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Liberal democracy, national development, and self-determination in late neocolonialism

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Abstract: Mainstream development theorists prescribe liberal democracy and 'inclusive institutions' as the panacea to the economic and social problems of the developing world. However, after three decades of liberal reforms under the tutelage of the Bretton Woods Institutions, the Global South continues to struggle with recurrent crises. I challenge the liberal orthodoxy as a self-serving and highly sanitised interpretation of the history of European development that overlooks centuries of plunder, repression, and bloodshed. I then draw on experiences from Ghana and other developing countries to show that the multiparty system, the ideal political manifestation of liberal democracy, is antithetical to the pursuit of development because of its preoccupation with contestation for political power and its subservience to corporate interests. The pressure of electoral competition reduces the time horizons of political leaders, creating conditions that erode state capacity and undermine long-term development planning. Moreover, liberal democracy is an illusion in a geopolitical reality where western-controlled multilateral institutions (coercively) impose policies and conditionalities on the Global South, often against the expressed democratic preferences of national populations. The ongoing geopolitical shifts have once again brought up the need to re-engage with the *concept* and *practice* of democracy in ways that can fulfil the developmental aspirations of the Global South, and that can transcend the thin definitions espoused by the multilateral institutions of the 'rules-based international order'.

Keywords: democracy, development, self-determination

Introduction

The consensus among mainstream development theorists that liberal institutions are necessary for development provides intellectual justification for the Western-dominated 'rules-based international order'. As this order continues its inevitable downwards slide (Mearsheimer, 2019), the hallowed institutions of the West have been recruited to shore up its legitimacy. The 2024 Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel – otherwise called the Nobel prize in economics – was awarded to Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson (AJR for short) for a self-serving theory about the relationship between 'inclusive' institutions and economic development. In reality, their argument amounts to an endorsement of colonialism, the type that resulted in 'the creation of Neo-Europes' where settlers imported European 'institutions that enforced the rule of law and encouraged investment' (Acemoglu et al., 2001, pp. 1370, 1395). According to this formulation, in colonies where high European mortality made settler colonialism impossible, the extractive institutions that were set up have persisted and account for the development challenges these countries face after independence. AJR claim that this accounts for the 'reversal of fortunes' among European colonies where richer pre-colonial societies and civilisations have now ended up poorer and less developed than the Neo-Europes:

> …colonization introduced relatively better institutions in previously sparsely settled and less prosperous areas: while in a number of colonies such as the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, and Singapore, Europeans established institutions of private property, in many others, they set up or took over already extractive institutions in order to directly extract resources, to develop plantations and mining networks, or to collect taxes (Acemoglu et al., 2002, p. 1264)

It is perhaps no coincidence that in 2024 the Nobel committee decided to award this theory whose key variable is mortality rate of Europeans – not the indigenous people who were decimated in the 'Neo-Europes' – as another 'Neo-Europe' is in the middle of carrying out what the International Court of Justice has described as plausible genocide in Gaza with the full participation of the West.

AJR have, of course, been heavily criticised for, among other things, over-simplifying causation, misinterpreting the historical literature, and glossing over the stark reality of violence, extraction, and repression that propelled Europe's rise to world dominance (Austin, 2008; Chandrasekhar, 2024; Greeley, 2024; Sundaram, 2024). For instance, the so-called inclusive institutions of the United States existed in parallel with slavery and the denial of basic humanity to minorities (Greeley, 2024). Tellingly, in their 'Reversal of Fortunes' article, they acknowledge dismissively in a footnote that their argument is about 'relative incomes across different areas, and does not imply that the initial inhabitants of, for example, New Zealand or North America themselves became relatively rich. In fact, much of the native population of these areas did not survive European colonialism' (Acemoglu et al., 2002, p. 1232).

AJR's dismissive allusion to colonial violence and the genocide of indigenous populations, as well as their claim that the developmental challenges of the Global South should be attributed 'not [to] the "plunder" by Europeans but to the failure of these countries to overhaul the extractive institutions they inherited at independence' (Acemoglu et al., 2002, p. 1264) is an apologia for European colonialism which the Swedish central bank fittingly recognised with 'the so-called Nobel prize in economics' (Sundaram, 2024).

