

Model behaviour

In a time where few of us pay attention to the different interpretations that make up the umbrella-term of democracy, **Milja Kurki** of Aberystwyth University, UK, explains how there should never be just one voice defining the meaning of this intrinsically dialogical political system



What does a conceptual approach to democracy promotion entail?

There are many models of democracy that can guide democratic aspirations, practice and also democracy promotion. Calls for democracy of an Occupy Wall Street movement activist may be quite different from the calls for democracy of a labourer in the Middle East, or of the conceptions of democracy of the US Government. In this project, we seek to unpack what kinds of assumptions are made by

democracy promotion actors in international politics about the meaning of the notion 'democracy'. Specifically, we are interested in which 'models of democracy' are promoted; that is, what kind of philosophical or ideological traditions of thought on democracy come through in the policy frameworks and concrete practices of democracy promotion today.

Why is it important to understand and pay special attention to the relationship between democratic and economic structures?

In the context of the current financial crisis it is inescapable that the meaning of democracy must be understood in the context of the economic. The 'Political Economies of Democratisation' (PEoD) project argues that the meaning of democracy as a concept is always crucially conditioned by how the economic context of democracy's functioning is conceived. Our interest is in investigating to what extent democracy promoters can take account of a multiple, politico-economic set of meanings of the idea of democracy. In short, in the context of the financial crisis we ask which politico-economic models democracy promoters are advocating: liberal democracy or social democracy; participatory democracy or global democracy?

Why do you think literature on democracy promotion is inadequate in terms of interacting with debates on governance vision?

There has been a long-running problem-solving tendency in the social sciences: the point of social science, it has been believed, has been to contribute towards the development of smoother policy processes and implementation of policy decisions. This tendency has been fed by an objectivist belief in social science which produces 'natural science', like laws and generalisations about what works and what the generalisable effects of specific processes or policies are. Such studies, while not without their uses, have serious limitations: they are unable to deal with the interpretive and dialogical content of concepts in the social world and the subjective experiences and meanings attached to ideas by people and policy makers. They function without an adequate awareness of the importance of conceptual starting points for how we 'perceive' the world and options within it.

PEOD recently organised a major event at Chatham House, London, to discuss the inner workings of democracy promotion, with a focus on opportunities and politico-

Democratising democracy promotion

economic issues. How successful was this event, and what do you feel was achieved?

As the culmination of the project, this was a success. Some of the most well-known and highly-positioned democracy promotion policy makers, as well as many everyday practitioners of democracy aid from development institutes and NGOs, directly engaged with our project findings in the context of the financial crisis and the current challenges of democracy promotion, that come from the Middle East and elsewhere. We have received very good feedback on the event: it has provoked many policy makers to review or recognise their conceptual starting points, or at least acknowledge that concepts and conceptual underpinnings of actions matter. At the same time, the event also pushed academics to seriously consider the everyday constraints within which policy must take place, and useful contacts and links have been developed. To be able to directly feed into and discuss the project findings with key policy makers is a privilege and a challenge that we have valued. It showed that there is a willingness to adopt new kinds of stances, to consider new kinds of paradigm shifts in democracy promotion and that conceptual reflection can feed into this.

Where do you hope to focus your research efforts in the near future?

There is much more to be said about where to go from here. The obsession with governance criteria, and the enforcement of positivist ideas as criteria for foreign policy decision-making and democracy support, need to be studied in more detail. I aim to continue my studies by developing a line of analysis focused on objectivism in global governance, which I have had an interest in for some years. Much more needs to be done to seriously tackle the role of delivery mechanisms, managerial assumptions and techniques, and assessment methods in the delivery of democracy and development aid. Within these aspects of democracy and development aid many implicit assumptions are made and pushed through with significant consequences for the actual practices and power relations of aid, assistance and north-south relationships.

