such a strong believer that the way forward in the Middle East is to promote democracy' (quoted in Bennis 2007, p 238). These statements reflect the belief that the West, and especially the US and its junior partner the UK, have been responsible for the diffusion of democracy to other parts of the world and will continue to be so; in fact it has been declared by a well-known North American political scientist that 'the principal disseminators historically of democratic institutions at the international level have unquestionably been the United States and Great Britain' (T Smith 1994, p 5). This belief in the mission of Western democracies to spread their form of rule to other non-Western societies is not confined to the present era.

For example, in the middle of the nineteenth century, at the time of the US-Mexico War, the originator of the term 'Manifest Destiny', John O'Sullivan, suggested that for the United States, the 'great nation of futurity', democracy was nothing 'but Christianity in its earthly aspect' and the last order of civilization which was the democratic had received its permanent existence in the United States, the country that was destined to manifest to the nations of the world the excellence of divine principles(see Stephanson 1995, pp 39-41). From the nineteenth century onwards – and Woodrow Wilson(1901) already referred to that century as a 'century of democracy' – US expansion went together with an emerging narrative that emphasized the political significance of 'democracy' and 'self-government'. For Wilson, democracy provided the 'frank and universal criticism, the free play of individual thought, the open conduct of public affairs, the spirit and pride of community and of cooperation which make governments just and public-spirited' (Wilson 1901, p 296). The spread and promotion of democracy and self-government continued through the twentieth century (Robinson 1996) and the Wilsonian aphorism of 'making the world safe for democracy' has been seen as a chief goal of the national security strategy of the United States(T.Smith 1994, p 4). How then might we interpret this firmly grounded underscoring of the spread and promotion of democracy from a US template?

In order to develop one possible answer to this question, I shall situate the official promotion of one vision of democracy in a context of imperial relations and geopolitical power where faith in democracy acts as a mode of legitimization for an underlying imperial ethos. The argument will be located in a West/non-West setting

and the paper will conclude with some comments on alternative visions of democratic politics.

### Geopolitics and Imperial Power

Geopolitical interventions have been a permanent feature of imperialism and they can be viewed in terms of the interlinkages between desire, will, capacity and legitimization. The will to intervene can be portrayed as a crystallization of the desire to expand, expressed in the incursive notion of 'Manifest Destiny' or in Cecil Rhodes' comment that he would 'annex the planets if I could', encouraging Hannah Arendt(1979, p 125) to suggest that 'expansion as a permanent and supreme aim of politics is the central political idea of imperialism'. [1] The will to intervene, to possess, to take hold of another society, even if only temporarily, flows from a deeply rooted sense of supremacy and mission. It was not just that the United States for example had a ruling vision of itself that was associated with a destiny that needed to be fulfilled; it was a vision, for instance the Jeffersonian notion of an 'Empire of Liberty', that was embedded in a hierarchical perspective on peoples, races and cultures, whereby the constructed white/black binary division was seen as a crucial marker of value. At the outset of the twentieth century for instance, Theodore Roosevelt placed imperial violence at the heart of US nation building, declaring in the context of the ongoing colonial war in the Philippines that the war represented the 'triumph of civilization over forces which stand for the black chaos of savagery and barbarism' , and moreover, 'the warfare that has extended the boundaries of civilization at the expense of barbarism and savagery has been for centuries one of the most potent factors in the progress of humanity' (quoted in Kramer 2006, p 169).[2]

The will to expand, to penetrate and to invade has frequently been explained in the context of the political economy of imperialism whereby, as Harvey(2003) suggests, imperialism is a diffuse political-economic process in which command over the use of capital takes primacy. For Harvey the central idea is to posit the territorial and capitalist logics of power as distinct from each other, while recognising that the two logics intertwine in complex and contradictory ways. But the will to expand and imperialize needs to be also connected to deeply-sedimented values of socio-political and cultural superiority. In the case of the United States the emergence of an imperial ethos cannot be solely anchored in the drive for raw materials and resources or in the

needs of capital. There is something broader and more multi-dimensional which connects to notions of geopolitical predestination(Weinberg 1963), the formation of an imperial self(Anderson 1971) and to the collective psyche of a nation that is being formed through violence, war and the decimation of an indigenous people(see for example, Brown 1991 and Slotkin 1998).

