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# KETTERING REVIEW

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the quality of public life in the American democracy

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KETTERING  
**REVIEW**

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For more than three decades, this journal of democratic thought has been edited by Robert J. Kingston, a senior associate of the Kettering Foundation. Sadly, Bob passed away on August 20 of this year at the age of 87, leaving his wife, Carol Vollet Kingston, his children, colleagues, friends, and neighbors grieving his loss.

Bob left England for America in 1954 to teach Shakespeare; he stayed to work on democracy. He was an extraordinary person, raising the level of conversation wherever he went, curious about everything and everyone he met, and capable of discerning the course of democratic thought as it developed in a forum and in the country.

After teaching English literature at a number of colleges and universities in the United States, Bob joined the National Endowment for the Humanities as director of planning and analysis. He moved up to serve as deputy chairman and acting chairman during the administrations of former Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Carter. In the late 1970s, he left government service to become president of the College Board, then joined the Kettering Foundation's longtime research partner Public Agenda as executive director.

As a senior associate of the Kettering Foundation, in the 1980s Bob became the *Review's* editor and for many years, he also helped produce the tapes for A Public Voice, Kettering's annual meeting in Washington, DC.

In his tenure as editor of the *Kettering Review*, he explored some of the most important issues facing democracy of the past 30-some years. Our next issue of the *Review*, through essays and interviews, will follow and develop the arc of Bob's thought about democracy. With a heavy heart, this issue is dedicated to his memory.

In Memoriam  
Robert J. Kingston  
1929-2016

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# Democracy as Public Reason

By Amartya Sen

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*Democracy in its elaborate institutional form may be quite new in the world—and yet, as Tocqueville remarked, it gives expression to a tendency in social living that has a much longer and more widespread history.*

**T**he belief that democracy has not flourished anywhere in the world other than in the West is widely held and often expressed. And it is also used to explain contemporary events; for example, the blame for the immense difficulties and problems faced in post-intervention Iraq is sometimes put not so much on the peculiar nature of the underinformed and badly reasoned military intervention of 2003, but attributed instead to some imagined difficulty that sees democracy and public reasoning as being unsuitable for the cultures and traditions of non-Western countries like Iraq.

The subject of democracy has become severely muddled because of the way the rhetoric surrounding it has been used in recent years. There is, increasingly, an oddly confused dichotomy between those who want to “impose” democracy on countries in the non-Western world (in these countries’ “own interest,” of course) and those who are opposed to such “imposition” (because of the respect for the countries’ “own ways”). But the entire language of “imposition,” used by both sides, is extraordinarily inappropriate since it makes the implicit assumption that democracy belongs exclusively to the West, taking it to be a quintessentially “Western” idea which has originated and flourished only in the West.

But that thesis and the pessimism it generates about the possibility of democratic practice in the world would be extremely hard to justify. Indeed, in understanding the roots of democracy in the world, we have to take an interest in the history of people’s participation and public reasoning in different parts of the world. We have to look beyond thinking of democracy

only in terms of European and American evolution. We would fail to understand the pervasive demands for participatory living, on which Aristotle spoke with far-reaching insight, if we take democracy to be a kind of a specialized cultural product of the West.

It cannot, of course, be doubted that the institutional structure of the contemporary practice of democracy is largely the product of European and American experience over the last few centuries. This is extremely important to recognize since these developments in institutional formats were immensely innovative and ultimately effective. There can be little doubt that there is a major “Western” achievement here.

And yet, as Alexis de Tocqueville, the great historian of American democracy, noted in the early 19th century, while the “great democratic revolution” occurring then in Europe and America was “a new thing,” it was also an expression of “the most continuous, ancient, and permanent tendency known to history.”

Even though Tocqueville’s own elucidation of this radical claim did not go beyond Europe, or further back than the 12th century, the general point he was making has a much wider relevance. In assessing the pros and cons of democracy, we have to give an adequate recognition to the attraction of participatory governance that has surfaced and resurfaced with some consistency in different parts of the world. It has not been, to be sure, an



irresistible force, but it has persistently challenged the unscrutinized belief that authoritarianism is an immovable object in most parts of the

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Democracy is no longer seen just in terms of the demands for public balloting, but more capaciously, in terms of what John Rawls calls the exercise of public reason.

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world. Democracy in its elaborate institutional form may be quite new in the world—its practice is hardly more than a couple of centuries old—and yet, as Tocqueville remarked, it gives

expression to a tendency

in social living that has a much longer and more widespread history. The critics of

democracy—no matter how vigorous they may be in their rejection—must find some way of addressing the deep attraction of participa-

tory governance, which is of continuing relevance today and is hard to eradicate.

