

Books & the Arts.



The World War II Memorial on the National Mall, October 2, 2013, in Washington, DC

SUSAN WALSH / AP

The Great Chastening

by THOMAS MEANEY

When American traders began arriving in China at the close of the eighteenth century, local officials were curious about their new visitors. One of the earliest Chinese descriptions of Americans appeared in a dispatch sent by the governor of Liang-Guang province to the imperial court in Beijing:

These barbarians have no monarch whatsoever, only a headman. The tribe publicly selects several men, who serve in succession according to the drawing of lots, for terms of four years apiece. Commercial affairs are

managed independently by private individuals who are not controlled or disputed by the headman.

The Qing dynasty was perplexed by a people who could do without a king or a centrally administered market. Fifty years later, when Ulysses Grant, after his presidency, became the first US leader to travel to China, his visit presented a problem for Shanghai copy desks. They settled on referring to him as *huangdi* (emperor). By then, many Chinese were aware that the United States was ostensibly ruled by elected representatives, but to use the newfangled Chinese character for “president” still seemed like a sign of disrespect. Then, as now, to be a democratic leader touring China was a bit of an embarrassment.

That the Chinese government today should peer through our electoral robes and find our body politic wanting should not be surprising. To see China as perpetually on the brink of a democratic awakening is to

mistake the contingencies of its history for our dreams deferred. China’s flirtation with elections in the wake of Sun Yat-sen’s 1911 revolution was a brief encounter. The country did not become a democracy during the populist May Fourth Movement a few years later, when Chinese student demonstrators learned Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points by heart. It did not become a democracy after World War II, when the gentle offices of Gen. George Marshall tried to coax the Kuomintang and the communists into a unity government. It did not become a democracy in Tiananmen Square in 1989, when Gorbachev became an anti-example for the government. It is not about to become one now.

To be sure, the country does face severe crises—corruption that has set the party against itself; a judiciary in thrall to the Politburo; separatist and democracy movements in Tibet, Xinjiang and Hong Kong; pollution levels that suddenly appear intoler-

Thomas Meaney last reported in these pages on democracy in Indonesia. The statement about “barbarians” at the start of this review, and quoted by Dunn, should be credited to Yuezhi Xiong, who brought it to light in his article “Difficulties in Comprehension and Differences in Expression: Interpreting American Democracy in the Late Qing” in the journal Late Imperial China.

erable to its citizens; and an economy beset by excess liquidity and shrinking demand in export markets. Most daunting of all, there is China's need to feed its people and diminish its reliance on imported food, which may soon require the most ambitious land reform in history. Whether it is effected through privatization or some other means, the expansion of industrial-size farms in China to satisfy the new diet of its middle class could create an enormous tide of landless peasants, whose grievances might overwhelm a party that still owes some of its legitimacy to its original redistribution of land in 1950.

But is procedural democracy the answer to any of these problems? It seems unlikely. What's clear is that the Chinese leadership does not see it as a solution, and that its tolerance for what it perceives as "foreign" concepts and ideas may be approaching a limit. In 2013, Beijing restricted academic research on seven so-called speak-nots: civil society, citizens' rights, freedom of the press, human rights, mistakes made by the party, the privileges of capitalism and the independence of the judiciary. This intellectual xenophobia becomes more comprehensible when one considers that the postwar history of China is largely the tale of two outside ideological incursions: first, Mao's ill-starred consolidation of a Soviet-inspired program, which even Stalin cautioned against; second, Deng Xiaoping's domestication of market-oriented initiatives that the Communist Party has, since the 1970s, only been able to manage through a policy of maximal ideological flexibility.

The leaders of China today no longer look to the country's deep past, nor to Western expertise, to determine what course to take. Instead, under President Xi Jinping, the government has further stressed its divergence from the path of Anglo-American political development, though its propaganda remains crude and derivative: China now has its own "Chinese Dream," centered, more forthrightly than ours, on material well-being; it issues its own human-rights reports, which rate the United States very badly; and it has its own form of exceptionalism, which, unlike the American version, is based on the more candid view that no other country could possibly mimic China's *sui generis* ascent. In recent months, Xi has also called for a return to the Chinese Constitution, a party document full of vacuous clauses about religious and press freedoms that Chinese leaders will now have to swear to uphold. The initiative is part of Xi's anticorruption campaign, but the 1982 Constitution remains a document

Discussed in This Essay

Political Order and Political Decay

From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy.

By Francis Fukuyama.

Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 658 pp. \$35.