The desire to expand and penetrate needs to be seen as connected to a political will which represents a crystallization of that desire and which is perhaps most appropriately envisaged as being centred within the ambit of an imperial state where agents of power formulate and deploy a strategy of expansion which is a response to the interweaving of geopolitical, economic, cultural and psychic compulsions. Such a will can only be made effective when the capacities – military(see for example Bacevich 2005, pp 214-215), economic, political(see for example Zakaria 2008, pp167-214) – to intervene are sufficiently developed.  Will and capacity together provide a potent force but their effectiveness is only secured through the deployment of a discourse of justification. A political will that focuses desire and is able to mobilise the levers of intervention seeks a hegemonic role through the ability to induce consent by providing leadership, while retaining the capacity to coerce. This is why I would argue that an understanding of imperial politics must be centred on the state as the key propulsive and coordinating  node of power and furthermore any realistic attempt to comprehend the contours of hegemony must  also pass through the nucleus of state power, an issue I shall return to below.

The will to intervene, to penetrate another society and begin to reorder, modernise, civilise, democratise that other society is an essential part of any imperial project. The political will is provided by agents of power working in and through the apparatuses of the imperial state, as has been the case with the 'neo-con project' closely associated with the Project for a New American Century(see for example PNAC 2000 and Parraguez 2007). The processes of legitimization for that will to power are produced both within the state(see for example, Wolfowitz' 'Defense Planning Guidelines' [Ross 2004 pp20-21] and within civil society, including a range of influential 'think-tanks'(see Rich 2004). In  the case of the US and its relations with the societies of the global South and especially the Latin South the discourses of spreading and promoting freedom and democracy have been particularly significant in the justification of the projection of geopolitical power.(see for example Carothers 1991 and Grandin 2006).

Before taking up this theme of democracy as a mode of justification of imperial power, it is first necessary to delineate one approach to the main components of imperial power relations wherein the geopolitical context is formed by North-South encounters.

First, one has what can be referred to as a geopolitics of *invasiveness* that is manifested through strategies of appropriating resources and raw materials and/or securing strategic sites for military bases(see Johnson 2004), and which is accompanied by the laying down of new patterns of infrastructure and governmental regulation. Invasiveness, or processes of the penetration of states, economies and social orders can be linked to what Harvey(2003) has called 'accumulation by dispossession', whereby the resources and wealth of peripheral societies are continually extracted for the benefit of the imperial heartland(see Klein 2008 for the Iraqi case). But such invasiveness is not only a question of political economy; the desire to be invasive is expressed in cultural, political and psychological terms as well. For example, the violation of the sovereignty of a Third World society is not only a question of the transgression of international law; more profoundly it constitutes a negation of the will and dignity of another people and another culture. Violations of sovereignty negate the autonomous right of societies of the global south to decide for themselves their own trajectories of political and cultural being. In this sense the imperial is rooted in a 'power-over' conception that reflects Occidental privilege and denial of the non-Western other's right to geopolitical autonomy. And in anti-imperialist discourses, this denial is always strongly contested.

Second, as a consequence of the invasiveness of imperial projects, one has the *imposition* of the dominant values, modes of thinking and institutional practices of the imperial power. This is sometimes established as part of a project of 'nation building' or geopolitical guidance, where the effective parameters of rule reflect a clear belief in the superiority of the imperializing culture of institutionalisation. Clearly, under colonialism such impositions were transparent and justified as part of a Western project of bringing 'civilisation' to the non-Western other. In the current era, and specifically in relation to Iraq, bringing democracy and a market economy, US-style has been part of a tenuous project to redraw the map of the Middle East(Achcar 2004 and Gregory 2004), a project which has seen both resistance and partial accommodation, especially in the Kurdish region of the country.

