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## Democracy's Good Name

*The Rise and Risks of the World's Most Popular Form of Government*

by Michael Mandelbaum

PublicAffairs, 336 pp., \$27.95

Until recently, at least by historical standards, democracy had a bad name.

In 1787, when state representatives gathered in Philadelphia to craft a constitution to replace the ineffective Articles of Confederation, democracy was identified with direct rule by the people and was considered a recipe for instability and injustice. In *Federalist* 10, James Madison rehearsed the conventional wisdom, which maintained that in a democracy "a common passion or interest will, in almost every case" seize a majority and impel it to tyrannize the minority.

"Hence it is," Madison observed, "that such democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths."

But also in *The Federalist*, on the basis of a new "science of politics," Madison defended the unconventional conviction, embodied in the recently drafted Constitution, that the proper organization of government institutions could capitalize on democracy's virtues, contain its disadvantages, and thereby render it an ally of liberty.

By enlarging the republic and multiplying the number of interests and thus reducing the impact of any one of them; by using schemes of representation to filter and refine the people's preferences; by separating, checking, and balancing governmental powers; and by further diffusing power among federal and state government, the Constitution did go a long way toward taming democracy's wayward tendencies. Two hundred and twenty years later, the nation has vindicated Alexander Hamilton's hope, expressed in the first installment of *The Federalist*, that America would prove to the world that individual freedom and democratic self-government belong together, and that together they represent a universally desirable form of government.

To be sure, the world needed some convincing. A century ago, only 10 countries in the world were democratic. Europe remained the home of monarchy and empire. Great Britain, though increasingly democratic domestically, ruled its colonies autocratically. Then World War I, which destroyed Europe's old order, ushered in the rise of communism and fascism, both of

which threatened to defeat and destroy democracy. Led by the United States, which emerged as the mightiest of them, the democracies prevailed, first in World War II and then in the Cold War. Beginning in the 1970s, by which time the number of democracies had reached 30, a wave of democratization swept the globe. In the last three decades the number of democracies has more than tripled. Today, no fewer than 119, or nearly two-thirds, of the world's countries are democratic, even as the rise of Islamic extremism and autocracy in Russia and China threaten democracy's progress.

Michael Mandelbaum's excellent and broadly accessible book seeks to account for democracy's success, and to assess the prospects for its extension. Mandelbaum, a professor of American foreign policy at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, is cautiously optimistic.

To understand democracy's rise and its current golden reputation, he argues, it is necessary to appreciate, as even learned commentators seldom do, that "what the world of the twenty-first century calls democracy is, in fact, a fusion of two political traditions that, for most of recorded history, were not only separate and distinct from each other but were seen by virtually all those who took an interest in politics as entirely incompatible." This fusion of liberty and popular sovereignty, or rule by the people through free, fair, and regular elections, produced "a hybrid political form" that has proved remarkably resilient.

Neither of the two component parts alone provides all the goods that we have come to associate with democracy. Absent either, democracy as we have come to know it is unthinkable:

Liberty belongs to individuals; self-government to the community as a whole. Liberty involves what governments do, or, more accurately, what they are forbidden to do--they are forbidden to abridge individual freedoms. Self-government, by contrast, has to do with the way those who govern are chosen--they are chosen by all the people. Self-government therefore answers the question of who governs, while liberty prescribes rules for how those who govern may do so. Liberty refers to the way the machinery of government operates, self-government to the identity of the operators.

Nor are the component parts equal. Liberty comes first; popular sovereignty is the time-tested means to securing it. Absent a commitment to individual rights and the rule of law, elections have proven over the last several decades (just as the bleak history Madison invoked in *Federalist* 10 suggested) an excellent vehicle for the tyrannizing of minorities and the mobilizing of majorities for wars of acquisition and conquest.

Mandelbaum shows that the fusion of liberty and popular sovereignty in what is best referred to as liberal democracy depended on a variety of developments. The diffusion of the norm of equality, which Tocqueville identified as the dominant feature of the modern world, undermined the claims of monarchy and empire, and reinforced the idea that individual rights

were the common property of all mankind. The rise in the 19th century of nationalism--the belief that those who shared a common language, culture, and history had the right and responsibility to rule themselves---further eroded the political claims of kings and autocrats.

Increasingly, commitments to liberty and popular sovereignty led to demands for universal suffrage, which, when achieved in the West in the 20th century, enhanced respect around the globe for liberal democracy's integrity. Moreover, the rise of the welfare state--which moderately redistributed wealth to compensate for the vagaries of the marketplace while allowing the ambitious to make the most of their economic choices and to amass fortunes--ensured that not only the middle class but the rich and poor would have a stake in the state's stability and prosperity.

Of course, the rise of liberal democracy involved adversaries and reversals. In the 19th and 20th centuries, nationalist energies destabilized the international order by delegitimizing existing imperial borders and licensing wars waged by newly emancipated groups against minority ethnicities. Moreover, the 20th century witnessed the rise of a new kind of leader, both fascist and Communist. While claiming democratic legitimacy, these dictators were returned to office by elections that were neither free nor fair.

Their claim to rule in the people's interest was belied by the totalitarian regimes they built, which menaced individual liberty to an unprecedented extent. Meanwhile, the triumphant liberal democracies *did* protect individual liberty and *did* enjoy democratic legitimacy. Their popular appeal has made liberal democracy the world's most popular form of government.