There is, of course, the older—and more formal—view of democracy which characterizes it mainly in terms of elections and ballots, rather than in broader perspective of government by discussion. And yet, in contemporary political

philosophy, the understanding of democracy has broadened vastly, so that democracy is no longer seen just in terms of the demands for *public balloting* but, much more capaciously, in terms of what John Rawls calls “the exercise of public reason.”

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## The critique of democracy as a purely regional phenomenon fails altogether.

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There are many differences in the distinct ways in which the role of public reasoning in politics and discursive ethics can be viewed. However, the main thesis that I am trying to explore here is not threatened by the existence of these differences. What is more important to note is that the totality of these new contributions has helped to bring about the general recognition that the central issues in a broader understanding of democracy are political participation, dialogue, and public interaction.



Despite the general transformation in the conceptual understanding of democracy in political philosophy, the history of democracy is often recounted, even now, in rather narrowly organizational terms, focusing particularly on the procedure of balloting and elections.

Ballots do, of course, have a very important role even for the expression and effectiveness of the process of public reasoning, but they are not the only thing that matters, and they can be seen just as one part—admittedly a very important part—of the way public reason operates in a democratic society. Indeed, the effectiveness of ballots themselves depends crucially on what goes with balloting, such as free speech, access to information, and freedom of dissent. Balloting alone can be thoroughly inadequate on its own, as is abundantly illustrated by the astounding electoral victories of ruling tyrannies in authoritarian regimes in the past as well as those in the present, for example in today’s North Korea. The difficulty lies not just in the political and punitive pressure that is brought to bear on voters in the balloting itself, but in the way expressions of public views are thwarted by censorship, informational exclusion, and a climate of fear, along with the suppression of political opposition and the independence of the media, and the absence of basic civil rights and political liberties. All this makes it largely redundant for the ruling powers to use much force to ensure conformism in the act of voting itself. Indeed, a great many dictators in the world have achieved gigantic electoral victories even without any overt coercion in the process of voting, mainly through suppressing public discussion and freedom of

information, and through generating a climate of apprehension and anxiety.

When democracy is seen in the broader perspective of public reasoning, going well beyond the specific institutional features that have emerged particularly strongly in Europe and America over the last few centuries, we have to reassess the intellectual history of participatory governance in different countries in many parts of the world—not just those in Europe and North America. Cultural separatists, who criticize the claim of democracy to be a universal value, often point to the unique role of ancient Greece, particularly that of ancient Athens, where balloting emerged in a particular form in the sixth century BC.

Ancient Greece was indeed quite unique. Its contribution to both the form and the understanding of the content of democracy cannot be overemphasized. But to see that experience as clear evidence that democracy is a quintessentially “European” or “Western” idea deserves much more critical scrutiny than it tends to get. It is, for one thing, particularly important to understand that even the success of Athenian democracy turned on the climate of open public discussion, rather than just balloting, and while balloting certainly began in Greece, the tradition of public discussion (very strong in Athens and ancient Greece) has had a much more widespread history.

Even as far as balloting is concerned, the tendency to seek backing for a culturally segregationist view of the origins of elections in Europe calls for some further examination. First, there is an elementary difficulty in trying to define civilizations not in terms of the exact history of ideas and actions but in terms of broad

regionality, for instance, being “European” or “Western,” with a grossly aggregative attribution. In this way of looking at civilizational categories, no great difficulty is seen in considering the descendants of, say, Vikings and Visigoths as proper inheritors of the electoral tradition of ancient Greece (since they are part of “the European stock”), even though ancient Greeks, who were very involved in intellectual interchange with other ancient civilizations to the east or south of Greece (in particular Iran, India, and Egypt), seem to have taken little interest in chatting up the lively Goths and Visigoths.

The second problem relates to what actually followed the early Greek experience of balloting. While Athens certainly was the pioneer in getting balloting started, many Asian regions used balloting in the centuries that followed,



largely under Greek influence. There is no evidence that the Greek experience in electoral governance had much immediate impact in the countries to the west of Greece and Rome, in, say, what is now France or Germany or Britain. In contrast, some of the cities in Asia

—in Iran, Bactria, and India—incorporated elements of democracy in municipal governance in the centuries following the flowering of Athenian democracy; for example, for several centuries the city of Shushan, or Susa, in south-west Iran, had an elected council, a popular assembly, and magistrates who were elected by the assembly.