Whilst the violation of sovereignty can be more appropriately viewed under the category of invasiveness, the related imposition of governmental norms constitutes an effect of that violation but here the process of geopolitical guidance can be better interpreted in terms of an imperial governmentality. Such a governmentality crucially involves the installation of new rules, codifications and institutional practices which are anchored in a specific set of externally transferred rationalities concerning 'market-led' development and democracy, effective states, 'good governance', property rights , 'open economies' and so on(for an earlier formulation see Williamson 1993). The imposition is thus a project for societal transformation that aims to leave behind an imperialized polity which is 'owned' and run by indigenous leaders. Whether such projects can be successful is surely doubtful given the nature of their imposition but in the final outcome much will depend on both the extent and resilience of resistances to imperial power, as well as on the efficacy of the domestic leaders who act as introjecting agents of externally initiated authority. Again, in both instances, with resistance and accommodation, the key significance of relationality is clearly evident. In addition, we need to stress the complexities of the imperial encounter, including not only the limits of externally deployed power,- or more emphatically the posited 'incoherence of Empire', to borrow a phrase from Mann(2005), - but also the unpredictable dynamics of internal situations which are affected by the clash of rival interests and competing discursive orientations, whereby a hierarchy of forces is combined with an heterogeneity of political subjectivities.

Third, it is necessary to bear in mind that imperial relations contain a lack of *respect* and *recognition* for the colonised or, expressed more broadly, imperialised society. Hence, the processes of penetration and imposition are viewed as being beneficial to the societies that are being brought into the orbit of imperial power. The posited superiorities of Western 'progress', 'modernisation', 'democracy' and 'civilisation' and so on are deployed to legitimise projects of enduring invasiveness that are characterised by a lack of recognition for the autonomy, dignity, and cultural value of the imperialised society. Overall, there is a mission to Westernise the non-Western world, and resistances to such a mission, especially in their more militant forms, are seen as being deviant and irrational and in need of repression and cure. Moreover, the existing cultural heritage of the imperialised society, as in the case of Iraq, is treated with disdain. In this context, Arundhati Roy(2004, p 111) reminds us that before the invasion of Iraq, the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian

Assistance sent the Pentagon a list of sixteen crucial sites to protect; the National Museum was second on that list and yet the Museum was not just looted, 'it was desecrated' (for a detailed critical evaluation of the cultural impact of the invasion, see,for instance, Báez 2004).

Imperial relations, seen as the most acutely asymmetrical form of geopolitical encounter, can be interpreted in terms of the three above-outlined features and in the context of global politics imperialism itself can be broadly defined as the  strategy, practice and advocacy of the penetrative power of a Western state over other predominantly non-Western societies, whose political sovereignty is thereby subverted. [3] The word 'predominantly' is used here since I would argue that imperialism, or more specifically, US imperialism, while having potentially dominating effects on other Western nation-states, is most clearly manifest in the context of West/non-West relations(Slater 2006). But at the same time the United States is widely seen as the 'self-proclaimed global beacon of democracy' (Hardt and Negri 2004, p 231) so how do the imperial and the democratic connect?

### Hegemony and Democracy for Export

According to Robert Cooper(2004, p 14), advisor to Tony Blair and Javier Solana, democracy is a destroyer of empires, whereas former National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski(2004) more realistically argues that US global hegemony is wielded by US democracy but that the imperatives of hegemony could clash with the virtues of democracy. For Brzezinski  a key question here is whether the outward projection of the US' democracy is compatible with a 'quasi-imperial responsibility', since hegemonic power can defend or promote democracy if it is applied in a way which is sensitive to the right of others, but it can also undermine democracy if there is a failure to distinguish between national security and the 'phantasms of self-induced panic' – there is in fact a danger, post 9/11, that the US could be transformed into an intensely security-conscious 'somewhat xenophobic hybrid of democracy and autocracy' (Brzezinski 2004, p 179 and p 206).

One of the pivotal issues here concerns the question of democracy's 'inside' and 'outside'. Dominating power at home can lead to the erosion of the democratic ethos that helps to sustain the consensuality of hegemonic power, just as the intensive deployment of what Nye(2002) has called 'hard power' can undermine the

seductiveness of the democratic promise abroad. War and militarization, together with transgressions of international law (see Sands 2005), are inimical to the health of democracies in general, as well as being a source of the corrosion of the US-made image of democracy for export, an image which Fukuyama(2006) has called the US' 'benevolent hegemony' for spreading democracy globally.

