Engaging Emerging Democracies

For how frequently the term is used, and for the consequence of that use, democracy’s meaning should be simply evident. Of course scholars can deconstruct any term and debate any operationalization, but democracy’s connotation is more than academic. Authorities of various sorts allocate resources depending on a nation’s association with it. Activists can sacrifice their lives to realize it. The meaning of democracy is especially important for those who engage emerging democracies, including the newly endowed Weiser Center for Emerging Democracies (WCED). The center is dedicated to study, and through that scholarship enhance, capacities to assure and extend freedoms in emerging democracies, by which I understand societies whose authorities and publics have symbolically and institutionally broken with an authoritarian past and are crafting institutions, social relations, and cultural forms that extend rule of, by, and for the people. Isn’t that final clause enough to satisfy the quest for meaning?

The world’s conceptions of democracy itself, and its relationship to various freedoms and social and institutional capacities, are critical to thinking not only about how to study democracy, but also to consider how scholarship might inform its extension. In this article I reflect on some of the challenges of democracy’s definition and consider their implications for thinking about the public good of scholarship engaging emerging democracies.

Democracy’s Sense

When a word lives with qualifiers (in democracy’s case, the words liberal, social, representative, and direct begin the list), one can assume that no authority can define universally what it means. Indeed, one of the central conclusions of a fall 2008 U-M seminar, “The Sociology of Emerging Democracies,” was that categorical approaches to democracy distract us from the best analytical questions about democracy’s extension. They are better posed by conceiving democracy in degrees.

The Freedom House rankings of countries across the world offer the most proximate inspirations and starting points for WCED. The initiatives of various Western authorities mattered in those transformations, but it was the organization of civil society, especially in the 1980s, and the response of communist authorities in 1989 to accept democratic trajectories, that ignited qualitative transformations across much of the old Soviet bloc. Even with that change, however, authoritarian practices within democratic institutional façades remained. In fact, some of the vision for endorsing WCED came from the experience of Ambassador Ronald Weiser in Slovakia when its civil society organizations and broader public rejected through elections the nation’s authoritarian legacies in 2002 and opted for a course that enabled the country’s subsequent entry into NATO and the European Union. It clearly matters not only how much civil society has, but what civil society’s organizations and culture do, as Magda Zaborowska illustrates in this issue of the Journal of the International Institute.

The transition culture associated with the 1990s was relatively simple, but the revolutions at the turn of the millennium offered new challenges to democratic sensibilities. The ouster of Slobodan Milošević in Serbia meant not only the need to craft democratic institutions, but also to develop transitional justice after war. Georgia’s Rose Revolution and Ukraine’s Orange Revolution not only invited more democratic practices, but also challenged the region’s geopolitics. Subsequent visions of democratization only became muddied further when the price of energy—and the value of pipelines transmitting oil and gas from Russia and Eurasia through these transit states—skyrocketed. Consequent support for emerging democracies was not just about extending freedoms and rights, but about assuring European energy security.

Beyond democracy’s conception, then, the articulation of emerging democracies with other questions of policy and practice is central to understanding the prospects for democracy’s extension, and that takes us directly to a key problem for studying emerging democracies: the relationship between thinking about democracy in degrees and as category. In the former, we can think more critically about democratic ideals, while in the latter, we can think better about how democratic societies are associated with economic prosperity, diversity, and peace, on the one hand, and with different kinds of inequalities and geopolitical alliances, on the other.

Scholarly Engagements

By conceiving democracy in degrees, scholars can mark any nation’s departure from accepted norms, as well as room for improvement. That is not only a matter of scholarly purity or political integrity; it is critical to assuring that publics accustomed to the duplicitous associated with communist governmentality recognize how democracy is qualitatively different and that its ideals can be used to diminish corruption and extend the rule that list. The moral power of that contrast cannot be lost. But when democracy comes to define the discursive terrain on which various authorities and movements contest one another, democracy’s sense requires more substantial intellectual investment.