Breaking Democracy's Spell

By John Dunn.

Yale. 192 pp. \$35.

Tocqueville's Nightmare

The Administrative State Emerges in America, 1900–1940.

By Daniel R. Ernst.

Oxford. 240 pp. \$39.95.

The Royalist Revolution

Monarchy and the American Founding.

By Eric Nelson.

Harvard. 391 pp. \$29.95.

as open to interpretation as ours, and could become a means of shaming the state were it to take on a life of its own.

If the Chinese example poses a challenge to Western politicians and political theorists, the reason is not because it offers states around the world an attractive authoritarian alternative to liberal democracy—at least not yet—nor because it has, more impressively, done more for its people in the past thirty years, in relative terms, than any Western government has done for its own. More simply, it is because China shows that in the twenty-first century a functioning state can rule over and claim the allegiance of more than a billion people without any pretense of liberal-democratic governance. Among some Anglo-American observers today, one detects the sort of admiration for China that in the nineteenth century was directed toward the bureaucratic efficiency of the Prussian state. It seems at least possible that in the near future the world will have something concrete to learn about the possibilities of the modern state from the Chinese experience. Already, China presents us with the unsettling fact that democratic rule does not automatically entail favorable economic or political outcomes—a lesson we apparently still haven't learned from the last century. The point is not that China has become a model for governance, but that the pretense of any model, including a Western one, being stable and exportable is getting harder to uphold. Under democracy, we may be fortunate enough to experience good government, but good govern-

ment is far from something that democracy guarantees—in theory, much less in practice.

Francis Fukuyama is the West's most popular political theorist; John Dunn is one of its more trenchant and tenacious. In their new books, they acknowledge, in very different ways, the great chastening of Western democracies by the Chinese experiment. Fukuyama, whose writings are already primary sources for the history of the post-Cold War order, is an exemplary product of the era's marriage between social science and American power. He has made a career of moving smoothly between the academy and the Beltway, and the ease of his passage is reflected in his unadorned prose. Dunn, by contrast, has a historically steeper vision marked by his childhood in the British Empire; it has been rumored that the plan for the 1953 Anglo-American coup against Mossadegh was hatched in his family's garden in Tehran. Dunn's intellectual itinerary has taken him well beyond the erstwhile linguistic idealists of the Cambridge School to studies of postcolonial states and toward what might be termed "global political thought," which would mean monitoring the traffic of political ideas as they are injected and appropriated throughout the world. Dunn is known for the skeptical heat he applies to his colleagues' imprecisions and pieties, especially the disjuncture between political hopes and outcomes, whether they have looked forward to socialism or market-centered liberalism, or backward to some form of virtuous republicanism. His prose is intellectually bracing, sometimes opaque, but often flashes with insight. He is a late expositor of what Cyril Connolly called the Mandarin style: "Its cardinal assumption is that neither the writer nor the reader is in a hurry, that both are in possession of a classical education and a private income."

Between them, Fukuyama and Dunn offer a good sense of the current state of Anglo-American thinking—and forgetting—about democracy. Instead of gauging the prospects of liberal democracy around the world, as both made a habit of in the twilight of the Cold War, they have turned their gazes inward to consider the internal state of actually existing democracies. Both of them address their books to American audiences. It must be a sign of the times that Fukuyama's serenades to the owl of Minerva have given way to prosaic tributes to the professionalism of the 1920s US Forestry Service. In *Political Order and Political Decay*, he has written a book that shows how the country's governmental institutions are decaying, and how Ameri-

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cans have created obstacles that impair their ability to govern effectively. (Academics may scoff at Fukuyama for the scale of his historical sweep, but at this point some gratitude is in order for a man who has synthesized an immense amount of the specialist literature of the social sciences and produced an account others will have the luxury to pick apart.) With sharper blades, Dunn—who has been for decades one of the most articulate critics in the face of democratic triumphalism—now seeks to clear a path out of the maze of our ill-founded aspirations and confusions. In *Breaking Democracy's Spell*, he has concentrated on how, despite all appearances, we have never really known what democratic rule is in the first place. For all their differences in approach and tone, however, both Dunn and Fukuyama agree that the democratic crisis is in the main the result of an intellectual failure. Only once the reasons for this failure are firmly grasped can the work of renovation begin.