In the official narrative of bringing democracy to the world there is a hidden assumption that the US has the right, under circumstances chosen by the 'global sovereign', to spread democracy to others through the use of force. This might be expressed in a call for the imposition of democracy from above, as asserted by Ferguson(2005, p 52) a keen supporter of the US imperial mission. For Ross(2004, p 41) 'democratic imperialism is the claim that a democratic state has some kind of duty, as a citizen of the world, to act with the goal of ending non-democratic governments everywhere'. This is a relevant point but equally we must remember that whilst force has been used, 'democratic imperialism' requires a more subtle and multi-dimensional legitimization. This includes the idea that democracy is being called for, or in other words that democracy US-style is being invited by peoples yearning for freedom. Rather than democracy being imposed, or, as Appadurai(2007, p29) sardonically puts it democracy is being offered to many societies, 'even if this requires them to be invaded..' , it is suggested that the US is responding to calls from other societies to be democratized, so that through a kind of cellular multiplication, a US model can be gradually introduced. The owners will be the peoples of other cultures, as in Afghanistan and Iraq, who will find ways of adapting the US template to their own circumstances. What is being proposed here is a kind of 'viral democracy' whereby the politics of guidance is merged into a politics of benign adaptation. President Bush has expressed this idea quite clearly, noting that the US' faith in freedom and democracy is now 'a seed upon the wind, taking root in many nations'…'our democratic faith…is more than the creed of our country, it is the inborn hope of humanity, an ideal we carry but do not own, a trust we bear and pass along' (quoted in Gardner 2005, p 25).

Further, it has been suggested by President Bush that America's liberation role in Iraq , in which tyranny has been replaced by democracy, requires gratitude from the Iraqi people, just as in Brazil Bush in 2007 affirmed that the United States did not get enough credit for trying to improve peoples' lives. Insofar as the call for gratitude functions as a means of moral suasion it reduces the obtrusiveness of US power. The

United States, as Pérez (2008, p 4) acutely notes, 'secures its objectives not through coercion, real or implied, but through voluntary acquiesance in the form of ethical reciprocities – hegemony as a moral system '. The United States is bringing democracy to the world and the world ought to express its gratitude, even if some countries have to be invaded first.

Equally, it needs to be stressed that it is a specific form of democratic rule that is being projected and installed, a form which defines a political system as democratic to the extent that its powerful collective decision makers are selected through fair, honest and periodic elections. In the words of government advisor and theorist of democracy Huntington (1991, p 9), 'elections, free and fair, are the essence of democracy, the inescapable sine qua non'. Democracy in this characterisation is limited to a market friendly regime whereby liberalism is conjoined to a restricted democratic imagination, and as Anderson J (2002, p 34) puts it ' elevation of the liberal democratic state to hegemonic world norm is part of the 'new imperialism'. In this sense, alternative models that might include a critique of US power and attempts to introduce connections with popular sovereignty and new forms of socialism are singled out for disapproval. For example, in the case of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez is described as a 'demagogue awash in oil money' , who is 'undermining democracy and seeking to destabilize the region' (The White House 2006, p 15); - this is despite the fact that the Venezuelan leader has won more elections in the past eight years than any other Latin American leader. [4]

Moreover, if we examine the US' AID programme for democracy and governance, the US' largest 'democracy donor', a related concentration on one vision of democracy is present.

From its 2005 prospectus on 'Freedom's Frontiers', - a strategic framework for democracy and governance,- four core dimensions of democracy are identified: the rule of law, institutions of democratic and accountable governance, political freedom and competition and citizen participation and advocacy. These core dimensions capture the mainstream view on liberal democracy. From the document, it is argued that the United States promotes democracy as a matter of principle, whilst at the same time it is recognised that 'democracy is central to our national security' (USAID 2005, p 5). Equally, it is stated that 'democracy must be home-grown', and that 'there is no single blueprint for democracy – each country's needs, history and cultural

heritage are different' (USAID 2005 p 3 and p 7). Furthermore a distinction is drawn between 'immature' and 'mature' democracies, giving a sense of hierarchy although the distinction is not elaborated on (USAID op cit p 12). For the purposes of this analysis, there are two observations that can be made concerning the USAID document.

