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An American Dilemma: Can a Racial Plutocracy Export Democracy?¹

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Recently the media reported extensively about Obama's rapprochement with Cuba and the expected agreement about nuclear weapons in Iran. These two developments were hailed as signs that, in spite of many types of opposition in the US Congress on the part of war-mongering Republicans and supporters of Israel, from Israel itself and some pundits, Obama had imposed diplomacy as a substitute for war. It gave the world the impression that, belatedly, Obama was living up to his promise and had started implementing a foreign policy different from the one of his much-hated predecessor, George W. Bush, and more focused on peace and realistic means of achieving it.

This, at least, is the view of the media, mostly the media in the West, for opinion polls in the world suggest that this view is not very popular on the global level. First it is based on the simplistic notion that the President of the US is free to decide what he wants as a person and not part of a huge apparatus shaping foreign policy. Second it airbrushes contradictions among many aspects of foreign policy and distinguishes it from domestic policy.

While the US has decided to put an end to the 50-year-old "Tropical Cold War" with Cuba it is now putting additional pressure on Venezuela, a country

¹ The title, of course, refers to Gunnar Myrdal's work, published in 1944, which analyzed race relations in the US and focused on white prejudices toward African Americans (then called Negroes). A much shorter version of this paper was published on May 6, 2015 by *Truthout* under the title "The US From Abroad: Still Seen as a Strange Liberator"
<http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/30627-the-us-from-abroad-still-seen-as-a-strange-liberator>

whose régime is close to that of Cuba. The US worries about democracy in that country and puts some leaders on a black list for their violation of basic democratic rights. The US further argues that Venezuela is a threat to US national security. In Latin America, as the latest Summit of the Americas in Panama in April 2015 showed, this US attitude meets with ridicule, even among countries such as Brazil, that do not approve of the human rights violations of the Maduro régime. The Argentinian president even said it made her laugh.² The Latin American countries that requested the release of prisoners in Venezuela, that is to say those that were extremely critical of the régime in Caracas, did not agree with the US in its assessment of a Venezuelan danger to the national security of their North American neighbor.

There is clearly a disconnect between the perception of the rhetoric of democracy in the US itself and the one in foreign countries that have a long history of involvement with the self-described leader of the free world. Latin American perceptions, which are based on a history of domination and control going back to the Monroe doctrine, may themselves be prejudiced or partial but it is not the focus of this paper.

The rhetoric of "freedom and democracy" v. the impact of torture

The rhetoric of freedom and democracy is the preferred one in American foreign policy. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 was code-named "Iraqi freedom" and President Bush argued that the US was fighting for Iraqi and Arabs generally were entitled to enjoy the benefits of democracy. Thus in a typical formulation he declared: "Today I'm going to speak in depth about another vital element of our strategy: our efforts to help the Iraqi people build a lasting democracy in the heart of the Middle East."³ It is, of course, now almost too easy to deride such a statement for we know that the war was based on a web of lies about weapons of mass destruction and that

² <http://es.panampost.com/panam-staff/2015/04/11/presidentes-latinos-rechazaron-sanciones-a-venezolanos/>

³ "The Struggle for Democracy in Iraq: Speech to the World Affairs Council of Philadelphia", December 12, 2005 <http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com/speeches/12.12.05.html>

the US promoted torture more than democracy in Iraq as the very official Senate Intelligence Committee Report on CIA Torture in Iraq asserted in December 2014.⁴

The rhetoric of democracy in US foreign policy lost credibility over Iraq when lies were officially exposed, but the same type of event happened in the past without significantly modifying the prevalence of democracy and freedom as favorite tropes of American propaganda. Thus historians now know that the Gulf of Tonkin incident was a fabrication that even Robert McNamara partially admits in his documentary *The Fog of War*.⁵ The 1953 toppling of Mossadegh in Iran like the 1973 support for the coup in Chile were actually attacks on democracy. These historical events are well known by the populations concerned and historians in the rest of the world. These events did not derail the rhetoric of democracy in US foreign policy indicating that there is a deep divide between the reception of ideas and propaganda among the US population and the rest of the world and suggesting that maybe this rhetoric is relevant only for domestic consumption.