For example, can we simply embrace Vladimir Putin’s claim that Russia offers the world another version, one called “sovereign democracy”? Or might we consider the sense of another former president, Poland’s Aleksander Kwaśniewski, in his inaugural lecture for WCED? Pluralism, civil society, and tolerance for diversity with Western support animate Kwaśniewski’s sense of his nation’s immediate democratic past, and his vision for a European future. Putin’s sense depends on state strengthening and stabilizing Russian distinctions from western presumption. But their contrasting visions are not just a matter of democracy’s definition; rather they are part of the very problem scholars need to address in democracies’ articulations.

Democracies’ Articulations

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Democracies
By Michael D. Kennedy

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of law. At the same time, ideals need realistic foundations, as Gerard Libaridian illustrates in this issue, compromises with realism need to be evaluated with a variety of competencies that rarely sit well with those prioritizing expediency. We need better means to assess how democracy’s ideals can be preserved in the process of real transformations, especially when democracy’s articulation with other interests, and with its implications in various geopolitical alliances, might influence how critically we address limitations on freedoms and popular sovereignty.

We also should understand when democracy becomes a language, a form of expression, used to stake claims to power and to assert its normative and real superiority to other forms of political, social, and economic organization. Here, then, we need to take special account of how democracy is itself promoted. During the 2009 winter term, we attended to this question when former ambassadors and those invested in democracy promotion from scholarly and practical points of view visited U-M to help WCED envision its future. Francis J. Ricciardone and Ronald Weiser (“U.S. Diplomacy, Civil Society, and Democracy in the Middle East and Europe”) and Craig Calhoun and Lorna Cranmer (“Challenges to Promoting Democracy from the Ground Up”) participated in public conversations about how these questions look in different regions, and with different emphases on scholarship and practice.

Addressing gender inequalities offers an important alternative perspective on this too. Extending women’s rights and gender equality is not only a key feature of development, but it is central to democratization’s association with the broadening and equalizing of rights and protection of citizens around their engagement with the state. At the same time, we find authorities’ most typical claims to autonomy and complaints about undue external influence in matters of sexuality and gender. However, as Marianne Kamp illustrated in her discussion of postcommunist Central Asian transformations at WCED in December 2008 (“With or without Women’s Movements? Democratization, Economic Transformation, and Women’s Equality in Central Asia”), because states, regardless of democratic credentials, often sign international agreements signaling their embrace for women’s rights, scholars and activists can find spaces within existing regimes for empowering women.

In such work, scholarly investigations and collaborations can extend freedoms through the language of legal rights without democracy’s name. And that is why it is so important, as Kiyo Kwasniewski poses in his negative scenario for east European futures, Russia’s justification for intervention in South Ossetia, made around defending the rights of Russian citizens, could become a precedent for intervention in Moldova’s Transnistria and Ukraine’s Crimea.

Among the reasons WCED is associated with the International Institute’s Center for Russian and East European Studies (CRIESS) and Center for European Studies-European Union Center (CES-EUC), through the Weiser Center for Europe and Eurasia (WCCE), are its assumptions that understanding democracy’s trajectories requires engagement with the contextual expertise of area studies, and that many of the most critical questions we can pose can be explored within Europe and Eurasia and in their comparisons with other regions. We also find that engaging emerging democracies is more productive when those collaborations are based on long-term commitments. Indeed, our investment in the study of emerging democracies rests, in part, on the longstanding collaborations CRIESS has cultivated not only with individual scholars from the region, but also with one of civil society’s most important institutions.

Scholarly Collaborations
Regardless of regime, few would deny that vital and critical universities are part of that constellation that extends public goods. As Volodymar Tomusk illustrated in his November 2008 discussion of higher education reforms in post- State-Socialist Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (“Harvesting the European University at St. Petersburg to extend collaborations, and a new venture in collaborative learning is being established. I have also been working in Ukraine, with OSI, along a number of these dimensions. Inspired by consultations with Ukraine’s Minister of Education and Culture, Ivan Vakarchuk, and with leading authorities of Lviv National University, scholars are working to develop Ph.D. programs that move away from Soviet-era higher education in order to become more resonant with European and American forms. Through these curricular transformations, they also seek to move beyond the dangers of the old system’s tutelage, and to create more independent, critical, and interdisciplinary scholars central to democracy’s extension. That is no small challenge.