First, whilst it is suggested that democracy must be home-grown and that there is no single blueprint for democracy, the document nevertheless sets down its own blueprint in a normative fashion, without leaving space for dialogue and alternative visions of democratic politics. The template is constructed around an uncritical view of neo-liberal democracy, where the market and private property relations form a key foundation. The document expresses a unidimensional gaze on democracy and governance which avoids the possibility of alternative visions examined in an ethos of dialogue. Second, not only is there an unclarified division introduced between mature and immature democracies, and presumably between Western and non-Western democracies, but also the notion that the West and particularly the United States is the essential model of democracy for the world uncritically informs the conceptual framework.

In general terms, two problems affect this kind of framework. First, it is assumed that one model of democracy can be transplanted and installed in other societies, rather than seeing democracy as growing out of indigenous roots. Second, the model itself is not open and flexible enough to provide relevant guidelines for an enabling perspective for thinking democratic politics. These two problems have been widely commented on but there are other limitations which relate to its 'Westocentric' formulation, drawbacks that surface more generally when democracy is treated globally. In this context, we can pose a number of critical questions concerning: a) the Western democracies themselves; b) the relational dynamics between the West and non-West and c) the non-Western democracies.

**Contesting Westocentric Visions of Democracy**

In a detailed, revealing and somewhat neglected paper on where and when democracy was invented, Markoff(1999) examines, *inter alia* , the writing of constitutions, competitive electoral parties, representative institutions, accountability, secret ballots, and the extension of suffrage. One of his main conclusions is that 'for the past two centuries the great innovations in the invention of democratic institutions have

generally not taken place in the world's centers of wealth and power' (Markoff op cit p 663). At the same time, he argues that much more comparative research is needed, especially since it has been frequently assumed that democracy has been a solely Western product (see, for example, Zakaria 2007, p 25).

Taking a comparative angle, and looking at the extension of voting rights for women, it is worthwhile noting that the West has not always been in the vanguard; for instance, certain Latin American countries gave women the vote before the 1940s(eg Ecuador 1929, Chile 1931, Brazil and Uruguay 1932 and Cuba 1934) whereas certain First World countries were considerably later in extending voting rights to women(eg France 1944, Italy 1946, Japan 1947, Belgium 1948, Switzerland 1971 and Spain 1976, after 36 years of dictatorship). This uneven and unpredictable differentiation has not always been signalled by feminists, and other subordinating attitudes of Western feminists regarding womens' struggles in the global south(for instance, the posited prevalence of tradition, and the dominance of family structures) were highlighted by Mohanty(1988) in her pathbreaking paper.

Turning to issues of race, Hobson(2007,p 292) points out, that in the United States the African-American population faced varied formal obstacles to their voting rights including problems of literacy, arbitrary 'character' requirements and the threat of violence against those who turned up to vote. It was only in 1965 with the Voting Rights Act that African Americans were able to achieve their full voting rights, although even then in the 2000 election irregularities with respect to race were encountered in Florida.

More broadly, Gilroy (2005), in his incisive work on 'postcolonial melancholia', reminds us that racism needs to be connected to colonial and imperial projects, and whilst narratives of colonial brutality cannot capture the whole complexity of imperial affairs, they tend to get overlooked since a sanitized history of the imperial project is required by those who want to bring it back to life. And the info-war images of the shackled, goggled, humbled and orange-suited 'battlefield detainees" incarcerated at the US government's Cuban "Camp Delta" suggest that a system of colonial otherness may still be operative. For Gilroy, taking account of the history of imperial horrors can provide a starting point for reconciliation and healing but all too often in 'multicultural democracies' such as Britain a defensive argumentation surfaces which seeks to minimize the extent of imperial power, to deny or justify its brutal character, and finally to present the British themselves as the ultimate tragic victims of their

imperial successes (Gilroy op cit p 94). In addition, one has to take into account the fact that not only has there been a failure to move towards a process of healing and reconciliation, but also the recrudescence of imperial sentiment has become more acute, together with xenophobic attitudes towards immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers, undermining the possibilities of projects for the deepening of democracy.

