

Book Review

KURLANTZICK, J. (2013). DEMOCRACY IN RETREAT: THE REVOLT OF THE MIDDLE CLASS AND THE WORLDWIDE DECLINE OF REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT. NEW HAVEN: YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS.

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In *Democracy in Retreat*, Joshua Kurlantzick provides a detailed account of how our end-of-the-millennium exuberance about the spread of democracy dissipated so quickly. Around the world, Kurlantzick says, an unhappy middle class has slipped away from the pro-democracy camp. Whether the middle class can be drawn back is a critical question which Kurlantzick only begins to answer -- and perhaps cannot be answered neatly in a work of this breadth.

Parts of this story will be familiar to readers, but Kurlantzick performs a service by laying out the facts so well. In the thirty years after 1974, the world witnessed an extraordinary shift toward democratic modes of government. Kurlantzick divides this shift into two "waves" of democratization. One, spanning from 1974 to the early 1990s, mainly affected Europe, Latin America and Asia. Another, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, included much of sub-Saharan Africa and an assortment of other nations, such as Mexico and Cambodia. But it is not clear that this distinction is necessary for the analysis that follows. The critical point is the larger change. Freedom House, a non-governmental organization that measures political rights and civil liberties, says that the number of free countries rose from forty-four in 1972 to eighty-nine in 2002. But then progress stopped. The latest Freedom House report, published after Kurlantzick's book, affirms that the state of freedom has declined steadily over the last decade (Freedom House 2014). An *Economist* report calls it a "global backsliding in democracy" (*Economist Intelligence Unit* 2012, 3). As Kurlantzick shows, polling data also shows public disappointment with the experience of democratization throughout the world.

This is not the first time that the democratization movement has faced setbacks. There was a surge of enthusiasm for democracy in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, followed by the collapse of many democratic systems in the 1920s and 1930s. And there was a similar surge and retreat in the decades following the Second World War. Kurlantzick thinks that the current "reverse wave of antidemocratization may be more serious" than these earlier setbacks. This may be an exaggeration. After all, the reversal

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of the interwar period led to a global conflict that caused sixty million deaths. Additionally, Freedom House acknowledges that the number of free countries is still double what it was forty years ago. Still, that is no reason to dismiss the current bout of democratic malaise.

Kurlantzick surveys the main reasons for democracy's current troubles. The most important is the defection of the middle class -- that stratum of "professionals, small businesspeople, and other educated men and women" (Kurlantzick 2013, 84) whose enthusiasm for democratization has been undermined by political and economic instability, corruption, and civil unrest. Kurlantzick relies on Samuel Huntington to bolster the claim that the middle class has "long [been] considered the linchpin to successful democratization" (Kurlantzick 2013, 84). "Huntington's theory," he says, "has been turned on its head. . . . [After the transition to democracy,] a sizable middle class actually became a primary impediment to democratic consolidation" (Kurlantzick 2013, 83). The middle class, it turns out, often prefers mildly authoritarian regimes that are able to restore economic and political order. "If the middle class can no longer be taken for granted as a force for democratic change," Kurlantzick concludes, "it will mark an enormous shift that will challenge the accepted wisdom about democratization" (Kurlantzick 2013, 83).

In fact, there is room to doubt whether the "accepted wisdom" about the democratic predispositions of the middle class was ever so clear-cut. Huntington did suggest that the growth of an urban middle class had encouraged the recent wave of democratization. But he also warned that earlier reversals had been fueled by the reaction of "conservative middle-class groups" against economic and political turmoil (Huntington 1991, 18). Indeed, the conventional wisdom throughout the age of democratic capitalism has been that the middle class tends to be a conservative force. It has been the reliable backbone of the law and order movements that have arisen in every period of upheaval in American history. The ambition of the middle class, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in 1840, is to maintain "peaceful equilibrium and . . . a settled social state" (de Tocqueville 2003, 738-739).

As Kurlantzick shows so well, a "settled social state" is the one thing that many new democracies have struggled to provide. This is partly because of the prescription for economic reform that was dispensed by international financial institutions and its backers in the United States between the mid-1980s and early 2000s. The package of market-friendly policies that became known as the Washington Consensus failed to deliver the strong economic growth that Kurlantzick says was essential to retain support for democratization. Worse still, the strategy for implementing economic reforms -- "shock therapy," as Jeffrey Sachs called it (Klein 2007) -- aggravated feelings of insecurity. So did the financial crises that punctuated the neoliberal era (Reinhart and Rogoff 2009, 155).