The practice of municipal democracy in ancient India is also well recorded. B. R. Ambedkar, who chaired the drafting committee that wrote up the new Indian constitution for adoption by the Constituent Assembly shortly after Indian independence in 1947, wrote fairly extensively on the relevance, if any, of India’s ancient experiences in local democracy for the design of a large democracy for the whole of modern India.

The practice of elections, in fact, has had a considerable history in non-Western societies, but it is the broader view of democracy in terms of public reasoning that makes it abundantly clear that the cultural critique of democracy as a purely regional phenomenon fails altogether. While Athens certainly has an excellent record in public discussion, open deliberation also flourished in several other ancient civilizations, sometimes spectacularly so; for example, some of the earliest open general meetings aimed specifically at settling disputes between different points of view, on social and religious matters, took place in India in the so-called Buddhist “councils,” where adherents of different points of

view got together to argue out their differences, beginning in the sixth century BC. The first of these councils met in Rajagriha (modern Rajgir) shortly after Gautama Buddha’s death, and the second was held, about 100 years later, in Vaisali. The last one happened in the second century AD in Kashmir.

Emperor Ashoka, who hosted the third and the largest Buddhist council in the third century BC in Patna (then called Pataliputra), the capital city of the Indian empire, also tried to codify and propagate what were among the earliest formulations of rules for public discussion (some kind of an early version of the 19th-century “Robert’s rules of order”). To

choose another historical

example, in early seventh-century Japan the Buddhist Prince Shotoku, who was regent to his mother,

Empress Suiko, produced

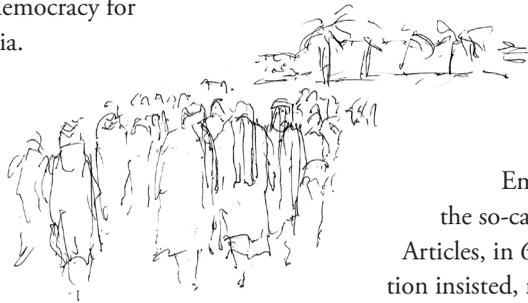
the so-called Constitution of 17

Articles, in 604 AD. The constitution insisted, much in the spirit of the

Magna Carta, signed six centuries later in

1215 AD: “Decisions on important matters should not be made by one person alone. They should be discussed with many.” Some commentators have seen in this seventh-century Buddhism-inspired constitution, Japan’s “first step of gradual development toward democracy.” The Constitution of 17 Articles went on to explain: “Nor let us be resentful when others differ from us. For all men have hearts, and each heart has its own leanings. Their right is our wrong, and our right is their wrong.”

Indeed, the importance of public discussion



is a recurrent theme in the history of many countries in the non-Western world.

The relevance of this global history does not, however, lie in any implicit presumption that we cannot break from history, cannot initiate

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## We do not have to be born in a country with a long democratic history to choose that path today.

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a departure. Indeed, departures from the past are always needed in different ways across the world. We do not have to be born in a country with a long democratic history to choose that path today. The significance of history in this respect lies rather in the more general understanding that established traditions continue to exert some influence on people's ideas, that they can inspire or deter, and they have to be taken into account whether we are moved by them, or wish to resist and transcend them, or (as the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore discussed with compelling clarity) want to examine and scrutinize what we should take from the past and what we must reject, in the light of our contemporary concerns and priorities.

It is not, therefore, surprising—though it does deserve clearer recognition today—that in the fight for democracy led by visionary and fearless political leaders across the world (such as Sun Yat-sen, Jawaharlal Nehru, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr., or Aung San Suu Kyi), an awareness of local

as well as world history has played an importantly constructive part. In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela describes how impressed and influenced he was, as a young boy, by seeing the democratic nature of the proceedings of the local meetings that were held in the regent's house in Mqhekezweni:

Everyone who wanted to speak did so. It was democracy in its purest form. There may have been a hierarchy of importance among the speakers, but everyone was heard, chief and subject, warrior and medicine man, shopkeeper and farmer, landowner and laborer. . . . The foundation of self-government was that all men were free to voice their opinions and equal in their value as citizens.

Mandela's understanding of democracy was hardly aided by the political practice that he saw around him in the apartheid state run by people of European origin, who, it is perhaps worth recollecting in this context, used to call themselves by the cultural term *European* rather than just *white*. In fact, Pretoria had little to contribute to Mandela's comprehension



of democracy. His discernment of democracy came, as we see from his autobiography, from his general ideas about political and social equality, which had global roots, and from his observations of the practice of participatory public discussion that he found in his local town.