In addition to the above features concerning the uneven extension of voting rights, and the role of racial hierarchy and the ideology of white supremacy, there are other limiting factors concerning First World democracies. Not only do we have an unprocessed history and geopolitics of colonial violence, but the corrosive influence of organised crime, corruption( the Enron case for example, see Nederveen Pieterse 2004, pp146-149), the role of restricted access to financial resources for electoral purposes, as in the US case, and growing voter apathy, - both a dramatic increase in levels of abstention and the fact that citizens feel less and less represented by those they have elected, - ought to sound a critical and cautionary note when the posited superiority of Western democracy is routinely taken for granted.

Further, post 9/11, the 'war on terror' has led to a notable erosion of democracy in the US, as well as elsewhere in the West, with the rise of an extremist politics, as is seen in White House memos on torture. Human Rights documents the continual circumvention of law in the treatment of prisoners and detainees in Afghanistan, Guantánamo and in Abu Ghraib.(see Sands 2005). As Eisenstein(2007 p 54) notes in her critique of imperial democracy, 'humiliation and degradation as well as coercive interrogation are now permissible; the Commander-in-Chief is not bound by international laws; offshore and undisclosed and off-limits sites are created in which to detain terror suspects' . The illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003 has compounded the problem of the erosion of democratic legitimacy (Curtis 2004), and continues to undermine the hegemonic posture of US foreign policy.

Apart from the contentious presupposition that the West and especially the US constitutes *the* template for global democracy, there is also the prevalent notion that the West has been and remains responsible for the promotion and diffusion of democracy to the non-Western world. In actual fact, it can be shown that the West and in particular the US has acted as a *terminator* of Third World democratic experiments. For example, in 1954 in Guatemala, a CIA-backed coup overthrew the democratically elected government of Arbenz, who had initiated a programme of land reform which was strongly opposed by the United Fruit Company. The US preferred the installation

of a military regime to the possibility of a reforming, redistributing government acting as a possible example for other Latin American societies. Once in power the Guatemalan military reversed the Arbenz land reform and in the period 1960 to 1996 more than 200,000 people from the largely indigenous population were killed (Grandin 2004). A similar intervention had taken place in Iran in 1953 where the democratic government of Dr Mossadegh was overthrown in a CIA-led coup. In Latin America related interventions took place in 1965 in the Dominican Republic and in Chile in 1973 where a reforming democracy was violently replaced by a US-backed Pinochet dictatorship. In the case of Nicaragua, the Sandinista government which had comfortably won an election in 1984 – an election which was judged by independent observers to be fair and legitimate(Cornelius 1986) – was destabilised by the Reagan Administration and subsequently lost the 1990 elections. [5] Moreover, the current Bush Administration is engaged in covert military operations aimed at destabilising the Iranian government, and in 2008 congressional leaders from both parties approved $400m for a secret war, including abductions and assassinations (*The Guardian,* 30 June, 2008, p 4). This is an another example of the US government violating the sovereignty of a Third World state, and not being called to account by the institutions of international law.

The termination of independent democratic governments has had its reverse side – namely a record of support for pro-Western dictatorships. In South America, military regimes in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay were not destabilised but rather supported(see Slater 2007, pp1046-1047). A similar pattern has been evident in other regions of the Third World and in the current era support for undemocratic regimes such as in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Uzbekistan contradicts the notion of a Western diffusion of democratic politics. Western backing for non-democratic regimes has a long history and it is quite symptomatic of mainstream writing that such support is rarely analysed (see for example Zakaria 2007)

As far as the past and present of democracies of the global south are concerned, one is confronted by a blizzard of Western prejudice. Societies of the periphery have been characterised as being 'pre-democratic', or in need of democratic guidance, or in transition to democracy, or as 'emerging democracies' and so on. Amartya Sen(2007) is particularly useful at this juncture, since in a short section on the 'global roots of democracy' a number of incisive points are made. First, Sen notes that although

modern concepts of democracy and public reasoning owe much to European and American analyses and experiences, (for example, from the European Enlightenment), nevertheless to extrapolate backward from these comparatively recent experiences to construct a long-run dichotomy between the West and non-West would be to make a very odd history. Looking at the Greek origin of democracy, Sen suggests that there is a great reluctance to take note of the Greek intellectual links with other ancient civilizations to the east and south of Greece, in spite of the fact that the Greeks themselves showed great interest in talking to ancient Iranians, or Indians or Egyptians.