For Dunn, our confusion about the meaning of democracy is contained in the tangled trajectory of the word itself. No ancient Greek understood *demokratia* to mean anything close to good government, nor did almost anyone in the West until the latter half of the nineteenth century. “Democracy” meant something closer to mob rule that, in its best-known expression in ancient Greece, appeared to have been a spectacular failure. But in the United States, and elsewhere around the world, the word “democracy” today is taken to be synonymous with good government—“not in the sense of government with reliably desirable consequences, but in the sense of government exercised on a wholly appropriate basis and through unimpeachable means, government fully sanctioned by the people and exerted in the spirit and through modes that the latter have explicitly chosen or through means they would definitely welcome,” Dunn writes. In other words, “democracy” connotes multiple political utopias for diverse peoples around the world. The problem, as Dunn shows, is that “democracy” is also the conventional term for the political order in which we actually live, and which “all too frequently conflicts agonizingly with many of [our] most urgent purposes and deepest commitments.” How are we to reconcile the disparity between democracy as an ideal and democracy in practice? Or, as Dunn puts it, “Is American government today so confused, so fractious, and so dysfunctional despite democracy or because of democracy?”

Americans may like to think they are better governed than the Chinese, but the only identifiable advantage they can hold up in their favor is that they have the right to replace a tier of their government at regular intervals. However, this rejectionist spirit all too often becomes the sole *raison d'être* of democracy. (Among the so-called minimalists of democratic theory, from Joseph Schumpeter to Adam Przeworski, it often is cited as its saving grace.) To demand democracy in Egypt during the Arab uprising more often than not meant to demand the end of Hosni Mubarak's rule. “The people want the fall of the regime” was the chant that filled Tahrir Square. Democracy provided no reliable guide for what to do after the strongman fell, or even how to form the necessary political judgment to know what to do. As a way of providing people with a minimum, if largely fleeting and ethereal, sense of participating in a polity, democracy will continue to have a rhetorical advantage over the Chinese system for as long as it can keep up the fiction of granting effective political agency. Yet it is far from clear that procedural democracy is superior at actually governing people under the conditions in which the Chinese currently find themselves.

The account of democracy in *Political Order* is one piece of Dunn's puzzle. Like Dunn, Fukuyama is concerned with the “pseudo-democratic authorization of almost everything in the United States.” His book is a remarkably levelheaded and empirically grounded account of how certain homegrown ideas about democracy in America have created daunting obstacles to effective governance. To his credit, Fukuyama has not written a new entry in the fashionable genre of American decline. Nor is he concerned with conservative critiques of American society and culture, which go back at least as far as Brooks Adams's *The Law of Civilization and Decay* (1895). Instead, Fukuyama has tackled something more precise and disturbing: the political decay of American political institutions. In the 1960s, Samuel Huntington used the term “political decay” to explain political instability in many newly independent countries after World War II, but for Fukuyama the problem that once afflicted the international periphery now bedevils the core. Central to his argument is the assumption that the United States in particular has lost the balance between democratic oversight and bureaucratic capacity. The problem is not that there is too much

bureaucracy, or too much state power, or anything resembling an imperial presidency, but rather that each of these institutions has deteriorated beyond recognition and suffers from a deficit of legitimacy.

As Fukuyama sees it, the American state, starting in the second half of the twentieth century, stopped running according to Madisonian principles, in which the disarray of interest groups was supposed to produce something recognizable as the public interest. It requires ever more elaborate fictions to believe that even the “spontaneous order” of the market could satisfy such an interest. In Fukuyama's infinitely expansive historical tapestry, the capture of the American state by elite interests and lobbying groups is comparable to the “repatrimonialization” of the Chinese state in the Later Han dynasty or to France's *ancien régime*. In itself, the problem of repatrimonialization in America would be solvable in the sort of anticorruption campaigns engineered in the past to purge the bureaucracy of rent-seeking, such as Teddy Roosevelt's progressivist campaign in the 1900s.

But the second problem Fukuyama finds in the American state makes this more difficult. The checks and balances of the Madisonian system allow too many opportunities to derail reform. The never-ending character of American budget negotiations gives lobbyists and interest groups repeated chances to kill legislation. This is what Fukuyama refers to as the American “vetocracy.” By contrast, both the German and the British states have comparably fewer veto players and have formal restrictions that make vetoes less easy to perform. The German Federal Republic has provisions for a “positive” vote of no-confidence: “a party cannot topple a government coalition...unless it can put together an alternative government” in its place. The United Kingdom does not allow individual interest groups and politicians to veto individual items on the national budget. Instead, the entire budget is presented to the Parliament, which must either veto it or approve it all at once. Fukuyama takes this to be a more genuinely democratic system. If British voters don't like the kinds of policies their current government is passing, they are free to vote the government out in less time than it would take Americans to vote out a president or congressional representative. This means the British government is supposedly more accountable for its overall performance than for its ability to provide pork barrel benefits to special portions of the electorate. (Fukuyama neglects to explain, however, why the short terms of US representatives

only seem to render them less accountable.)

