Reflections on Democracy: The Beginning of the End or The End of the Beginning?


The Bush administration would have us believe that democracy, assisted where necessary by American power, could soon sweep the debris of its competitors into the dustbin of history. Outside the administration, this belief is widely disputed, even by people prepared to accept a minimalist definition of what democracy entails. Assessments of democracy’s prospects—and of democratic performance—have, in fact, varied widely since the “third wave” began in the 1970s.¹ For many observers, both inside and outside the academy, the creation of democratic regimes in southern Europe, the demise of military dictatorships in South America, and, especially, the end of Soviet communism seemed to herald an era in which democracy and capitalism would hold the political field uncontested. Triumphalist arguments were tempered, however, both by real-world events and, within the academy, by the

¹ See Samuel Huntington, The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century (Norman, 1991).
influence of new interpretive grids, principally postmodernism
and postcolonialism.\textsuperscript{2} Institutional decline in democracies as different as the United States and India, the proliferation of “superfluous people” in otherwise prosperous global economies, the revelation on September 11, 2001, that not even powerful democratic states could continue to take their security for granted, and the reluctance of significant groups of people in the contemporary world to embrace either democracy or capitalism suggested that democracy might yet have to face serious threats.\textsuperscript{3}

Assessments of democracy’s prospects turn on two questions, one concerned with the genesis and putatively universal appeal of democratic institutions and the other with the sustainability of democratic institutions (formal or informal). The three books under review contribute to an understanding of both issues. Each emphasizes either the institutional preconditions of democratic development or the relationship between institutions and political practice in democratic settings. Read together, the books straddle disciplinary borders, elucidating questions that cannot be adequately addressed by any single discipline or approach. Snyder is a mainstream political scientist; in earlier books, he has written about the relationship between patterns of domestic politics and military expansionism. Eley is a historian known for his work on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Germany. In \textit{Forging Democracy}, he looks at democratic gains from the perspective of subordinate people (for example, women) whose voices were ignored by mainstream democrats and, often enough, by historians more attentive to the primary struggle between democrats and their conservative or reactionary opponents. Hansen, an anthropologist engaged in and by postmodernist and postcolonial arguments, is a student of Hindu nationalism. In none of the books under review is democracy portrayed as an unmitigated good, a natural outcome, or a done deal, in any time or place.

Democratization represents both a sea change in the life of a society and an open-ended process. Viewed this way, it can be defined as an evolving but positive institutional and cultural re-


response to three propositions: that all human beings are political equals; that they possess inviolable rights beyond that of political equality; and that within any political community, rulers can and should be held accountable by the ruled. Like other broadly transformative events—an economic takeoff, for example, or a religious transformation—democratization affects, and is affected by, every major facet of social life, and by international as well as domestic factors. As such, it begs to be studied in interdisciplinary terms, just as democracy’s contemporary competition—from neopatrimonial strongmen to Islamist movements—should be studied from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Democratization should also be analyzed as a trend or, even better, a dynamic, rather than as something that simply happens (or fails to happen) at some point in time. Democratization is an open-ended process because, as Eley’s book shows, human beings continually invent new ways of defining equality, new understandings of rights, and new mechanisms of both domination and contestation; the latter, in turn, change the terms on which political accountability can be enforced or evaded. Thus, “democratization” does not cease with the establishment of a regular electoral cycle or the first peaceful turnover of governmental power. American politics of the last half-century can be read as an eloquent statement of what democracies do: They continue to “democratize,” as new groups step into the competition for power, new conceptions of justice vie for support, and new technologies of power frustrate or embolden both rulers and ruled in complex and often unpredictable ways. This is how Hansen reads Indian politics.

Some students of democracy successfully bring multiple disciplines to bear on their topic. In Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia (Princeton, 2000), Robert F. Hefner trespasses across disciplinary boundaries to “come to terms with how one might think about democracy and religious reformation in a non-Western tradition” (xvii); the result is “a social anthropology of democratization in a majority Muslim society seen through its achievements and setbacks” (xviii). More often, an interdisciplinary perspective must be achieved by grouping books written around a common set of themes.