For Sen, while Athens was the pioneer in getting balloting started, there were many regional governments which went that way in the centuries to follow. For example, some of the contemporary cities of Asia – in Iran and India – incorporated elements of democracy in municipal governance such as the city of Susa in southwest Iran which for several centuries had an elected council, a popular assembly and magistrates who were elected by the assembly. However, democracy is not just about ballots and votes; it is also about what Sen(ibid p 53) calls 'government by discussion', and here there is a long history across the world; for instance, Middle Eastern history and the history of Muslim people include a great many accounts of public discussion and political participation through dialogues – thus, as Sen(p54) reminds us, 'in Muslim kingdoms centered around Cairo, Baghdad and Istanbul, or in Iran, India or for that matter Spain, there were many champions of public discussion(such as Caliph Abd al-Rahman III of Córdoba in the tenth century, or Emperor Akbar of India in the sixteenth)'. In another example, Sen refers to Nelson Mandela's autobiography in which the democratic nature of  the proceedings of the local meetings in Mandela's hometown are described. Sen quotes Mandela as writing, 'everyone who wanted to speak did so..it was democracy in its purest form', [6] and Sen comments that 'Mandela's quest for democracy did not emerge from any Western "imposition" – 'it began distinctly at his African home, though he did fight to "impose" it on "the Europeans"(as the white rulers in apartheid-based South Africa …used to call themselves'. 'Mandela's ultimate victory was a triumph of humanity – not of a specifically European idea' (Sen ibid p 55).

From these and related examples, Sen(p 54) makes the valid point that 'the Western world has no proprietary right over democratic ideas'. Such ideas belong to

the world, or expressed in a Zapatista format, these kinds of ideas belong to a world in which many worlds fit. This insight can lead us to a related point concerning the way democratic theory is often framed in the West. I shall take one brief example to illustrate this particular issue.

The social theorist Bauman(2007), in a succinct discussion of the future of the left, concludes by emphasizing the relevance of the social state and the Scandinavian democratic model; he notes that such a model is far from being a relic of the past, in fact, 'just how topical and alive its underlying principles are, and how strong its possibilities for inspiring human imagination and action, is demonstrated by the recent triumphs of emergent or resurrected social states in Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil and Chile' (Bauman ibid p 15). Leaving aside the significant differences among these countries, the problem here is that the specificities of Latin American political change are locked into a particular Eurocentric straitjacket of interpretation. A particular Scandinavian experience of liberal democracy is extrapolated to give us an ostensible understanding of quite different political realities where the 'popular' rather than the 'liberal' is more closely associated with the democratic. What is needed is a concrete analysis of the Latin American experiences to see how and why they are different from the European situations and one key dimension relates, in the Latin American case, to the construction of popular-democratic subjects in which anti-imperialist politics acts as a central ingredient. From such a starting point, Eurocentric universalization can be better avoided, and theorists such as Bauman might broaden their intellectual curiosity to connect with Latin American social theory(for one perspective, see Santos 2007).

In a related manner, it can be argued that it is in the global south where the democratization of democracy or, as Santos and Avritzer(2007) put it, the emergence of a counter-hegemonic democratic politics, is particularly evident. In other words, far from being a passive recipient of a diffusing Western democratic template, it is in the countries of the periphery that alternative forms of the deepening of democratic politics are to be located. What is at issue here is alternatives to the hegemonic version of democracy, to a formalised neo-liberal democracy that emphasizes the market, elections, competition between political parties and an acceptance of the given disposition of power relations. The alternatives or 'demo-diversity' include a vibrant emphasis on participation in democratic politics whereby across the different

worlds of the global south, social movements have played a crucial role in bringing a reinvigorated democratic imaginary to civil society. [7]

For example, considering India, Appadurai(2007) connects a new politics of hope to an explosion of civil society movements which make some use of the conventional practices of democracy such as open legislative deliberation and a vigorous sense of the accountability of rulers to ruled, but also have generated a new range of practices that allow poor people to exercise their imaginations for participation – practices that include techniques for self-education and ways of pressuring state and party officials to act on basic needs without falling into machine patronage and vote-bank politics. Similarly, in Latin America, social movements have put new forms of participation on to the agenda, especially in the context of indigenous politics with the Zapatistas in Mexico( Ceceña 2008 and Higgins 2004) and the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador(CONAIE) as noteworthy examples, and movements of land reform such as the Landless Rural Workers' Movement-MST in Brazil have also been playing a key role in pushing back the frontiers of democratic politics( for a recent discussion see Stahler-Sholk et al 2007). These processes of democratisation from below provide a stimulating counterpoint to the brittle and limited export model of Western democracy.