Today the difficulties the rhetoric of democracy is encountering in the world, mostly outside the West are of two broad types: the clash between words and deeds in the international arena, and the travails of US democracy in the US itself, which sap the credibility of foreign propaganda. The US resorts to drones to kill suspected terrorists in many parts of the world, thus flouting international law and killing many innocents. This makes the talk of democracy in Pakistan or Yemen rather ineffective for the “greatest democracy” is the “greatest violator of human rights”. Drones are actually the best recruitment argument for terrorists: violence and military interventions by the US are welcome by the anti-democratic terrorists of the Middle East.⁶ US support for illegal, secret or undercover interventions by US allies such as Israel in Lebanon or Saudi Arabia in Bahrain or Yemen also destroys the credibility of the rhetoric of democracy and human rights in countries which are themselves violators of these rights.

⁴ The *New York Times* published the full text of the report and a series of articles about it: <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/12/09/world/cia-torture-report-document.html>

⁵ The relevant segment of this movie can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5AaGVAipGp0>

⁶ See the report entitled “Living under drones” Stanford/NYU report at: <http://www.livingunderdrones.org/report/>

The perception of the US as a hypocritical power is reinforced by the gap between deed and creed. All powers are, of course, hypocritical. The French writer La Rochefoucauld argued that “hypocrisy is the homage vice pays to virtue”. The US however is more open to this charge for it claims to act in ethical, democratic terms and not to resort to straight power concepts and it is the only superpower left. French or German hypocrisy anger others in Europe but are less significant on the world stage. The US wants to be a beacon of light or a city upon a hill so its actions are measured in part in terms of its professed creeds.

Two researchers, Henry Farrell and Martha Finnemore, recently analyzed what they called *The End of Hypocrisy* after the revelations by Wikileaks and Edgar Snowden. They wrote:

The deeper threat that leakers such as Manning and Snowden pose is more subtle than a direct assault on U.S. national security: they undermine Washington’s ability to act hypocritically and get away with it. Their danger lies not in the new information that they reveal but in the documented confirmation they provide of what the United States is actually doing and why. When these deeds turn out to clash with the government’s public rhetoric, as they so often do, it becomes harder for U.S. allies to overlook Washington’s covert behavior and easier for U.S. adversaries to justify their own.⁷

They claimed that the US would have to come clean (“the U.S. government can certainly afford to roll back some of its hypocritical behavior without compromising national security”) yet the historical record suggests that the US usually reacts to revelations with more propaganda or different tactics in public diplomacy. American hypocrisy in a sense legitimates the hypocrisy of others; for instance the French have their own version of NSA surveillance, the Chinese bug the computers of their international rivals and their dissidents but they can now hide behind the exposed hypocrisy of the US. This makes the rhetoric of democracy even hollower than before WikiLeaks and Snowden.

Another aspect of what one could call the credibility gap of US propaganda can also be linked to hypocrisy, but it refers to the gap between domestic conditions

⁷ *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2013, available at: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/140155/henry-farrell-and-martha-finnemore/the-end-of-hypocrisy>

and foreign hectoring. The world is not culturally globalized but information is and since Western, mostly US media, dominate the world, information about the US spreads instantaneously in the world. The world knows more about the US than the US knows about the world. In the words of media analyst Todd Gitlin: “The whole world is watching” whatever happens in the US.⁸ Gitlin dealt with the New Left and the Chicago demonstrations in 1968 but his title is relevant here too for US domestic issues become global ones. Thus US elections are a global phenomenon and the life of famous US actors is known in every corner of the world.

Racism in the US and its global impact

The violations of the rights of African American men who are killed in places like Ferguson or New York by white policemen who are subsequently not prosecuted are not a purely domestic matter but global phenomena. In the 1950s racial segregation in the South of the US was a major factor tarnishing the image of the nation in third-world and later newly independent countries. The fight against segregation, which Eisenhower then Kennedy and Johnson carried out until new laws were passed in 1964 and 1965 (*Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act*), was prompted, in part, by international condemnations. During the Cold War the Soviets could easily debunk the proclamations of freedom and democracy made by the US which did not respect equality at home. The rhetoric of Martin Luther King could be deployed by people who either identified with the people of color outside the US or enemies of the US, even enemies of democracy. How could the US teach the world lessons when it did not grant all its citizens equality?