If democracy has taught us anything, it is that there is never one singular voice behind democratic practice. In light of this, a group based at **Aberystwyth University**, UK, is exploring the different interpretations that surround this important term in democracy promotion practice

DEMOCRACY PROMOTION HAS been a major concern across the Western world since the 1990s, as policy makers and leaders have sought to advance and facilitate democratic governance in many non-democratic and authoritarian countries. Yet while democracy has certainly made its mark as a dynamic political tool, the thinkers behind the 'Political Economies of Democratisation' (PEoD) research project based at Aberystwyth University claim that democracy promoters are not doing enough to evaluate the multiple interpretations of the term's meaning and, as a result, are left with a democracy promotion practice with unacknowledged inconsistencies.

Led by Principal Investigator Dr Milja Kurki, PEoD team seeks to understand which models of democracy exactly inform the practice of democracy promotion, democracy support and democracy assistance. Committed to recognition of multiple interpretations of democracy's meaning, Kurki's team highlights the shortcomings of existing conversations on democracy amongst the democracy promotion community and aims to establish how democracy promoters can improve their own as well as recipients' understandings of democracy in the future.

By encouraging fellow academics and practitioners of democracy aid to embrace an open and pluralistic conceptual mindset, the project works to encourage sensitivity to different understandings of the democratic political system, and thus enhance relationships between donors and recipients of democracy aid. The aim is ultimately to strengthen the effectiveness and credibility of democracy promotion as a foreign policy practice by pointing to existing constraints in how democracy, a contested concept, is envisioned by donors.

THE AIMS

At the core of the research is the desire to shed light on the diverse nature of democratic aspirations globally, and on the possible biases

in how democracy promotion is undertaken. Alongside team members based at Aberystwyth and at Helsinki University and the United Nations University, Kurki endeavours to encourage policy makers and leaders to recognise and consciously acknowledge the wider ideological and political dynamics that contribute to their understandings of democracy.

Funded by the European Research Council, the group has three key aims. After highlighting that different types of democracy exist, the first objective of PEoD is to recognise that decision makers and leaders tend to, often quite unknown to themselves, subscribe to a specific set of understandings of democracy, often surrounding the notion 'liberal democracy'. The group has been interested in interrogating how this conceptual focus on promotion of 'liberal democracy' constrains the practices of democracy promoters and their ability to 'see' alternative types of democratic aspiration in target countries (such as desire for social democracy, participatory democracy, global democracy or Islamic democracy). They are also interested in exploring how this notion of liberal democracy is connected with specific interpretations on global economics. Finally, Kurki's team uses these angles of exploration to speculate upon what would happen if alternative interpretations of the concept were employed in democracy promotion and support.

DIFFERENTIATING DEMOCRACY

Throughout her research, Kurki has considered a number of different incarnations of democracy. For instance, by pitching social democratic ideas against liberal democratic notions, Kurki has exposed different dynamics surrounding how the various political groups, but also various democracy promoters, may perceive democracy and as a result the relationship between economics and politics. While liberal democracy prioritises elections and individual rights and leaves the arena of economics outside of the democratic sphere, other models of democracy

PEOD

POLITICAL ECONOMIES OF DEMOCRATISATION

OBJECTIVES

The research is guided by three sets of questions:

- What is the nature of the link between models of democracy and economic discourses/theories? How do economic discourses condition conceptions of democracy? Do particular understandings of democracy entail specific conceptions of economy-state relationship? What kind of politico-economic models of democracy can we delineate?
- Which politico-economic models of democracy do democracy promoters uphold? What are the consequences, and the strengths and weaknesses, of the politico-economic models of democracy that underpin (even if tacitly) democracy promoters' practices? How is the contested nature of democracy taken into account by democracy promoters?
- What policy-making implications can be drawn from the theoretical and empirical analysis of politico-economic models of democracy?