The triumph of the West in the Cold War and the rise to unquestioned prominence of the neo-classical economic framework resulted in the increasing assertiveness of orthodox economists and the aid/development establishment. What followed from the late 1980s was an aggressive programme of enforced 'institutional monocropping' marked by 'the tethering of institutions to a one-size-fits-all policy perspective' driven by the single-minded pursuit of investment stimulation (Mkandawire, 2012, p. 80). The wave of 'democratisation' that swept through the developing world from the late 1980s was by far the most important aspect of this institutional monocropping.[1] However, after over three decades of practising liberal democracy under the tutelage of the Bretton

[1] The promotion of liberal democracy and its touted values of freedom, human rights, and dignity had such strong persuasive force that, at the turn of the twenty first century, the imperial powers were able to wage devastating wars around the world wielding 'democracy promotion' as their justification even if, in this pursuit, they violated all their own espoused values of freedom, dignity, and human rights.

Woods Institutions, the promised development dividends remain elusive while developing countries continue to face recurrent economic and political crises.

In this paper, I challenge the widely asserted correlation between liberal democracy and development by arguing that the term liberal democracy is an oxymoron. Capitalism only allows a thin form of democracy freedoms are only protected as long as they do not infringe on capitalist accumulation or the interest of the ruling elite. I argue that liberal democracy is antithetical to the pursuit of development because its central mechanism, multiparty politics, is preoccupied with electoral competition but reduces the time horizons of political leaders, creating conditions that undermine long-term development planning and erodes state capacity. These challenges have deepened following recent geopolitical convulsions sparked by the decline of the Western powers.

Democracy: concept and pretext

Democracy is widely invoked but notoriously hard to pin down. Because it is a value-laden and politically charged term, it can and has often been invoked to justify imperialist acts. The most widely cited definition is the one by Abraham Lincoln that describes it as 'government of the people, for the people, by the people'. However, beyond its vague allusion to 'people's government', this definition does little to clarify the meaning of the concept. Indeed, while there appears to be a general consensus in quantitative social science about the correlation between democracy and economic development, very little agreement exists about what the term actually means, partly because of its polysemic nature.

Przeworski (Przeworski, 2024, p. 5) distinguishes between 'democracy as a *method* for processing whatever conflicts may arise in a particular society and democracy as an *embodiment* of values, ideals, or interests' that are considered desirable in a political community. Much of the disagreements over the meaning and real-world implications of democracy arise from the fact that in much of the literature, scholars define democracy as method while their propositions and conclusions are made on the assumption of democracy as embodiment of values. In other words, they use a minimalist definition of democracy but formulate their arguments and conclusions using a maximalist conception of democracy:

Indeed, almost all normatively desirable aspects of political life, and sometimes even of social and economic life, are credited to democracy: representation, accountability, equality, participation, justice, dignity, rationality, security; the list goes on. We repeatedly hear that "unless democracy is X or generates X, then…." The ellipsis is rarely spelled out, but it insinuates that a system in which governments are elected is nonetheless *not* a "democracy" unless X is fulfilled (Przeworski, 2024, p. 7)

However, the claim that liberal democracy embodies these virtues is contestable. By its very nature, capitalism and democracy are incompatible even if one uses the minimal conception of democracy (i.e. the equal participation of citizens in the selection of leaders and the decision-making process). This is because the extreme inequality fostered by the capitalist system, and the

undue influence that the capitalist class wields by virtue of their vast wealth, renders any notion of equal political participation farcical.

Disagreements over the meaning and purpose of democracy have a long history going back over a century in socialist thought when intellectuals debated over what to make of parliamentary democracy. In a response to Kautsky who had praised capitalist or bourgeois democracy for being progressive and protecting minorities, Lenin has countered that bourgeois democracy was nothing more than 'liberal twaddle intended to fool the workers' (Lenin, 2002). He went on to argue that:

Bourgeois democracy, although a great historical advance in comparison with medievalism, always remains, and under capitalism, is bound to remain, restricted, truncated, false and hypocritical, a paradise for the rich and a snare and deception for the exploited, for the poor (Lenin, 2002)

Discussions about democracy and democratisation need to be based on a theory of the state. While neo-classical theories of democracy and development do not explicitly present such a theory, they work with an implicit model of the state that is utopian in its pursuit of inclusivity, justice, and protection of minority rights. This model is alien to theories of state formation in Western Europe that have highlighted the role of warfare, repression, and violent expropriation (Olson, 1993; Tilly, 2017).