As the Washington Consensus floundered, authoritarian regimes thrived. China enjoyed rapid economic growth while retaining tight central control over politics, the judiciary, and the commanding heights of finance and industry. The country has also become more aggressive about promoting the virtues of its approach to development, while intervening to undermine pro-democracy movements in neighboring countries

(Kurlantzick 2013, 117-134). (Kurlantzick also criticizes Russia for similar interventions.) The apparent success of the "China model" has bolstered the position of authoritarian leaders elsewhere, and given the middle classes of developing countries a plausible alternative to the strain of liberal democracy that was promoted by western elites in the 1990s.

Kurlantzick gives one other reason for the retreat of democracy: the persistence of *realpolitik*, even among countries that are themselves the beneficiaries of the latest pro-democracy surge. South Africa, freed from apartheid in 1994, now props up the Mugabe regime in Zimbabwe. Brazil overlooks human rights abuses in Venezuela and Iran. And India maintains a "see-no-evil" policy toward Burma. Too often, Kurlantzick complains, nations are guided by a narrow conception of their "strategic interests," particularly when they are "less secure in their regional environments" (Kurlantzick 2013, 165). Many advanced democracies are not well-placed to complain: the United States, for example, pursued a similar policy during the Cold War.

Democracy in Retreat makes a good argument about why it actually is in the long-term interest of existing democracies to support democratization abroad. And it provides valuable advice on how to improve existing democracy-promotion programs. Too often, Kurlantzick says, western policymakers have taken a shallow approach to democratization, giving disproportionate emphasis to clean elections and pinning too much hope on reform-minded "big men," like Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan after 2004. What is needed instead is an approach that is custom-fitted to "local cultural and economic conditions" and emphasizes sustained investment in the "foundations of democracy" -- such as stronger non-governmental organizations, a better informed populace, and more effective courts and watchdog agencies (Kurlantzick 2013, 173 and 227). This is sensible advice -- although this warning about the importance of local conditions is undercut by the overall frame of the book, which is generally aimed at providing a universal explanation ("the revolt of the middle class") to a "worldwide" problem.

We could also go much further in thinking about what the key elements of an effective democracy-promotion program might be. Another implication of this book is that we need to think more carefully about tailoring economic reforms so that they account for the politics of democratic transition, perhaps by softening free-market prescriptions. It is also clear that in many countries, middle class support for democratization will hinge on administrative reforms to improve essential services such as policing, healthcare and education. And there is clearly more to say about the control of corruption, which Kurlantzick suggests may be the most serious problem that emerges in democratic transitions (Kurlantzick 2013, 218). Of course, it would be impossible for Kurlantzick to discuss all this in one volume. Nor should he try, because the broader lesson is that each country requires a distinctive reform strategy that integrates economy, politics and administration.

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Kurlantzick also acknowledges one final challenge: the need for the advanced democracies to address their own "economic problems and governance crises" (Kurlantzick 2013, 200). This is no simple assignment, especially in the United States, where the scholarly literature on governmental dysfunction is growing rapidly (Mann and Ornstein 2013; Schuck 2014). Francis Fukuyama has recently argued that the United States suffers from a problem of "political decay" that is more serious than in any other democratic political system, and likely to continue "until some external shock comes along to catalyze a true reform coalition and galvanize it into action" (Fukuyama 2014b, 464; Fukuyama 2014a). This is bad news for advocates of democratization. They need a powerful example of democratic success, just as proponents of authoritarian capitalism have China as an exemplar.

In a perfect world, the United States would be a well-functioning democracy, and also a vigorous advocate for democratic development abroad. It has done this before. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the United States responded to the challenge posed by Soviet expansion with a robust decades-long program whose purpose, expressed in the Truman Doctrine, was to advance the "way of life . . . distinguished by free institutions [and] representative government" (Runciman 2013, 111-120). Of course, the country was jarred into action by precisely the sort of "external shock" described by Fukuyama: the perception of an existential threat posed by a well-armed rival power. Thankfully, China does not pose a comparable threat today. It remains to be seen whether, under these more benign conditions, American voters are ready to make the long-term investments that are necessary to reverse today's "global democracy recession" (Kurlantzick 2013, 170).

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