The three books listed at the head of this essay all take, or imply, a long view of democratization. They examine the darker sides of democratic politics, commenting in the process on democracy’s
possible definitions and likely trajectory. Each book is explicitly (Eley and Snyder) or implicitly (Hansen) comparative in its reach. Embedded in Eley’s sweeping historical account of Europe’s democratic journey is the argument that democratic empowerment is always the product of an adversarial struggle, in the course of which democratic forces privilege one understanding of democracy over others to maximize their competitive advantage or to reflect their sometimes only dimly perceived social position. Their victory comes at the expense of other democratic aspirations.

Whereas Eley emphasizes the tradeoffs and costs inherent even in democratic success stories, Snyder and Hansen stress the unintended consequences often produced by processes of democratization. Both authors argue that across a depressingly broad range of circumstances, ranging from new to established democracies, democratic competition may unleash the ambitions and favor the fortunes of populists prepared to violate systematically even the most basic human rights and to empty the promises of equality and accountability of their meaning.

Eley views European democracy as the contested political project of the left and examines its mixed reception across a continent in which various regions exhibited significantly different patterns of social, economic, political, and cultural development. In Eley’s account, democracy was no more the “inevitable byproduct of individualism or the market” than the emergence of a politically self-conscious working class was the “simple result of industrialization” (4, 60). This standpoint is more than an affirmation of the general contingency of historical outcomes. To Eley, democracy is forever changing its own definition, as its proponents “[push] the boundaries of citizenship outward and forward” to include previously disenfranchised or disempowered groups and to adopt more expansive lists of rights (10). It is an ongoing struggle, its temporary victories always achieved “against the resistance of socially dominant groups” (22). The heroes of Eley’s story are European socialist and communist movements, sometimes in office but usually out of power: “[T]hey organized civil society into the basis from which existing democratic gains could be defended and new ones could grow. They magnetized other progressive causes and interests in reform. Without them, democracy was a non-starter” (10).

Even with them, democracy was “fragile,” in part because of conflicting values and interests among its potential supporters, but
more fundamentally because of contradictions built into its foundational requirements (3). Looking across Europe in the years between 1848 and 1918, Eley argues that liberal constitutionalism trumped all other factors as the indispensable prerequisite of democratic progress. The class structure associated with triumphant liberalism, however, tended to impede democratic advances. Crudely put, liberalism—parliamentary institutions, individual rights, and limited government—favors, and is favored by, sociopolitical forces inclined to resist expansive definitions of citizenship. However, absent the institutional setting that liberalism provides, democratic aspirations inevitably veer off into utopian fantasies and/or dictatorial adventures.

This notion may strike some readers as a tired claim; at least some of these readers are also likely to be annoyed by Eley’s contempt for social democracy after 1917. Eley grudgingly credits twentieth-century social-democratic parties for their faithful defense of liberal gains, but derides them, “shriveled back into the parliamentary sphere” (226), for their alleged political timidity and sociocultural conservatism. Although he repeatedly acknowledges that Bolshevism evolved into an irretrievable moral and political mistake, he also credits it as an attempt to redefine the boundaries of citizenship and social justice.

Social democracy, in contrast, was always holding back more militant or more imaginative groups, objectively collaborating with democracy’s adversaries. Social democracy’s power was proportional to its willingness to play into the hands of “those far-sighted conservative politicians who faced up to the working-class insurgencies of 1917–23” and decided to defend their interests within the framework of liberal, constitutional regimes. In this game, the conservatives won, while the non–Bolshevik left surrendered the core of its progressive identity. Social democrats stabilized liberal regimes by selling democracy short. The evolution of the Labour Party in Britain is illustrative of the trend. Labour “craved the legitimacy of official recognition, desiring nothing more than to perform its moderation.” Anti-Leninist social democrats “adhered rigidly to parliamentary rules, trapped in a psychology of proceduralism and forever shying from the fight.” “This hardwiring of social democratic imaginations into the integrated

4 Elsewhere, Eley identifies social democrats with “pragmatism, machine politics, and moral compromising” (361–362).
circuits of parliamentary legality,” Eley argues, “was the key to the post-1918 period” (241).

