

Feeding Truffles to Porcupines: Why the West consistently fails to export democracy and human rights

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Abstract

*T*raditionally, the West has promoted the commendable cause of human rights because it was here that its contours were eloquently outlined by the champions of early liberalism. We uphold the western societal model because it results from our cumulative efforts to introduce into practice the noble standards conceptualised by John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, Thomas Paine, and other influential contractualists. Naturally, we are eager to share its fruits with the world. However, in the process of attempting to export western values we tend to disregard completely the fact that they took centuries to solidify into their present form. Furthermore, we fail to take into account the political and cultural climates which facilitated the advent of democracy and human rights. Further still, although our eagerness to market the products of our civilisation borders on intrusive advertising, we are yet to appreciate completely the qualities they entail. In this paper I shall argue that, in spite of being established theoretical concepts, from a practical perspective, democracy and human rights are novelties. I shall argue that the sociocultural evolutionary process cannot be expedited; that historically, piecemeal reform has taken pragmatic precedence over political adventurism. I shall argue that insofar as the West continues to recklessly impose its cultural ethos upon exotic civilisations, the ideals it espouses will become utterly devoid of authenticity.

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The past century bore the marks of enmity, oppression and belligerence. It witnessed two appallingly devastating conflicts which many had previously thought unfathomable. The great nations whence came numerous forefathers of democracy approached the verge of positively obliterating their nationals' constructive efforts. Merely two decades had passed since the collapse of European imperialism when the preservation of civilised values came into competition during an unprecedented attempt to institute a global hegemony. Following years of extraordinary hostilities, reconciliation came about and parts of the West re-embarked upon a more propitious track. Nevertheless, several states across Europe were a long way from concluding their democratic transition, while a great deal of others became trapped in an authoritarian stranglehold. With respect to the former, consider Francoist Spain, the *Estado Novo* in Portugal or the Regime of the Colonels in Greece; with respect to the latter, consider Yugoslavia and the Eastern Bloc. Democracy did not dawn in these countries until as recently as the 1970s². As much as the West enjoys patting itself on the back about how far it has progressed, when juxtaposed with other systems of governance, democracy comes out as quite embryonic. We should therefore endeavour to conduce to its uncomplicated gestation and birth. Similarly, we should safeguard the other hallmark of the Western civilisation – the observance of human rights. I shall note that in 2014, fifty years will have elapsed since the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed discriminatory practices against minorities and women in The United States³. A year later, a half-century will have passed since the enfranchisement of African Americans⁴. One must bear in mind, while reflecting on these facts, that in 1948, the U.S. adopted

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 2 of which states that '[e]veryone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex . . . or other status' (p. 535). Of these rights and freedoms, consider everyone's 'right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives . . . right of equal access to public service in his country . . . [right to] genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage' (Article 21). These and other entitlements did not apply catholically until almost two decades after their formal adoption. It is flagrant and revolting that the policy makers of any country should act in systematic denial of the standards they had consented to. It is sensational, yet, at the same time, somewhat lamentable that democratic values triumphed over socio-political inequity largely thanks to the perseverance and subversiveness of reform movements. It is preposterous that establishments with a history of suppressing individual and collective self-determination should become their most zealous proponents. It is entirely unacceptable that democracy should be undemocratically imposed upon those, whose cultural fabric is incompatible with its pretences.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, perhaps the greatest philosopher of the 20th century, made an assertion in *Philosophical Investigations* that I shall now paraphrase: 'If a porcupine could speak, men would fail to understand him' (p. 225). It is because the porcupine's perception of the world differs entirely from ours that we could not appreciate it. The same, of course, could be said of the human perspective from the point of view of the porcupine. In its vehement attempts to export human rights and democracy, the West is feeding truffles to porcupines. It is seeking to introduce into foreign lands values and a societal structure which, more often than not, collide with the established cultural norms. Moreover, it is doing so in quite an imprudent and seemingly

² 1990s as far as Yugoslavia and the Eastern Bloc are concerned.

³ Titles II - VII.