**I**n reexamining the historical background of democratic features in the past, we also have to reassess the history of the Middle East, since there is an often-articulated belief that this block of countries has always been hostile to democracy. That constantly repeated conviction is exasperating for fighters for democracy in the Arab world, but as a piece of historical generalization it is basically nonsense. It is of course true that democracy as an institutional system has not been prominent in the past of the Middle East, but institutional democracy is in fact a very new phenomenon in most parts of the world.

If we look instead for public reasoning and tolerance of different points of view, in line with the broader understanding of democracy that I have been discussing, then the Middle East does have quite a distinguished past. We must not confuse the narrow history of Islamic militancy with the capacious history of the Muslim people and the tradition of political governance by Muslim rulers. When the Jewish philosopher Maimonides was forced to emigrate from Spain in the 12th century (when more tolerant Muslim regimes had given way to a far less tolerant Islamic regime), he sought shelter not in Europe but in a tolerant Muslim kingdom in the Arab world and was given an honored and influential position at the court of Emperor Saladin in Cairo. Saladin was certainly a strong

Muslim; indeed, he fought hard for Islam in the Crusades and Richard the Lionheart was one of his distinguished opponents. But it was in Saladin's kingdom where Maimonides found his new base and a renewed voice. Tolerance of dissent is, of course, central to the opportunity to exercise public reasoning, and the tolerant Muslim regimes in their heyday offered a freedom that Inquisition-ridden Europe sometimes withheld.

Maimonides' experience was not, however, exceptional. Indeed, even though the contemporary world is full of examples of conflicts between Muslims and Jews, Muslim rule in the Arab world and in medieval Spain had a long history of integrating Jews as secure members of the social community whose liberties—and sometimes leadership roles—were respected. For instance, as Maria Rosa Menocal has noted in her

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The illusion of an inescapably nondemocratic destiny of the Middle East is both confused and very seriously misleading—perniciously so.

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book, *The Ornament of the World*, by the 10th century the achievement of Cordoba in Muslim-ruled Spain as being “as serious a contender as Baghdad, perhaps more so, for the title of most civilized place on earth” was due to the joint influence of Caliph Abd al-Rahman III and his Jewish vizier, Hasdai ibn Shaprut.

Middle Eastern history and the history of Muslim people also include a great many accounts of public discussion and political participation through dialogues. In Muslim kingdoms centered around Cairo, Baghdad, and Istanbul, or in Iran, India, or for that matter Spain, there were many champions of public discussion. The extent of toleration of diversity of views was often exceptional in comparison with Europe. For example, when in the 1590s the great Mughal emperor Akbar was making his pronouncements in India on the need for religious and political toleration, and when he was busy arranging organized dialogues between holders of different faiths (including Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Parsees, Jains, Jews, and even atheists), the Inquisitions were still very active in Europe. Giordano Bruno was burnt at the stake in Rome for heresy in 1600, even when Akbar was lecturing in Agra on toleration and the need for dialogue across the borders of religions and ethnicities.

The present-day problems of the Middle East and what is called, somewhat oversimplly, “the Muslim world,” may well be immense, but a probing assessment of the causation of these problems requires, as I have argued in my book *Identity and Violence* (2006), a fuller understanding of the nature and dynamics of identity politics. This calls for the recognition of the multiple affiliations that people have other than that of their religion, and the fact that these loyalties can vary from secular priorities to political interest in exploiting religious differences. We have to take note also of the dialectical encounters of the Middle East with its own imperial



past and the subjugation that followed from the dominance of an imperial West—a dominance that still has many remaining influences. The illusion of an inescapably nondemocratic destiny of the Middle East is both confused and very seriously misleading—perniciously so—as a way of thinking about either world politics or global justice today.

**T**he thesis that democracy is a Western intellectual inheritance derived from a long and unique past (unmatched anywhere else in the world) does not, therefore, work. It would not survive very well even if we took the rather limited public balloting view of democracy, and it does particularly badly when the history of democracy is seen in terms of public reasoning.

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*Nobel laureate Amartya Sen is professor of Economics and Philosophy at Harvard University. “Democracy as Public Reason” appeared in his 2010 magnum opus The Idea of Justice and is excerpted here with the permission of Belknap Press, a division of the Harvard University Press.*

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