Indeed, socialist thought has long held that the state is an instrument of violence. Marx describes the state as 'the executive committee' for managing the affairs of the bourgeoisie, while Engels describes it as 'nothing but a machine for the oppression of one class by another' (cited in Lenin, 2002). Unsurprisingly, socialists have a tensed relationship with the state and consider the control of its apparatus as a reluctant necessity. Mikhail Bakunin was so hostile to the state and its control of the apparatus for violence that he cautioned that democracy would inevitably lead to a situation where the people would be beaten with "the People's Stick" (Bakunin, 1873).

Violent repression of minorities and other groups that threaten the interests of the capitalist class is a constant thread in the history of the countries that hold themselves up as champions of 'the free world' and guardians of the rules-based international order. Over the past hundred years, one can point in the US to the violent repression of trade unionists, the illegal surveillance and assassination of leaders of social movements, the insidious suppression of freedom of speech and association during the 'Red scare' and McCarthyite years, the mass incarceration of racial minorities, persecution of whistleblowers, and the curtailment of personal rights through mass surveillance on the pretext of counterterrorism. Over the same period, US foreign policy has waged one war after another, oftentimes to get rid of elected governments who insisted on sovereign domestic policymaking. Incidentally, promotion of liberal democracy is the pretext given to justify these regime-change operations.

Democracy and development

After over three decades of practising liberal democracy, the Global South finds itself back to square one. One after another, developing countries emerged from the Covid-19 pandemic with debilitating debt burdens (UNCTAD, 2023). Even if precipitated by the impact of the pandemic, the roots of these debt crisis are inseparable from the ramifications of the institutional mono-cropping that came with the wholesale economic and political reforms imposed by the international 'development community' in the 1980s and 1990s (Mkandawire & Soludo, 1999; Opoku, 2010).

Ghana's experience is illustrative in this regard because it has been one of the most diligent pupils of the global development establishment. In the 1990s, it was widely regarded as the 'star pupil' of the IMF because of its strict adherence to the IMF policy prescriptions (Hughes, 2005) and it regularly receives the accolades of the international community as 'an island of stability and democracy' in an otherwise turbulent region (Chin, 2024; Daily Graphic, 2024). Given its track record, Ghana should be experiencing rapid development as predicted by neo-classical development theorists. On the contrary, the country has been grappling with intermittent economic crisis, soaring youth unemployment, crumbling infrastructure, and growing youth frustration that have in recent times found expression in calls to overturn the Constitution. In the commemoration of the thirtieth anniversary of the Fourth Republic in 2022, the former President and former Speaker of Parliament on different occasions both found it necessary to appeal to disgruntled citizens to continue keeping faith with the Constitution in spite of the challenges (Graphic Online, 2023; Myjoyonline, 2022).

Even the optimistic narratives about Ghana's prospects have changed. While the first decade of the twenty-first century saw a number of scholarly and popular writings celebrating Ghana's economic and political achievements (Hughes, 2005), a more critical literature has subsequently emerged because of the persistence of fundamental economic and political problems (Opoku, 2010; Resnick, 2019). This body of work has tried to examine and explain Ghana's failure to overcome corruption and to achieve the kind of structural economic transformation associated with economic growth (i.e. a shift from agriculture as the leading sector of the economy to industry rather than services). These explanations have given prominence to the unique character of Ghana's politics, labelled 'competitive clientelism', that has emerged and solidified over the course of the Fourth Republic (Abdulai & Hickey, 2016; Appiah & Abdulai, 2017; Asante, 2023). Competitive clientelism refers to the persistence of patronage politics under competitive electoral systems in contrast to theoretical assumptions that multiparty elections would trigger demands for accountability that would put pressure on political leaders to become transparent and eschew clientelistic politics.

Politicising and historicisng development

To avoid the analytical pitfalls of neopatrimonial discourse on African development, it is necessary to *politicise* and *historicise* such analyses. That is to say, discussions of Africa's predicament must begin with the legacy of the heavy burden of a history of domination and exploitation, the curtailment of national sovereignty in domestic policymaking, and the continuing reality of imperialist extractivism. However, the tendency for analyse on African affairs to degenerate into

what Nene-Lomotey Kuditchar (2022, p. 54) calls 'normative criticisms and scholarly prosecution of African actors for engaging in immoral political behaviour' is so strong that even studies that begin with such an acknowledgement seem to give the impression that the structural and historical context must be understood but is no longer have any contemporary relevance.