This analysis leads Eley to reiterate a critique of the French socialist leader Léon Blum and of the French Popular Front’s failure to intervene decisively in the Spanish Civil War; it also means that Eley has almost nothing to say about Prime Minister Pierre Mendès-France and Chancellor Willy Brandt, who make less easy targets than Blum. But beyond the contempt, Eley’s emphasis on the difficulties and tradeoffs that attended democratic struggles sometimes produces felicitous results, especially in the chapters that deal with the period prior to 1917, when the left was defining itself (against its own diversity) even as it defined democracy (against its adversaries). Eley is at his best when he traces how and why the left’s class-based notions of justice squeezed out other kinds of claims, such as gender equality. Eley recounts the complex ways in which women responded to their disempowerment. In the final chapters of the book, he considers contemporary efforts to reinvent the left—and citizenship—in postindustrial societies.

Eley’s book suggests a number of lessons. The uneasy relationship between democracy and liberalism, characterized by a combination of frustration and dependence, is a reminder that democracy cannot do justice to all just claims. Its viability will depend, in part, on which claims are most urgent to any community at any given time. The democratic bargain struck between the working classes and capitalist elites excluded major policy and discursive options. In the industrialized democracies, working-class organizations accepted the limits that democracy imposed, but even in established democracies, where the required compromise provided important material and political benefits to less-advantaged groups, the settlement inspired precisely the kind of alienation that Eley expresses. In today’s world, can the democratic bargain provide even minimal justice to the dispossessed in countries like South Africa?

Snyder tells a cautionary tale about the political dangers that attend processes of democratization in the contemporary world, especially in less-developed countries. Four decades ago, Hunting-

ton argued that “modernity breeds stability, but modernization breeds instability.” 6 “Modernization,” he warned, “means that all groups, old as well as new, traditional as well as modern, become increasingly aware of themselves as groups and of their interests and claims in relation to other groups.” 7 Without a concurrent and successful effort to build institutions capable of aggregating demands, mediating claims, and enforcing agreements, the result of social and economic modernization would be endemic violence and the empowerment of all the wrong sorts of people—warlords and colonels, because they have guns, or communists, because they know how to create institutions.

Snyder’s argument builds on Huntington’s now classic analysis. Snyder’s central thesis is that “the transition to democratic politics ... [creates] fertile conditions for nationalism and ethnic conflict, which not only raises the costs of the transition but may also redirect popular political participation into a lengthy anti-democratic detour” (20). In democratizing states, typically characterized by weak civic institutions, rapidly expanding mass participation in politics, and the sudden disruption of people’s expectations and identities, existing elites search for new strategies to underpin their power. Nationalism seems tailor-made to suit their interests as the political system opens up. Nationalist goals demand the concentration of power that ambitious leaders seek, and nationalism becomes “a convenient doctrine that justifies a partial form of democracy, in which an elite rules in the name of the nation yet may not be fully accountable to its people” (32). In the absence of a politically sophisticated public and a critical, socially responsible press, “elites can often use their control over the levers of government, the economy, and the mass media to promote nationalist ideas” (32), mobilizing animosities that might otherwise have remained politically dormant.

History suggests that where elites push this logic to its conclusion and provoke violence (either deliberately or because they lose control over the process they have set in motion), they ultimately come to grief. In the critical short term, however, faced with a choice between surrendering power and a fuite en avant, they are likely to choose the latter and take their chances. The resulting vi-

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6 Huntington, Political Order in Changing Societies (New Haven, 1968), 41.
7 Ibid., 37.
olence, because it occurs at the moment of national self-definition, has lasting effects: Hatred and suspicion become built into the political cultures of both the perpetrator and victim communities, creating in each case a dynamic inimical to democratic politics (325). The “ancient hatreds” often cited to explain ethnic violence in today’s world are not “ancient.” They are the new unintended and lethal by-products of a democratic dynamic.