Fifty or sixty years later the same predicament is still there. How can a racialized democracy teach the world lessons about respect for the law when it violates the law not only outside its borders but within them as well? Snowden and WikiLeaks revealed a lot of inconvenient truths about US foreign policy, but international media, including the most mainstream US media, produce an

⁸ Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*, University of California Press, 1980.

involuntary counter-propaganda on a daily basis. Black men are killed very frequently and the media report the deaths and the absence of prosecutions whether in Florida (Zimmermann) or Ferguson (Michael Brown), New York (Eric Garner) or Baltimore (Freddie Gray). Sometimes, as in the case of the killing of Eric Garner there is a video showing the circumstances of the killing (stifled to death) but the person arrested and jailed is the person who shot the film, Ramsey Orta.⁹

This institutional racism is reported globally and undermines propaganda efforts in the realm of foreign policy. So even when yet another police killing leads to a prosecution (Walter Scott killed by officer Michael Schlager in South Carolina) faith in the US justice system is not restored. Images of police officers turning their backs on the Mayor of New York, Bill de Blasio, who had made some mild critical comments after the choking to death of Eric Garner also have an impact on how the US is perceived abroad.¹⁰ The position of pivot of the world system or “hyperpower”¹¹ entails greater visibility than for any other power. Saudi Arabian human rights violations or even Russian ones cannot become global phenomena on a par with US ones. So although racism, bigotry and inequality are not specific American characteristics, in the case of the US they undermine the official story America tells the world about itself.

The killing of black men is easy to televise and therefore to understand; it has a lot of impact, it is consequently far more deleterious for US foreign policy rhetoric than systemic aspects of segregation in US cities or what researchers call American apartheid¹² or the New Jim Crow.¹³ The racism that leads to police murders cancels out the efforts to promote the image of the US as a prosperous democracy where diversity is a core value. The rhetoric of diversity, which domestically is even more prevalent than that of democracy and freedom, sounds hollow on the global stage when it clashes with images of brutality and criminal racism. Although racism is also

⁹http://www.salon.com/2015/04/17/killer_cops_are_camera_shy_its_not_a_crime_to_film_the_police_%E2%80%94_so_why_do_they_act_like_it_is/

¹⁰ <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/30/opinion/police-respect-squandered-in-attacks-on-de-blasio.html>

¹¹ The term “hyperpuissance” was coined by Hubert Védrine and quickly adopted in English.

¹² Douglas Massey & Nancy Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*, Harvard UP, 1993.

¹³ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, New York, New Press, 2010

prevalent in Russia or Japan, not to say anything about Britain or France, the global media do not report about it as much as about US racism, which is at odds with the soft power efforts of American public diplomacy.

Democracy cannot be reduced to elections and includes respect for human rights, so the record of the US on this score matters enormously. As a major violator of human rights on the global scale, with drones and illegal wars fought by itself or its allies, the US is in a difficult position to paint itself as the greatest democracy in the world. Yet the US also has a major problem with the domestic aspects of its democratic system.

Democratic deficits in the US: "The Whole World Is Watching"

Although scholarly analyses of the democratic deficit in the US cannot be widely known in the world, the media reports about these issues do have an impact. The TV networks critical of the US such as *Russia Today*, *Telesur* or *Al Jazeera* report about all the problems and the seamy sides of the US. Even media such as the BBC or alternative US media such as *Democracy Now!*, *Z*, or many others blogs from the *Huffington Post* to *Tomdispatch* feed information into the global media machine which laminates US propaganda and self-perceptions. Recently the German magazine *Der Spiegel* published a series of articles based on a book by Christoph Reuter analyzing the impact of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 on the creation of the terrorist organization ISIS. American news is global news.¹⁴

Many authors from Lawrence Lessig¹⁵ to Noam Chomsky¹⁶, from Sheldon Wolin¹⁷ to Carl Boggs¹⁸ have written insightful critiques of American democracy,

¹⁴ For an English version: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/islamic-state-files-show-structure-of-islamist-terror-group-a-1029274.html> Christoph Reuter's book, published by *der Spiegel* is entitled: *Die schwarze Macht, Der „Islamische Staat“ und die Strategen des Terrors*.