The 'good governance' tradition, by ignoring this important historical context and fixating on African lack of capacity to build the 'inclusive' institutions that is presumed to have fuelled the rise of the West, as argued by AJR and other neo-institutional economists, provide an account of economic development in Europe and its imperial outposts that is laundered of its violence and savagery. By so doing, they also reinforce what Jemima Pierre (2020) has described as the 'racial vernacular of development' that portrays the former colonies as inherently incapable of administering a modern state and as such are in need of the constant tutelage of the western powers that colonised and underdeveloped them in the first place (Akpome, 2021; Apata, 2019). By blaming developing countries for their own lack of development, such analyses ignore the global structures and practices that frustrate the development prospects and aspirations of the Global South.

Because of their insistence that the development challenges confronting developing countries are internally generated, and having dismissed the state as a key part of the problem, the proposed solutions of the development/aid establishment has been to hyper-fixate on micro-interventions whose academic expression is the randomised control trials (RCT) movement. This movement – which, by the way, has also received the imprimatur of the Nobel prize – is based on a simplistic view of the causes development problems as arising from isolated issues that can be quickly resolved by providing individuals and deprived communities with more micro-finance, more information, more digital finance, and even more day-old chicks, without having to address structural issues having to deal with the relations and balance of forces between social classes within a country, or its integration into the global economy. These neoliberal solutions based on valorisation of robust individualism (Stein et al., 2021) and 'resilience' as solution to problems requiring political action (Amo-Agyemang, 2021b, 2021a).

Thus, the entire strategy of the multilateral development 'industry' is to de-politicise the struggle for economic and social development. Their proposed measures to address poverty and community deprivation is just as divorced from broader politics as proposed solutions for national development is delinked from global politics.

In this context, liberal democratic politics involves little more than a periodic ritual of self-expression at the voting booth every four or so year. The outburst of emotions that accompany the electioneering period actually perform an important legitimating function for a political system that has been designed to select political leaders but in which control of economic policy has been effectively usurped by market forces. This also coincides with the demobilisation of social movements and the rise, in their place, of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society organisations (CSOs), and their professional equivalents, often Western-funded, who perform the same role in the social sphere as academics and 'technical experts' do in the policy space.

Pursuing long-term development in a multiparty context

There is a common assumption among scholars that the problems associated with the multiparty system in the Global South is due to shortcomings internal to those countries rather than the system itself. Caesar Atuire (2020, p. 533) claims, for instance, that ‘Unlike the European tradition in which political parties were traditionally divided along ideological lines, in Africa, the divisions tend towards ethnic and religious affiliations’. He argues that because of ‘the young age of post-colonial African states’, partisan divisions often become an obstacle to internal national cohesion’ (ibid, p. 533).

The widely held view about the African natural proclivity towards ‘tribalism’ is based on a flawed image of precolonial African states as parochial collectivities with minimal outside contact. In reality, however, states in precolonial Africa maintained extensive trading and diplomatic ties with neighbouring and distant states and often hosted large numbers of strangers on a long-term basis (Asante, 2020). On the other hand, the idea that western political parties are based on ideology rather than on ethnic or racial considerations again ignores the blatant appeals to identity politics and the contempt for supporters of political opponents that characterise partisan polarisation in western electoral politics (Finkel et al., 2020).

The problem of fragmentation must be stated in another form. Multiparty politics, by definition, implies conflicting visions of development. In that sense, some element of social division on party lines is expected and may even be considered healthy in the multiparty system. However, under liberal democracy, decisions on the consequential economic policy issues are carved out and delegated to ‘policy experts’, away from democratic debate. Without an avenue for citizens to influence economic policies, social issues become the arena for heated debates, often encouraged by the leaders of the main political parties to divert attention from the lack of any meaningful difference between them on matters of the economy and material wellbeing of the people. In the West, this has led to increasingly charged public debates on social issues, such as abortion, immigration, and sexuality. So viscerally felt are these disagreements in recent years that scholars now consider them partisan divide in the US as akin to sectarianism (Finkel et al., 2020).

An important problem with the multiparty system that is not as widely discussed in the literature is its undermining of long-term development planning. Ghana’s experience over the past three decades provides a good illustration of this problem. Scholars of Ghana’s political economy have often wondered why in spite of the country’s relative political stability, political leaders have not been able to translate its strong economic growth into structural transformation. Recent attempts to offer critical explanations of this puzzle have pointed to the country ‘political settlement’, i.e. the distribution of power among the main competing political coalitions (Abdulai, 2021; Oduro et al., 2014; Whitfield, 2011). This balance of power determines the degree of freedom with which the incumbent can formulate and implement policies in pursuit of its agenda as well how firmly it can hold on to power (Khan, 2018).