### Concluding Comments

In the global context of a resurgence of imperial politics the promotion and diffusion of one particular interpretation    of democracy acts as a potentially effective legitimization of re-asserted forms of the penetration of Third World sovereignties. The call for democracy is a powerful one since it evokes a movement towards equality, progress and a modern form of political engagement and rule. Who could be sensibly against the seductive spread of democracy and freedom?  But the key issue lies in the contextualization and content of the democratic imperative, as well as in the manner of its deployment.  For example, like every other imperative, the injunction to democratise in a specific way creates an asymmetry between those issuing the injunction and those subjected to it, or in other words between those who 'democratise' and those who are being 'democratised'.  In the official Western or specifically US template, the parameters and effects of the imperial gaze tend to be veiled, whereas the politics of the 'seer' are normalized and naturalized, so that

alternatives are excluded or rendered abnormal. In the case of democracy, this means that the enabling potential of learning across cultural divides is negated and in its place there is a tendency to prefer processes of imposition based on the supposition that the Western template is universal in its applicability.

However, the attempt to impose Western norms or in extreme cases the use of force violates the tenets of mutual respect and equal recognition which are pivotal conditions for a democratic ethos. Unfortunately, some policy makers still privilege 'cannons' over 'canons' of learning, so according to two US intellectuals(Frum and Perle) writing about democracy and foreign policy, the US ought to be committed to a global war for democracy and freedom which can only de realized by 'American armed might and defended by American might' (quoted in Dallmayr 2005, p 4). This may be taken as an example of an uncompromising and extremist position but it does connect to a wider contextualization of US foreign policy with strongly unilateralist features.

Alternatively instead of the unilateral export of Western liberal democracy to the rest of the world, what is needed is the creation of a space in which learning about the different cultures of democracy can take place in a spirit of mutual respect and recognition(Gaonkar 2007), remembering also that in an era of globalisation, the sources of learning need to be genuinely global, transcending Westocentric visions. For democracy to flourish, it has to be home-grown and autonomously sustained, not implanted from outside as part of a legitimisation of a subordinating imperial project. At the interface of the imperial and the democratic there are a series of antagonistic tensions that can never be resolved since crucially the imperial ethos, with its subordinating mode of power, violates the foundational and dialogic roots of the democratic spirit. If that spirit is to be protected and sustained the imperial sentiment has to be continually challenged and superceded so that democracy may flourish in an open and creative manner.

NOTES

[1] In the geographical domain, Blaut(1993) rightly emphasized the expansionist politics of colonialism or what he referred to as 'diffusionism' and his work can be usefully linked to Quijano's(2000) treatment of the coloniality of power.

[2] For further elaborations on this theme, see, for example, Said(1993) and Hunt(1987)

[3] A similar definition is to be found in Golub(2007 p 67) whereby imperialism is defined as a continuum of coercive expansionary practices, entailing multiple forms of intrusion, constraint and rule. For further analyses see Fouskas and Gokaay (2005) and Nederveen Pieterse (2004).

[4] For a similarly negative perspective see Zakaria(2007, pp96-97) and for a more positive view see Domínguez(2007).

[5] It is surprising, in this context, that Huntington(1991, p 193) when discussing the Nicaraguan case fails to mention the 1984 elections which were also ignored by the Reagan administration.

[6] One has to add here that the possibility that everyone within a certain community or at a given meeting has the right to speak is not necessarily constitutive of democracy; it surely will depend on how decisions are made and carried out.

[7] It is here that the World Social Forum has played a significant role in bringing together a variety of social movements with a range of NGO's. The WSF began its meetings in Porto Alegre and the Brazilian input was crucial in its formation. It is necessary to make this point since some authors, Anderson(2007, pp 22-23) being an example, give a misleading and Eurocentric account, suggesting that the WSF was conceived in France. For one detailed analysis of the development of the WSF see Santos(2006).