Snyder identifies four types of nationalism—revolutionary, counterrevolutionary, ethnic, and civic—distinguishing them on the basis of “the nature of their appeals to the collective good and their criteria for including members in the [national] group” (69). “A whole host of factors” is likely to influence the emergence and impact of one or another type of nationalism, but “[t]he type of nationalism that emerges during democratization (and the intensity and nature of nationalist conflict) depends primarily on the level and timing of economic development, the adaptability of elite interests, and the strength of the country’s political and administrative institutions” (314, 89). Motives are shaped by understandings of interest; opportunities are defined by institutional strength. Civic nationalism, based on what Habermas calls “constitutional patriotism,” is typical of established democracies. It alone is both inclusionary and “cost-conscious”; it builds unity out of diversity on the basis of equal rights and is capable of resisting or terminating reckless nationalist adventures (82). It presupposes strong political institutions and elites that “are not particularly threatened by the emergence of a democratic system” (75).

Revolutionary, counterrevolutionary, and ethnic nationalisms are all exclusionary and likely to spiral out of control. Revolutionary nationalism, exemplified by the French Revolution, arises in settings characterized by popular mobilization, where

8 Snyder calls his explanation of intergroup conflict the “elite persuasion” model, and the principal competing argument, emphasizing intractable “ancient hatreds,” the “popular rivalries” thesis (31–39).

9 Jürgen Habermas uses the term “constitutional patriotism” to define a political community united by its identification with a set of constitutional principles—in contrast to a political community united by putative prepolitical qualities (for example, shared ethnicity). Habermas developed the concept as part of a broader reflection on democracy and the nation-state and, more particularly, on national identity and citizenship in postwar and, especially, post-unification, Germany. His views have informed German debates about the rights of asylum seekers and immigrants as well as the future of the European Union. See Habermas, “Citizenship and National Identity,” in idem (trans. William Rehg), Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), 491–515.
“opportunistically adaptable elites . . . find that appeals to nationalism rooted in alleged foreign conspiracies may be the quickest route to the re-establishment of state authority in the wake of institutional collapse” (79). Counterrevolutionary nationalism, illustrated by Wilhelmine Germany, is the choice of unadaptable elites in countries with strong institutions; it is “opportunistic in its exclusions, resorting to any and every available ploy to divide potential popular opposition” (78). Both revolutionary and counterrevolutionary nationalism tend to generate expansionist foreign policies. Ethnic nationalism is likely to occur “where state institutions are still in their infancy when pressure for mass political participation arises” (79). Ethnic nationalism turns its violence inward, provoking often appalling levels of domestic slaughter but generally abstaining from foreign aggression.

Snyder’s purposes are poorly served by his tendency to gloss over conceptual problems, to shortchange competing arguments, and to use historical evidence simplistically and opportunistically. This is our loss, given the intellectual and political importance of the issues with which he is grappling. To his credit, he tests his theory against a wide range of historical and contemporary cases: Germany, Britain, France, and Serbia (chapters 3 and 4), postcommunist states (Chapter 5), and a set of developing countries—Sri Lanka, Malaysia, India, Rwanda, and Burundi (Chapter 6). He concludes by outlining policy recommendations consistent with his analysis of the relationship between democratization and nationalism and his understanding of the sources of different patterns of nationalist violence. He infers “three principal injunctions for a happy democratization: be rich and modernized, have adaptable elites, and establish a thick web of liberal institutions before embarking on the process” (315; see also 316–321). In other words, be England. Otherwise, he urges caution, patience, and policies based on analytically grounded findings (preferably his own) rather than on empirically uninformed moral preferences.