TEAM

The project team consists of six staff: a core team at Aberystwyth University– **Milja Kurki** (Principal Investigator), **Jeff Bridoux** (Postdoctoral Fellow), **Anja Gebel** (PhD student) and **Marcel Van Der Stroom** (Research Assistant) – and visiting Professor **Heikki Patomäki** (Helsinki University) and Research Associate **Christopher Hobson** (UN University Tokyo)

FUNDING

European Research Council

CONTACT

Dr Milja Kurki
Principal Investigator

Department of International Politics
Aberystwyth University
Penglais
Aberystwyth, Ceredigion SY23 3FE, UK

T +44 197 0628639
E mlk@aber.ac.uk

call for different types of democratic practice, with participatory democrats demanding workplace democracy and global democrats voicing what they perceive as a need to democratise the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

The researchers behind PEOd argue that 'liberal democracy' has become the most widely acknowledged reference point in thinking about democracy's meaning, silently becoming a backdrop to democracy promotion practice. The research team argues, however, that in recent years, politico-economic visions of democracy around the globe have diversified. Democracy promotion focused simply on liberal democracy promotion is in danger of not keeping pace with the rate at which new understandings of democracy are emerging and the diverse nature of democratic aspirations amongst democratising communities.

DIALOGUE WITH PRACTITIONERS

As part of the research, the team has engaged in many discussions with a variety of democracy promotion organisations and NGOs internationally. Such dialogues enabled the team to not only fine-tune existing classifications of conceptual thought, but to also confirm which interpretation of democracy has become dominant. It has also facilitated dissemination of the findings. Informing the key donors, the EU and the US alongside international financial institutions (IFIs) and NGOs, with a view to change attitudes and embrace more diverse understandings of democracy, the team has drawn a focus on 'self-reflection'.

In the policy-engagement phase of the project, the aim is not to preach; rather, Kurki endeavours to encourage key figures and policy makers to be more aware of the assumptions they habitually make about democracy's meaning and how this shapes their interactions with democratic forces in target states. As Kurki articulates: "We are not interested in measuring the success or failure of models of democracy per se – we are interested in how specific 'model assumptions' shape democracy promoters' perceptions and approaches".

INTERNATIONAL FINDINGS

In developing democracy promotion practice, Kurki's group has seen potential in exploring not only 'extra-liberal' democratic models, such as participatory democracy and social democracy, but also alternative interpretations of the idea of 'liberal democracy', such as 'reform liberal' notion of democracy. Reform liberal ideals can be seen as highly relevant to current US democracy promotion, for example, as a new

way forward from the Bush administration and the credibility problems brought on by the financial crisis is sought. In the EU, where a rich history of diverse democratic practice exists, more systematic effort to explore the meaning of social democracy or global democracy promotion is also seen as desirable. Speaking of this international organisation, Kurki observes: "There are multiple rich traditions of different types of democratic philosophy and practice to draw on".

OBSTACLES

An organisation's failure to negotiate the complex conceptual terrain surrounding the idea of democracy can be interpreted to be the result of the imposition of an overly 'scientific' attitude to the democracy support field. As a social scientist, Kurki urges the actors with whom she works to reject the perceived need for a definitive answer and celebrate the multiplicity of meaning integral to the concept of democracy.

The reluctance to interrogate multiplicity of meanings and implicit 'habitual' understandings of democracy is not the only obstacle faced by Kurki's team. Discussions with policy makers can be controversial, as there is an aversion to have to think about 'conceptual' underpinnings in a pressurised policy environment. To generate fruitful debate, the team at Aberystwyth has consciously broadened its research sample to include a broad range of global actors, ranging from US State Departments to international NGOs, and has made use of many illustrative examples and specific case studies with which practitioners can connect.

MOVING FORWARD

Thinkers at the PEOd project have worked to fuel discussion and influence practitioners, but the conversations have not finished and it is too early to see how the ideas will impact on concrete policy decisions. It is clear to see that the development of dialogues is at the very core of the team's work and the indications are that this dialogue is bearing fruit. If the team's emphasis on multifaceted meaning of democracy is more systematically taken into account in democracy promotion in the years to come, a more pluralistic and 'democratic' debate on democracy in democracy promotion may become a reality.

All views expressed in the project and this article are those of the project team and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Community or its representatives. The Political Economies of Democratisation is funded by the European Research Council under the European Community's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-13) ERC grant agreement 202 596.