Ghana's political settlement, which have been described as competitive clientelist, heightens the fixation on the electoral calculus because of the incumbent constantly faces a credible threat to its hold on power. This threat arises from the independence of electoral institutions and processes and the strength of the political opposition. In the context of a weak and undiversified economy in which a majority of the population makes their living in the informal economy, the incumbent is unable to improve the material conditions of the electorate using conventional economic policy tools (Khan, 2005). To improve its electoral fortunes, the incumbent focuses on policies with highly visible and short-term payoffs in order to sway voters to its side (Appiah & Abdulai, 2017; Asante, 2023; Asante & Mullard, 2021). On the other hand, policies that may have transformative impact in the long-term but involve short-term costs are avoided.

These constraints are exacerbated by the fact that when contending for power, both incumbents and challengers are confronted by multiple and sometimes competing interest groups, with varying degrees of power to influence electoral outcomes. Given the centrality of the electoral calculus, the interest group that prevails in the competition for policy influence are not necessary those pursuing programmes that advance the cause of economic or social development. As such, Resnick (2019) has described the Fourth Republic as a 'strong democracy, weak state'.

While these political economy scholarship is a welcome advance on the neopatrimonial school, it is still almost entirely focused on the internal dynamics of the electoral process. In the case of Ghana, for example, there is very little attention to the fact that the country's elections, and the clientelist incentives that it gives rise to, are occurring within a comprehensively neoliberalised context in which state-led approaches to development have been abandoned. Consequently, political leaders in Ghana and across the Global South are expected to reduce their role to 'prudent management' of the economy and to submit themselves to the discipline of the market. Their ability to pursue development has been constrained by the dominant international development paradigm that 'has tended to focus on the restraining role of institutions, while ignoring the developmental and transformative role' (Mkandawire, 2012, p. 80).

Self-determination, developmental state, and the 'rules-based international order'

A developmental state is necessary to escape the vicious cycle of poverty and underdevelopment in which many countries in the Global South are trapped. However, there is a lot of scepticism about whether the type of state that propelled the rise of the Asian Tigers can be replicated elsewhere. For Africa, this pessimism is rooted in the discredited assumptions of neopatrimonialism. However, Mkandawire has provided the definitive critique of the 'impossibility' thesis and argued that the core definitional elements of the developmental state, i.e. a visionary agenda for economic transformation and serious pursuit of this agenda has never been absent in Africa, especially in the early decades of independence (Mkandawire, 2015; see also Adésínà, 2009; Koddenbrock, 2024)

The core features of developmental states have been drilled down by Peter Evans into 'embedded autonomy' (Evans, 1995), i.e. the ability of the state to foster a close relationship with core social

actors to be able to direct production and development while remaining autonomous enough to not be beholden to any particular interest group. However, later work by Fang and Hung (2019) on the Chinese experience shows that embedded autonomy is not enough, and that what really counts is the ability of the state and its functionaries to pursue a well-thought through developmental strategy over the longue durée while also being flexible to changing circumstances. Another feature of the developmental state is the ability of state functionaries to 'rein in' the market and direct it towards the politically determined goals of development rather than simply succumbing to it.

This demands a different type of politics and statecraft than is now prevalent across the Global South. Specifically, what is needed to pursue this strategy of transformative development is for governments to exercise autonomy in the formulation and implementation of domestic policies and to be independent in their foreign policy alignments. On both scores, interference by the imperialistic West, led by the US, effectively undermine the ability of developing countries ot assert their sovereignty in domestic and external matters.

Foreign interference also ensures that even though citizens may have the right to vote political parties into and out of power, they have practically no influence on the policies that their own governments pursue. Writing about Africa, Thandika Mkandawire (2010, p. 1161), for instance, asserts that the evangelistic fervour with which donors impose policies on countries 'forecloses disputes, disagreement, and deliberation' in ways that 'constrain democratic institutions in the receiving country'. These unequal relationships accord donors undue influence in national affairs on the policies that have consequential impact on the long-term development prospects of the countries involved. By virtue of being trapped in this unequal relationships, African countries have been rendered into 'choiceless democracies' (Mkandawire, 2010; Mkwandawire, 1999).