¹⁵ Lawrence Lessig *Republic, Lost: How Money Corrupts Congress--and a Plan to Stop It*, New York, Hachette Books, 2011

¹⁶ "The Decline of America", *Philosophers for change*, December 6, 2011, available at: <http://philosophersforchange.org/2011/12/06/the-decline-of-america/>

¹⁷ Sheldon Wolin, *Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism*, Princeton U.P, 2008, (paperback 2010).

some in the mold of 1950s sociologist C. Wright Mills, the author of *The Power Elite*.¹⁹ With the two Supreme Court rulings known as *Citizens United* (2010) and *McCutcheon* (2014) the power of money in elections has been entrenched. The first amendment is kidnapped to abolish limits on spending in election cycles. Contrary to many European democracies, the US does not limit the amount of money parties and candidates can spend, nor does it limit access to the media. The first amendment is hijacked to protect the power of the wealthy.²⁰

The result is that the rich have more power and decide who can even run as a candidate in primary elections. Several synonymous expressions are used in the media to refer to this plutocratic aspect of the election cycle in the US: “money primary”, “secret or hidden primary”. The candidates in elections, in both parties, are funded by the wealthy and depend on so-called “dark money”, that is money contributed by corporations but not reported about. Moneyed interests or the so-called 1% in *Occupy Wall Street* terminology dictate who can run in elections and therefore dictate the ideological outcomes of the elections. Major donors such as the Koch brothers, bankrolling the Tea Parties and the most reactionary GOP candidates or Sheldon Adelson the casino owner are often quoted in the liberal and left media. George Soros bankrolls so-called liberal Democrats. What in Scandinavia would be considered corruption and be illegal is the norm in the US. Money buys elections which is not a totally new phenomenon but has become much more serious with the recent Supreme Court rulings.²¹

Two American researchers, Martin Gilens (Princeton) and Benjamin I. Page (Northwestern), recently demonstrated in a scholarly study that the people, the

¹⁸ Carl E. Boggs, *Phantom Democracy, Corporate Interests and Political Power in America*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011

¹⁹ These authors and the issue of “Democracy inc.” are discussed in Pierre Guerlain, “Democracy inc. and radical criticism in the US”, in *Democracy, Participation and Contestation, Civil Society, Governance and the Future of Liberal Democracy*, Emmanuelle Avril and Johan N. Neem, ed, London, Routledge, 2015 (pp. 38-50).

²⁰ At the November 2014 Paris Ouest Nanterre conference on “Money, Power and Representations” Vincent Michelot gave a keynote lecture entitled: « L’idéalisation de la liberté d’expression et le cauchemar de la ploutocratie » (The Idealization of Freedom of Speech and the Nightmare of Plutocracy) which deconstructed this hijacking of the first amendment by the powerful.

²¹ Thus in 1896 Republican Senator (Pennsylvania) Boies Penrose declared: “I believe in the division of labor. You send us to Congress; we pass laws under which you make money...and out of your profits, you further contribute to our campaign funds to send us back again to pass more laws to enable you to make more money.” Quoted in Frances Piven, *Challenging Authority how Ordinary People Change America*, Lanham, Md, Rowman & Littlefield, 2006, p. 14.

demos, had hardly any input in the political process and that the decisions were the sign of what they call “Economic-Elite Domination”. Their conclusion states the problem of democracy in the US in cautious but very significant terms:

Despite the seemingly strong empirical support in previous studies for theories of majoritarian democracy, our analyses suggest that majorities of the American public actually have little influence over the policies our government adopts. Americans do enjoy many features central to democratic governance, such as regular elections, freedom of speech and association, and a wide-spread (if still contested) franchise. But we believe that if policymaking is dominated by powerful business organizations and a small number of affluent Americans, then America’s claims to being a democratic society are seriously threatened.²²

A scholarly paper of this sort cannot have global consequences but the media reported about its conclusions. The BBC, for instance had a feature entitled: “Study: US is an oligarchy, not a democracy”.²³ Paul Krugman made a reference to this paper on his blog.²⁴ The words “oligarchy”, “plutocracy”, “rule by the rich”, “business-run democracy” are frequent in American, and therefore global, media. It is easy to see how *Russia Today* can make hay with these discussions.²⁵ Among other functions these critiques of the US enable Russia to downplay the role of its own oligarchy. In international relations the rule is: “I denounce your crimes and faults and I keep quiet or minimize my own”. The US is not exceptional on this score, neither are China, France or Turkey.

²² The full text of this article can be found at :

http://scholar.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/mgilens/files/gilens_and_page_2014_testing_theories_of_american_politics.doc.pdf

See also Martin Gilens essay in the *Boston Review*, “Under the Influence”, July 1, 2012 in which he states: “...the support or opposition of the poor or the middle class has no impact on a policy’s prospects of being adopted.” Available at: <http://www.bostonreview.net/forum/lead-essay-under-influence-martin-gilens>

²³ <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-echochambers-27074746>

²⁴ http://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/04/21/class-oligarchy-and-the-limits-of-cynicism/?_r=0

In his aptly entitled “Race, Class and Neglect” *New York Times* column (May 4, 2015) Krugman states: “Every time you’re tempted to say that America is moving forward on race – that prejudice is no longer as important as it used to be – along comes an atrocity to puncture your complacency.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/04/opinion/paul-krugman-race-class-and-neglect.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&module=c-column-top-span-region®ion=c-column-top-span-region&WT.nav=c-column-top-span-region>

²⁵ <http://rt.com/usa/us-democracy-oligarchy-policy-512/>

American democracy also suffers from voter apathy or refusal to vote in elections where there are only two serious candidates. The turnout for congressional elections is about a third of registered voters, some local elections have even lower turnout, as low as 10%. Americans are staying away from one key pillar of democracy: elections. If elections are mostly a matter of consumer choice between two products chosen by the same "economic elites" which do not address popular concerns, then abstention makes sense. This withering away of the electorate also affects other democracies when the choice of different leaders does not lead to the implementation of different policies. Yet the US's democratic difficulties make its public diplomacy or international propaganda less effective, which is not the case for Russia or China which do not praise democracy to achieve their international objectives.

A broken democracy in the US is therefore a handicap for America's preferred propaganda based on freedom and democracy. American lies or hypocrisy in foreign policy presentations discredit the concepts and values supposedly supported or cherished by the US. A racial plutocracy, perceived as such by the combined effects of critical US media and propaganda efforts by the enemies or rivals of America cannot praise democracy without risking ridicule. In many ways this is the obverse side of the coin of American hegemony.

Chomsky often quotes the words of the Mexican ambassador to the US in 1961 at the time of the Bay of Pigs (which ended in a fiasco) "if we publicly declare that Cuba is a threat to our security, forty million Mexicans will die laughing."²⁶ This applied to the perennial propaganda theme of a threat to US security that Obama recently used in relation to Venezuela. The disbelief in Latin America also applies to US democracy, for the US is known to have supported dictatorships or toppled democracies. In other regions of the world the same applies for similar reasons, from Greece to Egypt or China. US propaganda is not effective except in countries which have to deal with a powerful enemy of American such as the Baltic states or Poland. Yet even there what is crucial is not the rhetoric of democracy but the military and economic support of the super power.