⁴ The Voting Rights Act came into effect on August 6, 1965.

extemporaneous way. The West does not seem to recall that democratisation progresses incrementally. It does not seem to recognise the importance of historical tradition and the extent to which it has shaped contemporary societies. And finally, fond as its leaders are of the popular platitude 'change comes from the bottom up', they do not seem to grasp its implications. Edmund Burke, the great Irish conservative political theorist, wrote in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* that '[p]eople will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors' (p. 29). Political establishments may come about by means of three disparate modes, which I shall now expound. First, there is *infliction* – the forced introduction of extrinsic government. Second, there is *revolution* – the collective quest for political reorganisation. Third, there is *evolution* – the gradual transition towards a socially opportune state of affairs. The expediency of the transitions which proceed from these modes can be determined through investigating their *popularity* and *timeliness*. A popular transition will be consented to by the concerned population. A timely transition will only take place once the public have become attuned to its precepts. Thomas Masaryk, the first president of Czechoslovakia, once said: 'We have got democracy. What we need now are some democrats'⁵. What regimes came of inflictive transitions have been either tyrannical by design or became so gradually. Albeit their acceptance was rather short-lived, they have occasionally been popular. At the same time, however, they have been particularly untimely. Consider the introduction of socialism in the former Eastern Bloc. What regimes came of revolutionary transitions have been at the mercy of their orchestrators. Popular as they initially were, revolutionary establishments have seldom outlasted the preceding governments. For a cautionary example, one might look to the

⁵ This is a literal translation from the Czech language. To my mind, there exists no official rendering of the quote.

French Revolution - an event whose engineers mismanaged the authority which they had wrested from the sovereign and eventually precipitated the state's relapse to autocracy. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whom many have called the 'father of the French Revolution', wrote in *The Second Discourse: Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Mankind* that '[a] people once accustomed to masters are not able to live without them' (p. 73). Newly emancipated states, most of which stretch across Latin America and Central and Eastern Europe, are yet to endure the many trials of a free society. Time alone can tell how well they will fare. What regimes came of evolutionary transitions have become prosperous and self-sufficient. Consider Norway, a country whose becoming a sovereign constitutional monarchy represented a culmination of the historical, political, and socio-economic developments. It was timely because by 1905, when the Union between Sweden and Norway was dissolved, Norway's economy had grown vigorously and its administrative institutions had become largely self-reliant. It was popular because in the 1905 referendum, an overwhelming majority⁶ of Norwegians voted in favour of the dissolution.

It has been said time and again that history cannot be accelerated. Yet time and again, men have brazenly sought to alter its currents. One such endeavour in the former USSR brought about a regime whose despotism and uncompromising brutality against the 'politically proscribed' are unparalleled by modern historical standards. A synthesis cannot occur without a thesis and an antithesis. Recently, the disenfranchised masses of the Arab World rallied for social and political rearrangement. Their crusade was met with enthusiastic praise by numerous statesmen across the West. Whether the Arab Spring will yield more favourable establishments remains to be seen. Let us bear in mind a quote from Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*:

⁶ Approximately 99,5 %

'What experience and history teach is . . . that peoples and governments never have learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it' (p. 6).

The porcupine is not in a position to recognise the delicacy of truffles. He might find man's insistence upon his consuming the precious fungus rather curious. But because dietary appreciation has not yet penetrated into his world, the porcupine is not to be held accountable for his gastronomic inadequacy. It remains to be seen whether he will ever relish savoury food. Man, unlike the porcupine, realises that the procurement of truffles is especially laborious. He should therefore know better than to shove mushrooms down the poor rodent's throat. If the West desires to export its cultural standards, it is important that it acquaint itself with the intricate constitution of the porcupine's world. It must essay to determine, by means of a thorough and dedicated analysis, the likelihood of exotic sociocultural markets accommodating its product. Should the West fail to execute this measure, its reformative endeavours might soon prove *untimely*. Furthermore, should it disregard the sentiments of its clients, the Western mode would prove infictive and therefore *unpopular*. John Locke said in *The Second Treatise of Government* that '[no man] can be . . . subjected to the political power of another, without his own consent' (§ 95). It would be unworthy of the West to contradict the maxims of its ideological fathers.

Progress has a harsh way of correcting our judgment. It is remarkably difficult to accomplish, yet unusually simple to reverse.

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