**From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict**
Jack Snyder
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As the West has recently been putting pressure on newly emerging nations to embrace democracy, some are beginning to question the wisdom and effectiveness of this policy. Among them is Columbia University Professor Jack Snyder, whose new book, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict,* purports to demonstrate that "naively pressuring ethnically divided authoritarian states to hold instant

elections can lead to disastrous results." He offers as quintessential examples Burundi and Rwanda, but argues that indeed many democratic transitions often do not merely fail to prevent but actually cause nationalist conflict. If this is true, it is cause for serious concern; but does he prove his thesis?

Not exactly—or, at least, not without some qualification. Snyder is one of a growing number of academics who are learning what practitioners have known for several years now, namely, that elections do not a democracy make—at least, not without a great deal of additional work. It is no accident that the book's cover is graced by Eugène Delacroix's voluptuous Liberty leading the people of France to the barricades. Beyond its obvious marketing appeal, the picture recalls the most famous example of a revolution that failed miserably, collapsing into abject absolutism because there was no serious effort to institutionalize the freedom so passionately proclaimed by its lovers. This cataclysmic "lesson learned" has been eloquently articulated by many, notably by Hannah Arendt in her classic study *On Revolution*. She deplores "the sad inefficacy of all declarations, proclamations, or enumerations of human rights that were not immediately incorporated into positive law, the law of the land, and applied to those who happened to live there." The result is inefficacy at best; more likely, violence and terror. Mere talk of "rights," without the establishment of a genuine system of rule of law, and effective governance rooted within a civil society, may well be expected to inspire continued violence. Snyder brings new examples to illustrate that same crucial, if often forgotten, point. Evidently elections that give only lip service to the rituals of democracy can never be expected to solve problems, and can certainly create new ones.

As Snyder has witnessed many years of democracy-building throughout the world, he seems familiar with the complexity of the task, at least in general terms. He notes that "a broad range of institutional, civic, coalitional, and ideological supports is needed to reliably ward off aggressively nationalist outcomes." This implies a complex set of more or less simultaneous political institutions that are usually difficult to affect, particularly as implemented by well-meaning outsiders hampered by relatively rigid work plans, timetables, impact indicators, and impatient as well as limited funding sources.

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the progress of democracy is full of problems, and solutions not easy to find. But without offering a detailed analysis of past efforts and a set of "lessons learned," Snyder still arrives at several methodological conclusions. To wit, he is "skeptical of arrangements for powersharing between cultural groups, doubtful of federalism, selective in recommending democratization, wary of proposals to expand freedom of speech, and conditionally tolerant of the domination of civil society by a strong state."

"Powersharing" is admittedly an overused term. But surely some form of democratically institutionalized sharing of power by all cultural groups

is necessary for a multiethnic nation to survive. If what he means is that he is skeptical of overly rigid schemes, Snyder does not say. Similarly, being "doubtful of federalism" is acceptable—for that panacea too has been overstated. On the other hand, there is little doubt that the Canadian style of federalism has successfully incorporated the testy French minority with virtually no instances of violence; the American federalist scheme was threatened only once (and not on ethnic grounds) by secession; and the Russian Federation offers a fairly good example of relatively successful opportunities for diversity, the case of Chechnya being the glaring—and by no means necessarily falsifying—exception.

More likely to startle is Snyder's qualified recommendation of democracy in general and freedom of speech in particular. Since the current United States foreign policy adopted by the State Department embraces the pursuit of democracy as a holy given, such a notion is bound to be controversial—as was the 1997 *Foreign Affairs* article by Fareed Zakaria, "Illiberal Democracies." Snyder's statement goes considerably beyond weariness with mere elections. Like Zakaria, who argued that some elections lead to increased nationalist conflict—and who cited even the fall of the Soviet Union as an example, surprisingly enough, because essentially contrary to fact—Professor Snyder is suggesting a more cautious look at democracy as such.

Snyder (like Zakaria) takes back with one hand a little of what he gives with the other. Indeed, they both opt for—as Snyder puts it—"getting the sequence right." He writes: "Many of the cases in this book show that if nationalist conflict is to be avoided, the development of civic institutions should be well underway before mass-suffrage elections are held. Likewise, it is better if a strong middle class emerges before press freedom expand, and civil society groups organize." Which reminds of what my father always said: It is better to be young, rich, and healthy than old, poor, and sick. Indeed. The trouble is that the progress of democracy does not always follow the neat blueprints of academics.

That is not to say that Snyder's point—and Zakaria's—is not worth taking seriously: In those cases where the West, and the United States in particular, have some influence over the sequence of democratic development, it is surely wise not to rush into elections. In addition to the example of Rwanda and Burundi, one could cite Bosnia and now Kosovo. Yes, the development of civil society is very important, as is the emergence of a strong middle class. But here is the rub: In many cases, for both to develop it is necessary first to establish new institutions and go through the process of electoral change in order to set the stage for the development of civil society and privatization—which in the best-case scenario involves putting in place the mechanism for creating a new elite and, yes, a new middle class.

It is Snyder's emphasis on nationalist conflict that best explains his

methodology. But his admonition that "the transition to democratic politics is meanwhile creating fertile conditions for nationalism and ethnic conflict, which not only raises the costs of the transition but may also redirect popular political participation into a lengthy antidemocratic detour" needs to be set against the facts. For according to University of Maryland Professor Ted Robert Gurr, writing in the May/June 2000 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, "Ethnic Warfare [is] on the Wane": Between 1993 and 2000, the number of wars of self-determination has been halved. What is more, that trend is likely to continue: "Since the number of new ethnically based protest campaigns has declined—from a global average of ten per year in the late 1980s to four per year since 1995—the pool of potential future rebellions is shrinking." So one might conclude that the transition to democratic politics has worked better than Snyder appears to imply. The transition to democratic politics may be less worrisome than he claims.

But the reasons have to do precisely with the types of arrangements of which Snyder is skeptical. Gurr notes, for example, that central governments "tend increasingly to conclude that it is cheaper to negotiate regional and cultural autonomy and redistribute some funds than it is to fund endless insurgencies." That does seem to be the case, even if the reasons have little to do with either idealism or ideology.

There is much in Snyder's book that is empirically useful and correct: For example, he indicates that one of the reasons why recent democratization has been "comparatively peaceful is that old elites were cushioned as they fell from power." That is true, though by no means without a downside: It continues to pose an important challenge in the ongoing process of institutionalization, as those elites resist too rapid a pace of reform lest they lose their current advantage. As a result, other problems, less dramatic than nationalist clashes but hardly minor, present still serious obstacles to reaching a level of freedom and prosperity that makes for a peaceful and just world order. While nationalist clashes may be on the wane, building democracy continues to be a difficult and extremely complex enterprise.

In conclusion, *From Voting to Violence* is an interesting read. But it will need to be supplemented with some painstaking analysis of how democratic assistance really works and how one can affect democratic change most effectively. It is good to raise some questions about what elections can be expected to do, to remember the importance of institutions and respect for the rule of law, and to emphasize the need for creating a strong civil society. The next step is figuring out the sophisticated methods required to make a dynamic democratic system that fully respects individual rights not only a theoretical dream but a genuine reality. For that, however, we will probably have to look outside the academy.

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