As for Americans, we may love democracy less and cherish bureaucracy more than we care to admit. Fukuyama cites a poll showing the institutions that receive the highest levels of approval from the citizenry—the military, NASA, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—are the ones least subject to democratic oversight. By contrast, the most democratic American institution—Congress—is the most despised. This leads Fukuyama to explain a factor contributing to the decay of American political institutions: drastically low levels of bureaucratic autonomy and discretion. US bureaucracies and agencies, according to Fukuyama, are not granted enough free rein. His examples are the US Forestry Service and Amtrak. Amtrak might have become a profitable, effective railway, Fukuyama says, “if it were not under congressional mandates to serve various low-volume rural communities.” (It doesn’t seem to occur to him that part of the problem may be the expectation that the government maintain profitable agencies.) He makes a similar case for the Forestry Service, founded in 1905 by Gifford Pinchot, and once a vaunted example of US state-building in the Progressive era. It was staffed by professionals who were allowed to manage the forest according to the best scientific knowledge of the day, without much political or judicial interference.

For Fukuyama, bureaucracies such as the Forestry Service became thoroughly politicized during the postwar revolt against technocrats, to the point that they lost much of their bureaucratic autonomy. Interest groups—though Fukuyama hesitates to supply examples—began to find legal ways of capturing legislatures. Because they exercise an influence disproportionate to their place in society and manipulate budgets in their favor, interest groups have led to what Fukuyama calls “a crisis of representativeness,” in which people’s distrust in government increases “in part because of reforms designed to make the system more democratic.” And so starts a circle in which the government responds to public distrust by further decreasing the bureaucratic autonomy of the state, which in turn encourages more incompetence and more vulnerability to the sway of special interests.

Political Order and Political Decay is cogent as far as it goes. The problem is that it does not always go very far. In Fukuyama’s account, many of the deepest reasons for the decrepitude of

sectors of the US state owe to the way it was originally designed by the founders. Here he recapitulates his teacher Samuel Huntington’s 1968 masterwork *Political Order in Changing Societies*, which devoted a large section to the antique political structures of the American system inherited from England. In Huntington’s judgment, the colonists imported the English sixteenth-century constitution to America at precisely the moment when it was being dispensed with in the home country. This led to a polity that has “never been underdeveloped” but, as Huntington correctly noted, “has also never been wholly modern.” The

nineteenth-century Chinese observer who saw the Americans as lacking a monarch was in some sense mistaken: many of the American revolutionaries saw themselves as defending King George III against a wayward Parliament as partisans of a stronger, not a weaker, monarchy.

As Eric Nelson shows in *The Royalist Revolution*, a scrupulous archaeology of American revolutionary thought, many colonists were quite clear-eyed about their mission to protect the prerogatives of a strong monarch from an English Parliament that seemed determined to restrain them. The victorious revolutionaries granted their new

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“president” monarchical powers and feted George Washington to the tune of “God Save the King” in his first years in office. “Today America still has a king, Britain only a crown,” wrote Huntington. The presidential veto was only one of the royalist elements that the neo-Stuart defenders of prerogative power managed to smuggle into the American Constitution. The new nation was also reluctant to embrace modern elements of the state, such as positive law or a standing army, while its peculiar conception of judicial review testified to another early modern holdover and faintly resembled the way Tudor and early Stuart courts had used common law to control acts of Parliament. It was a development as “baffling to understand as it is impossible to duplicate.”

Fukuyama’s book is an elaboration of Huntington’s 1960s script about the development of the American state. Yet while both lament the judicialization of American institutions and the shift of power from the administration to the courts, they fail to give a full accounting of why this shift got under way. The seventeenth century is not the place to look. As Fukuyama acknowledges, the US state was already gathering exponential administrative capacity by the start of the twentieth century. It continued to grow and to seek opportunities to manage the conflicts of labor and capital in American society well into the 1940s. The subsequent judicialization of the state in large part owed to the revolt by business and capital interests against this emerging regulatory regime. In the interwar years, these interests, represented by groups such as the American Bar Association and the American Liberty League, began to recast contract and property rights in the language of civil liberties in order to invite increasingly pro-New Deal courts to check the prerogatives of administrative power.