The risks of failure will always be greater than the chances of success; opportunities will seem limited and even dangerous. “My approach,” Snyder writes, “is skeptical of arrangements for power-sharing between cultural groups, doubtful of federalism, selective in recommending democratization, wary of proposals to expand freedom of speech, and conditionally tolerant of the domination of civil society by a strong state” (322). Democratization creates
the setting in which elites reach for nationalism in the first place. From the moment when reform begins, everything possible should be done to make such elites “weak but happy in the course of democratization,” no matter how morally distasteful the necessary “golden parachutes” may appear (339). Power sharing and federalism both tend to “lock in” ethnic identities and create incentives for mobilization on the basis of ethnic outbidding; integrative strategies, however difficult, are preferable. Freedom of speech and, especially, external efforts to “empower” oppressed minorities by enhancing their means of self-expression are more likely to fuel rumors and promote demagogy than encourage informed public debate if established democratic institutions do not undergird them. Snyder sees “no substitute for the painstaking fostering of civic institutions and traditions. . . . Democracy is not instant. If it came in a bottle, everyone would have it” (353).

India has it, but Hansen tells a disturbing story about its results. In *The Saffron Wave*, Hansen argued that democracy “always tends to produce an ever more politicized society in which ‘undecidability’ reigns and expands, that is, where institutions, identities, and social horizons are unstable and always contested.”

Instead of bringing domestic stability and integration, it “makes possible new forms of violent conflict and new fantasies of power and xenophobias.”

Leaning on Tocqueville and the French political philosopher Lefort, Hansen argues that democracy produces a society “without stable legitimacy and knowledge,” thus prompting “all the central ideological configurations of modernity circling around, and straddling, narratives of loss (of truth, certainty, culture, faith, authenticity), and equally persistent quests for recuperation of the lost in new purified forms.”

This dynamic, not Hinduism per se, produced Hindu nationalism, which is neither a reflection of some cultural incompatibility between competing “Western” and “Eastern” value systems nor the price of frustrated developmental ambitions. Its key con-

11 Ibid.
st ituency has been the educated middle classes. It “emerged success-
fully . . . in the 1980s as a kind of ‘conservative populism’ that
mainly attracted more privileged groups who feared encroach-
ment on their dominant positions, but also ‘plebeian’ and impov-
erished groups seeking recognition around a majoritarian rhetoric
of cultural pride, order, and national strength.”

The Saffron Wave makes a general argument about democracy
and the rise of Hindu nationalism; Wages of Violence recounts
the renaming of Bombay, focusing on “the historical formation of the
political discourses, the identities, and the conflicts that changed
Bombay from being the preeminent symbol of India’s secular in-
dustrial modernity to become a powerful symbol of the very crisis
of this vision” (8). Both books are based on extensive fieldwork
completed during the 1990s in Maharashtra, a state created in 1960
as federal India redrew its provincial boundaries to accommodate
linguistic groups (in this case, Marathi speakers). Bombay, the re-
gion’s main city, was rebaptized Mumbai in 1995 by the state’s
new coalition government, led by two Hindu nationalist parties—
Shiv Sena, the regional extremist party, and the nationally com-
petitive Bharatiya Janata Party (bjp, then in power in New Delhi).
Three years earlier, in the wake of the destruction of the Baburi
mosque at Ayodhya by Hindu militants in 1992, the city had been
rocked by communal violence.