Countries that insist on asserting their sovereignty in domestic and international affairs get targeted for destabilisation and regime change. In Africa, this is most blatant in the former French colonies, where France has since independence continued to dictate policies through its control of the currencies of francophone West and Central Africa and its military bases. Civilians have often come under attack from French forces stationed in these countries, and France has on many occasioned used its military presence to intervene in the internal affairs of supposedly independent francophone countries, to the extent of violently deposing heads of states (Pigeaud & Sylla, 2024). Outside francophone Africa, western interference takes a more covert form. In 2009/2010, the US government sanctioned Ghanaian officials who intervened to stop a deal in which Kosmos would have offloaded 25 percent of its shares in a Ghanaian oilfield to Exxon-Mobil without giving the Ghana National Petroleum Corporation (GNPC) the first right of refusal as required by law (Ghana Web, 2010; Neat FM, 2022).

These patterns of interference are not unique to Africa, either. A recent example of Western interference to depose an inconvenient political leader occurred in Pakistan, where the US pressured the military to remove Imran Khan after the prime minister had refused to heed calls from Europe to back Ukraine in its war with Russia. An investigative piece by *The Intercept* had

revealed that a US diplomat had his Pakistani counterparts that Western officials were displeased with Pakistan was 'taking such an aggressively neutral position (on Ukraine),' but added that 'all will be forgiven in Washington' if Khan was removed in a no-confidence vote' (Grim & Hussain, 2023).

There are many other examples of Western intrigues leading to the overthrow of elected leaders all over the world who refuse to follow Western dictates. In a shockingly candid scene in the documentary *The War on Democracy,* a former Latin America chief of the CIA declared that 'we'll intervene whenever we decide it's in our national security interest to intervene, and if you don't like it, lump it! Get used to it world. We're not going to put up with nonsense.'[2] In a similar vein, the head of the US Africa Command (or AFRICOM) told a congressional hearing that the US was maintaining military bases in Africa in order to fend off their geopolitical adversaries and to secure access to mining concessions (Centcom, 2024).

Against this background of blatant and violent infringement of sovereignty, in what sense can one meaningfully talk about democracy in the Global South? What is clear is that, even when we're talking about the barest minimal definition of democracy, the champions of the rules-based international order do not have any principled commitments to the sanctity of elected governments. Within the neocolonial context, liberal democracy is invoked not as a virtue but as a propaganda instrument to justify attacks on 'official adversaries' of the US-led empire.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have critically reviewed competing conceptions of democracy and challenged the assumptions widespread in mainstream development theories that *liberal* democracy is necessary for economic and social development in the Global South. The argument that the creation of 'inclusive' institutions were the engines that powered the economic and political development of the West is based on a distorted interpretation of history that is willing to overlook centuries of slavery, resource exploitation, violent repression, and genocide (Chandrasekhar, 2024; Sundaram, 2024). It is this violent history that simultaneously account for capital accumulation in the West and the enforced underdevelopment of the Global South. Even within the metropolitan countries of Europe and the 'Neo-Europes', the so-called inclusive institutions were reserved for white males and co-existed with – and actually relied for their existence on – extractive institutions that dehumanised and held minorities in subjugation (Greeley, 2024). Attributing the rise of the West to liberal democracy and inclusive institutions amounts to a retrospective attempt to cleanse this history of its savagery while blaming developing countries for their failure to emulate 'good' institutions from Europe.

The 2024 decision of the Nobel committee has been mocked as anachronistic by political economist Yuen Yuen Ang (2024), who points out that this recognition should have come twenty years ago at the end of the Cold War when Western triumphalism inspired fantasies about 'the end of history'. The award is surely anachronistic, but it also performs the important role of

[2] The documentary is available on YouTube at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xyWVh4kRyg4

legitimising a liberal order that is obviously in terminal decline. This decline manifests itself in different ways and can be seen in the recent wave of hysteria among academics and media elites about what they refer to as 'democratic backsliding', 'the rise of populism', and an 'epidemic of misinformation'. While these phenomena are portrayed in the mainstream accounts as an attack on the sanctity of liberal institutions, they should more properly be seen as the manifestation of the crisis of late-stage capitalism and its institutional scaffolding. The spread of immiseration to the middle classes in the West who had hitherto been shielded from capitalist exploitation has shaken widely-held faith in the legitimising mythologies of liberal institutions, causing them to turn to populists on the left and right (e.g. Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump in the US, respectively).

Therefore, current historical moment has once again brought up the need to re-engage with *democracy* as concept and as practice. This would involve a rejection of the thin conception of democracy espoused by the multilateral institutions of the 'rules-based international order' and an elaboration of a people-centred democracy that would be capable of fulfilling the developmental aspirations of the Global South.

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