As Daniel Ernst shows in his illuminating legal history *Tocqueville’s Nightmare*, the US administrative state could still count on a wide range of legal defenders in the 1930s—from Jerome Frank to John Foster Dulles—to neutralize the attacks of both principled and red-baiting legal theorists, such as Roscoe Pound, who wished to cast agencies such as the Securities and Exchange Commission as instances of “administrative absolutism,” and sought to subject every step of their investigations to review by the courts. Judicial review nonetheless remained the preferred method for those looking to restrain Truman’s extension of New Deal policies during the early Cold War. These economic conservatives

finally started to succeed when, as the legal scholar Jeremy Kessler has argued, they began riding on the legal coattails of religious and conscientious objectors, and connecting their struggles, and the genuine worries about authoritarian overreach they fed, with calls for greater judicial review of the entire administrative state. Through this strategy of aligning with civil-liberties groups, which continues unabated today, business interests were able to paralyze many arms of the administrative state while obscuring the directness of their assault.

Unlike Fukuyama, Dunn is not encumbered by the need to show that democracy has any natural affinity with either capitalism or the rule of law, and so it is tonic to read the highly distilled essays in *Breaking Democracy’s Spell* (originally delivered as the Henry L. Stimson Lectures at Yale). Capitalism and the rule of law are distinct ways of organizing economic, legal and political life, and their permutations are more various than most Americans are willing to admit. There have been authoritarian market societies (Singapore), just as there could be democratically planned societies (Britain under Attlee). Whereas Fukuyama, because he has not quite given up on liberal democracy as a model for governance, sees evidence of it taking root in various parts of the world over the past two millennia (the rule of law in China, political accountability in India, property rights in Europe), Dunn thinks that liberal democracy’s global ascent is “an uneven, reluctant, painful series of surrenders of an immense miscellany of other kinds of belief.” Democracy, he argues, triumphed in most places and times because it served as an expedient for one group of elites seeking to banish another from the political stage. If we are to retrain our political vision in the present, the answer, Dunn suggests, is not simply to strengthen already existing governmental institutions, or to try to recover some of the glory of the mid-century administrative state. Alongside this, Dunn proposes a more urgent form of political education for Western elites. We have, he argues, entered into a new world in which we can no longer afford to misinterpret the political reasoning and imaginations of the rest of the globe.

When it comes to Chinese-American relations, the *modus vivendi* proposed by Henry Kissinger, in which China and the United States must acknowledge their common interest in a global balance of power, is

as dangerous as the democratic evangelism of Samantha Power, the US ambassador to the UN. The point of refining our political vision is to grasp what our fellow governments are trying to achieve, what political and historical resources they have to achieve it, and how we can work toward types of governance that address global crises, but to which no one country should be thought to have a privileged claim. Dunn’s answer to all of this is unsatisfactory: he believes we must put our faith in “educating the educators” in the hope that there is enough Dunnian political temperament to go around. This will never be the case. But Dunn is right that a new global political architecture will be necessary if we are to weather the upcoming storms—many of them literal ones. “A species facing self-extermination, even at a relatively sedate pace, has reasons for altering its behavior,” he writes with his inimitable sang-froid.

No less true is Dunn’s belief that political elites for some time to come will continue to be produced by a handful of great universities. The Ivy League has begun graduating the children of the upper echelons of China’s Communist government—not only the princelings with Ferraris but also the more dutiful sons and daughters who have now taken up supervisory posts in the provinces, the typical path to power, and may someday inherit the party. China, too, educates distant elites: the president of Ethiopia is a graduate of Peking University, and the prime minister of Kazakhstan studied at Wuhan. Any convergence and free exchange of political thought are more likely to take place among privileged ranks. But however many incentives they have, it still seems too sanguine to bet the future of the world on King’s College seminars. If global political thought is to contribute anything substantial to our predicament, every part of the world will need to be able to think of itself as contributing to its emergence. The palliative term “democracy” could be replaced with franker language that actually describes the operations and aspirations of real, existing states and citizens, and does not encourage their crude attempts to wrap themselves in a misnomer. One senses more frustration about this lack of realism among Chinese leaders than among their American counterparts. This is a delicate, and perhaps impossible, enterprise. But there is no longer much excuse—or much time—for perplexity at foreign ways of politically coping that are not outright aggressive. To see others as barbarians is no kind of solution. ■