Curricular reform is aided by new networks of scholars that bring questions from their own societies into more global scholarly conversations. OSI’s Academic Fellowships Program offers just this kind of program. While I am participating in various peer review projects with scholars from Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Bulgaria, Kosovo and Ukraine, I am especially focused on how Ukrainian universities might engage “publics.”

One can find the word “engagement” in most American university portfolios nowadays, and there have been several broad efforts to rethink this in comparative and global frames. But what would it mean to put universities directly in the work of helping emerging democracies themselves? In my own discipline’s terms, does public sociology look differ

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Engaging Emerging Democracies

As U.S. Ambassador to Slovakia from 2001 to 2004, Ronald Weiser saw a country in transition from communism to democracy in danger of returning to authoritarian rule. He witnessed the efforts of the nation’s young people and civil society to prevent the pendulum from swinging back, and the experience convinced him that understanding the role of civil society in that process would be vital to countries struggling to achieve democracy.

To further this research, Ambassador Weiser and his wife, Eileen, donated $10 million to the International Institute in the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts (LSA). The gift established the Ronald and Eileen Weiser Center for Europe and Eurasia (WCE) and the Weiser Center for Emerging Democracies (WCED), both of which work in common association with the Center for Russian and East European Studies (CREES) and the Center for European Studies-European Union Center (CES-EUC). “I am interested in what factors have fed some countries to achieve democracy and others not,” Ambassador Weiser said. “In Europe and Eurasia are some of the best examples of places that have achieved democracy and freedom. It is very important to understand how these countries transitioned and to share that information with countries that are in transition.”

The Weiser gift also created the Ronald and Eileen Weiser Professor of European and Eurasian Studies, who will direct WCEE and WCED, and provided funding for graduate fellowships. With matching funds from the University President’s Donor Challenge Fund, the Weiser gift totaled $11.5 million. Michael Kennedy, a professor of sociology and past director of CREES, CES-EUC, and the International Institute and former Vice Provost for International Affairs, has been appointed to direct WCEE and WCED and named as the Weiser Professor.

In addition, the gift will encourage collaborations among other U-M units as well as institutions in the United States and abroad to create courses, seminars, conferences, lecture series, and opportunities for teaching, learning, research, and outreach. These initiatives will be advised by a policy board and advisory council composed of distinguished public figures and scholars from across North America, Europe, and Eurasia.

“The generosity of Ron and Eileen Weiser will promote deeper understanding of this complex and dynamic region of the world at a time when such knowledge is essential to preparing students to engage in the global economy,” said Terrence J. McDonald, dean of LSA. “The funding for the professorship and student fellowships will also provide students with real-world experiences.”

Weiser (U-M B.B.A. 1966) was appointed by former President George Bush as U.S. Ambassador to Slovakia from 2001 to 2004. In addition to his diplomatic responsibilities, he organized three international investment conferences attended by investors from hundreds of companies. In 2004, he received the White Double Cross from Slovak President Rudolph Schuster, that country’s highest award given to non-Slovaks, and the Cultural Pluralism Award from the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America’s Heritage Abroad for his work in the restoration of the Jewish cemetery in Zakopane, Poland, and the medieval Trenčín Castle, one of Slovakia’s most cherished historical sites. In 2007 Ambassador Weiser was honored by the Woodrow Wilson International Center of the Smithsonian with the Woodrow Wilson Award for Public Service. He has chaired or cochaired numerous nonprofits over many years, including the University’s National Board of the Ginsberg Center for Community Service and Learning.

In 1968, Weiser founded McKinley Associates, a national real estate investment company, and served as its chairman and chief executive. He was recently elected Chairman of the Michigan Republican Party.

Michael D. Kennedy is Professor of Sociology, Weiser Professor of European and Eurasian Studies, and Director of the Weiser Center for Europe and Eurasia and Weiser Center for Emerging Democracies. His last monograph was entitled Cultural Formations of Postcommunism (2002). His current empirical work concerns the cultural articulation of energy, democracy, and peace. Kennedy was Special Editor for this issue addressing democracy/decolonization in various global contexts.

References

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