Part of that popularity is due to the good reputation liberal democracy has earned. Most liberal democracies are so by choice, the people having embraced liberty and popular sovereignty and the benefits they had ample reason to believe would follow. Not least, they were attracted to liberal democracy's superiority in producing goods and services, demonstrated dramatically by England's exporting of the Industrial Revolution around the world in the 19th century and confirmed in the 20th century by the rise of the American economy as the world's most innovative and powerful. Moreover, liberal democracy also proved tough, prevailing in World War I, World War II, and the Cold War, the three great military tests of the 20th century.

Its appeal, however, is not enough to account for liberal democracy's worldwide success. Without the proper material and moral preconditions, it could not have taken root and grown strong. Above all, Mandelbaum stresses the role of free markets, which provide not only economic growth but also a school in the qualities that liberal democracy depends on.

Private property presupposes and fosters respect for rights and the rule of law. Economic freedom rewards citizens who learn to form organizations and cooperate for mutual advantage, encouraging them to resolve controversies through compromise and negotiation.

And participation in a functioning free market teaches citizens that, when disputes break out about contracts or responsibility for accidents, government can be trusted to provide an impartial umpire.

The worldwide spread of liberal democracy is good for the United States and, in general, for international order, according to Mandelbaum. Political scientists, picking up on observations by Montesquieu and Kant, are largely right: Liberal democracies tend not to go to war with one another. The people are less inclined than kings and dictators to send themselves into battle. And commerce and trade, which accompany liberal democracy, create profitable relationships across borders that greatly increase the cost of war and the pleasures of peace.

Mandelbaum, however, adds a crucial caveat: The transition from autocracy to democracy, particularly through the premature introduction of elections, can (as in the Balkans in the 1990s) unleash violence and war.

The benefits of the spread of liberal democracy, along with the dangers of abrupt transition from autocracy, make especially pertinent, Mandelbaum points out, a consideration of the prospects for Russia, China, and the larger Arab world. He might well have added Iran. In approaching the issue, Mandelbaum emphasizes that whereas holding elections is relatively easy, establishing liberty is difficult, because it depends on qualities and beliefs that can take a generation or more to acquire. And he warns against taking the wrong lessons from the greatest success stories of the 20th century. The cases of Germany and Japan involve distinctive circumstances: Both suffered devastating military defeats that thoroughly discredited the old order; both were ethnically homogeneous; and both had previous experience with market economies and elections.

Russia and China are great powers that pose the possibility of combining capitalism with authoritarianism. Russia, in Mandelbaum's view, presents the best chance of a peaceful democratic transition. More than 15 years after the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia has adopted democratic trappings, but its elections are not free and fair, and the government's powers are not effectively limited.

On the positive side of the ledger, the Russian government no longer aggressively inculcates habits of subservience and conformity. Moreover, the population is largely literate and middle class; huge advances in transportation and communication have opened Russia up to the free world; and the decline of military threats from the West has weakened the traditional argument made by Russia's autocratic rulers that they need unlimited powers to defend the nation. To take advantage of these trends, Russia will have to avoid the temptation to grow steadily more dependent on its enormous natural gas and oil reserves, which would empower the government while weakening the economy's free-market dimensions.

After the introduction of reforms 25 years ago, China's economy has roared ahead--it is likely to surpass that of the United States sometime this century as the world's largest--even as the Communist party has resisted any significant movement toward democracy. At the same time, China is home to a small but growing middle class and civil society. And trade, tourism, and the Internet have given the Chinese people unprecedented opportunities to observe liberal and democratic ways.

Still, the party maintains a tight grip on power, it enjoys legitimacy among wide swaths of the people, and the state lacks even the formal democratic institutions found in Russia. If impetus for liberal and democratic change is to come, it will come, as in Russia, from the salutary influence of the market, and the pressure for limited and elected government that economic growth tends to bring.

Mandelbaum is least optimistic about democratic development in the Arab world, which has never seen genuine liberal and democratic government, and lacks the social, cultural, and economic preconditions. Moreover, the antidemocratic forces in the Arab world are strong. The countries tend to be religiously and ethnically heterogeneous, which leads to sectarian strife. Oil reserves are generally owned by the state; the larger they are the more they tend to stunt other areas of economic growth.

In addition, Islam's fusion of religion and politics creates a bias against individual liberty and popular sovereignty, subordinating both to religious leaders' interpretation of sacred law. The people's cultural memory of (and resentment at) the Christian West's centuries-long economic and political domination has been aggressively exploited by Arab autocrats, who have fomented suspicion of liberty and democracy as foreign and subversive. Finally, the effort to promote liberal democracy in Iraq has proven to be, in Mandelbaum's tempered formulation, "a cautionary example of the difficulties and dangers of trying to build one quickly and from scratch in conditions powerfully unfavorable to its establishment."

Taking account of the larger picture, the sobering lesson to draw from this cautionary example is that America's vital national interest in the spread of liberty and democracy requires it (as it did in the 1950s and '60s in the face of the Soviet threat) to dedicate itself to gaining cultural knowledge of its rivals. The United States must also develop state-building competence while coming to grips with the limits of its capacity to effect reform in faraway lands. And it must appreciate the reciprocal connections between liberty and democracy abroad and at home.

For while the survival of liberty at home is related to the success of liberty abroad--as President Bush, echoing a venerable principle of American foreign policy, declared in his second inaugural address--it is also true, as Michael Mandelbaum maintains in this measured and instructive book, that the spread of liberty abroad depends on the example the United States sets at home.

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