²⁶ http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/1027/tomgram%3A_noam_chomsky_on_terrorizing_cuba/

In Japan, the Philippines or even Vietnam today leaders want a closer alliance with the US, but it has nothing to do with admiration for America's democracy or freedom. Vietnam fears Chinese power next door and has therefore resolved to form some kind of partnership with its former formidable enemy. The US's geopolitical and economic power is what matters, in Hanoi as elsewhere; hard power always trumps so-called "soft power". In Japan there are many protests against US bases, in Okinawa mostly, but the authorities want to balance the power of the emerging hyperpower on the other side of the sea. Poland was ready to torture Iraqi prisoners in so-called black sites for the US showing democracy is not necessarily the chief good it wants from America.

If propaganda does not work, if the rhetoric of freedom and democracy does not win "the hearts and minds" of foreign leaders and people the question then remains: why does the US stick to it? After all in advertising a bad campaign is usually scrapped. The answer to this apparent conundrum lies in the real target audience of this rhetoric: it is actually Americans themselves who are the target of this international propaganda. They are encouraged to believe that, in the words of George W. Bush, "they are good", they want "freedom and democracy" for others and nothing for themselves as American presidents from Theodore Roosevelt to Nixon and Obama have constantly claimed even while using a big stick in the Caribbean, Vietnam, Iraq or the whole Middle East thanks to drones.

People on the receiving end of "freedom and democracy" usually know better, from Greece to Chile, from Iraq to Panama. Yet they sometimes pretend to believe this rhetoric when it suits their current interests, as is the case for Vietnam, just mentioned. There is nothing really new under this Orwellian sun. Attributing noble motives to oneself and demonizing the other is as old as the history of domination. The colonized did not really believe in France's "civilizing mission", a fairy tale that imperialist French people told themselves and sometimes even believed. The countries under the Stalinist yoke did not believe that the USSR stood for anti-imperialist proletarian solidarity.

The US with its global reach, its domination of the media and global cultural presence can disseminate its propaganda more effectively than other powers. Its

domestic propaganda, known as public relations, has proved very effective in shaping people's "hearts and minds". Democracy itself has become an advertising phenomenon. The debate about torture lasted a few days in late 2014, it had a huge impact in the world, for the champion of democracy was shown to behave like its Iraqi enemy. Yet in the US the discussion was but a moment in an ocean of "freedom and democracy rhetoric".

The report of the Senate was even used by some media to claim that American democracy was fine for it enabled the publication of the report (actually only an executive summary).²⁷ While there is some truth to this and alternative media in the US do attest to the vigor of freedom of speech and the democratic determination of the reporters the fact remains that the torture debate was just a moment with little domestic impact but a huge echo chamber outside the US.

Racism, democratic deficits and torture defeat the propaganda efforts of the US and are exploited by powers which are far from being blameless on these scores. The US can sell itself as a land of the free and home of democracy only at home; outside its borders this propaganda is either ridiculed or accepted as the necessary hypocrisy to achieve a higher goal. As has been known since analysis of Hollywood movies started, the US feeds the negative propaganda that others use against it. In 1967, Martin Luther King in his famous "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence" speech said: "They must see Americans as strange liberators".²⁸ Things have not changed that much almost 50 years later, even if those liberated by American "freedom and democracy" are not Vietnamese any longer.

A plutocratic USA promoting democracy may be a form of global *chutzpah* but it domestically serves to change the conversation from touchy topics and reinforce national beliefs about American exceptionalism. Martin Luther King quoted President Kennedy in his speech: "Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable."²⁹ Wise words which the US should still meditate alongside John Quincy Adams's "she [America] goes not abroad in search

²⁷ See a comic deconstruction of this idea at: <http://mic.com/articles/106226/jon-stewart-destroys-fox-news-appalling-reaction-to-the-cia-torture-report>

²⁸ <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/058.html>

²⁹ A poster with this quote can be found at: <http://files.ctctcdn.com/72dea1f6be/028e8206-e457-46e9-a634-4745a6e62860.jpg>

of monsters to destroy". Yet the US is not really trying to export democracy or freedom as its track record of monster-hunting shows, it wants to maintain its hegemony or at least contain its decline. In this it is not so different from past imperial powers or from China today; only its rhetoric based upon its history differs. It is therefore legitimate to argue that American exceptionalism amounts only to a rhetorical exception.