Wages of Violence is both more assertively postmodernist in its

13 Hansen, Saffron Wave, 8–9. Hansen’s questions focus on democracy, but his immediate
topic is Hindu nationalism. On the related topic of communal violence, see also Ashutosh
Varshney, Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India (New Haven, 2002).
14 Hansen, Saffron Wave, 11.
15 The national government redrew state boundaries in the States Reorganization Act of
1956, but denied the demands of Marathi speakers. Months before the Act was passed, Bom-
bay had been declared a Union Territory; it included both present-day Maharashtra and
neighboring Gujarat. Metropolitan Bombay’s powerful business community had long been
dominated by non-Marathi speakers, often Gujaratis. The national government’s decisions
sparked demonstrations and violence. In the ensuing agitation for a unilingual state, “the vern-
acular press and Marathi-speaking intellectuals . . . rallied around a single narrative of the
emergence of a Marathi-speaking people, unique in their courage and independence, not to
be subdued by Muslim invaders, and, indeed, the first real Indian nationalists” (43). The new
role of the vernacular press and the new narrative successfully promoted by the Samyukta
Maharashtra Samiti announced circumstances that would favor the rise of Shiv Sena in the
1980s. The state map was redrawn in 1960.
analysis and more narrative in its approach than is *The Saffron Wave*. Perhaps as a consequence, the argument is sometimes harder to follow. *Wages of Violence* begins with an exploration of the historical myths that have been used to constitute identities in Maharashtra, and it includes a wealth of ethnographic information about urban life in and around Bombay. But neither the stories nor the references to Lacan, the maverick French psychoanalytic theorist, ever fully submerge the argument.\(^\text{16}\) Social and cultural groups, Hansen contends, “are not ‘out there’ as groups *an sich* but only exist as collective identities when they are named in public rituals, organized, and reproduced through performative practices as groups and categories for themselves” (10).\(^\text{17}\) The narrative traces how Shiv Sena, founded in 1966, performed itself into prominence, utilizing a mix of “formal, institutionalized politics, violent street-level agitation, informal networking, and local brokerage” to redefine “social imaginaries” in ways that left less and less room for civil and civic politics (45).\(^\text{18}\)

The key contextual factors facilitating the success of Shiv Sena were the broadening of Indian democracy and the concomitant decay of the country’s political institutions. Those institutions—a professional civil service, an apolitical military, functioning representative bodies—bequeathed by imperial Britain to independent India, are often cited in the literature on India to explain how democracy developed in an otherwise “improbable” setting.\(^\text{19}\) Because they were designed by the British to promote stability rather than change, they also figure in explanations of independent India’s limited success as a developmental state.\(^\text{20}\)


\(^{17}\) As Hansen also writes, “Parties rarely reflect a preexisting interest or group; on the contrary, they create and reiterate the precarious boundaries of a group through the act of naming” (98).


\(^{19}\) The adjective is Robert Dahl’s, in *On Democracy* (New Haven, 1998), 159.

\(^{20}\) See, for example, Judith M. Brown, *Nehru* (Harlow, U.K., 1999), 81.
Hansen makes another argument about the legacies of colonial governance. The British ruled by virtue of a targeted mix of cooptation and repression: They coopted the “civilized” middle classes by offering them the rule of law and some measure of self-government, and they met the illiterate, impoverished masses with armed force. Middle-class nationalists adapted colonial practices to serve their own purposes. They saw themselves as selfless apolitical servants of progress and the public good, using state power to bring civilization to their less fortunate fellow citizens; they viewed the masses as “deeply religious, uncontaminated, and good while living within their separate cultural communities.”

In reality, the new state “became the main provider of resources, jobs, recognition, and protection for the middle classes of bureaucrats, private entrepreneurs, and wealthy farmers” who opposed any fundamental revision of the social status quo. Less privileged groups, mobilized by democratic politics, challenged the motives and threatened the interests of the elites. The residual emphasis on purity and cultural communities undercut and distorted the state’s ostensible commitment to secularism. Eventually, it encouraged elites and masses alike to respond to social frustration by seeking ideological control, which is one way that Hansen describes cultural nationalism.

Bal Thackeray (born in 1927)—the hate-mongering, rule-defying, self-indulgent, and alas charismatic leader of Shiv Sena—is the antihero of Hansen’s story about Bombay/Mumbai. Vulgar and brash, Thackeray is reminiscent of Jean-Marie Le Pen, the longtime leader of the French National Front. Thackeray’s movement is forging what Snyder terms “ethnodemocracy” (352–353), through what Hansen calls the “democratization of Indian democracy.” This process involves the invasion of the vernacular into the preserves of a previously elite-dominated political system. Shiv Sena, Hansen argues, “is not an ideology or a program, it is a state of mind” (50). A 1995 manifesto was “literally devoid of any concrete content” (201). The movement speaks to men [sic] who feel they have been denied respect—a large category in today’s societies, and one not restricted by class boundaries. Thackeray uses

21 Hansen, Saffron Wave, 54.
22 Ibid., 49–50.
23 Ibid., 90.
24 Ibid., 58.
rhetoric, rumor, and fabricated rivalries to nurture his supporters’ discontent, offering violence—sometimes verbal but often physical—as an open-ended solution to the very insecurity that his rhetoric is designed to cultivate: “Whereas the RSS promises harmony, cooperation, collective organized activism, and reconciliation, Shiv Sena promises violence, strife, and conflict” (92).25

Democracy, in sum, far from reproducing the conditions necessary for its own survival, has encouraged and rewarded thuggery. Shiv Sena shows a natural affinity to what Indians call dada culture, “a style of exercising political and social power and protection that invokes images of a masculine, assertive, often violent local strongman, whose clout lies in self-made networks of loyalty rather than in institutionalized action and discourse” (72). This culture has empowered criminal elements on both sides of the Hindu–Muslim divide and decisively undermined the state’s authority. “Political society in contemporary India,” Hansen concludes, “is not about generating new rules; its primary drive is to contest existing rules in the broadest sense, to defy the law, and, most important, to make a community or cause as visible as possible in order to claim certain benefits, public services, or entitlements for that community or cause” (230).

The books reviewed herein confirm the academy’s move away from “metanarratives” that predict a definitive triumph of Western-style democracy and capitalism; they also caution against policies that seek to impose democratic transitions from without. In Eley’s account, democracy never “triumphs,” both because gains on one democratic front always seem to entail losses on another front and because democracy continually opens up new fronts. Snyder’s and Hansen’s accounts are even more somber: Both democratization (Snyder) and democracy (Hansen) can easily create a dynamic inimical to the survival of a democratic regime (based on and promoting political equality, rights, and accountability). Both Eley and Snyder suggest the dependence of democratic politics on the prior emergence of a historically unusual

25 The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, founded in Maharashtra in 1925, has been the organizational core of Hindu communalist activism in India ever since. It is the muscle behind the bjp, allowing the latter to present a more moderate face and focus on electoral tasks. It has always been obsessed by discipline and ideas of regeneration and purity, targeting its appeals to upper-caste Hindus. Its elitist culture reflects its origins in colonial India and contrasts sharply with the populist, plebeian culture of Shiv Sena.
constellation of liberal institutions and habits; Hansen warns that
democratic politics itself may be all that is necessary to disrupt the
constellation. The eventual result is dada culture.

Yet it is important on both intellectual and policy grounds
not to be pessimistic about democracy’s future for the wrong
reasons. Neither “ancient hatreds” nor a putative “class of
civilizations” produces thuggery; weak institutions do. De-
institutionalization can be either the unintended by-product of
democratic politics or the foreseeable consequence of deliberate
policy. Policies ranging from the structural-adjustment programs
imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund
(IMF) in the 1980s to the destruction of infrastructure in the
Occupied Territories by Israeli Defense Forces—particularly during
the second intifida—have had predictably negative effects
on institutional capacity in regions desperately in need of strong
institutions.

We know that democracy undermines institutions. We also
know how to destroy institutions. What we do not know with
any certainty is how to build, or even maintain, the institutions on
which democratic politics depends. What is true at home is more
emphatically true abroad. Even when we pool our disciplinary re-
sources, recipes elude us. Virtuous circles are far more artificial and
fragile than vicious ones. Faced with an often ambiguous and mul-
tifaceted process shaped by the changing interactions of multiple
causal chains, we can explain past successes, but if asked to predict
and prescride, the best that we can do is to warn against strategies
that will not work. In activist times, whether the activism is
prompted by fear or by hope, such arguments meet with impa-
tience. The purpose of the accounts in these three books, how-
ever, is not to induce paralysis but to discourage recklessness. As
the books demonstrate, democratic paths are hard enough to find
and follow without the added dangers that recklessness introduces.

26 The “clash of civilization” thesis rests on an essentialized view of culture that is unper-
suasive within the academy but widely held in policy circles. It is articulated in Huntington,
Clash of Civilizations: The Remaking of the World Order (New York, 1996). It also informs the
work of Bernard Lewis (for example, What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Re-
sponse [Oxford, 2002]).