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My first year of study at the Institute of the Americas has served to further develop my knowledge of the region and the principal themes and debates relevant to its study. One of the most engaging and thought-provoking topics that we have studied is the role of democracy in the Americas and how it has evolved. The study of democracy provides an important insight into how effective democracies are at producing responsive, accountable, and representative governments. That said, a distinction must be made between the academic study of democracy and the democratic principles arbitrarily defined and invoked by the United States government in order to further advance its imperialist objectives. In the Americas, the concept of democracy has often been manipulated and weaponised by the US to delegitimise nations that resist integration into the US sphere of economic and political domination. As such, the primary function of democracy from the US' perspective is not to foster freedom and equality under a government and set of laws which citizens can influence but, instead, to justify US aggression towards countries that pursue independent foreign and economic policies. The implications of imposing a Western-centric conception of democracy – one deeply rooted in Western democratic tradition and, thus, imbued with an inherently biased form of white elitist universalism – serves to further perpetuate the myth of US exceptionalism. As a result, the US itself is not subject to the same level of scrutiny as those within its sphere of influence and begs the question: on what grounds can the US attest to have the authority or legitimacy to make such judgements? To demonstrate the contradictory nature of US democracy and the democratic principles it imposes on Latin American nations to enforce its domination, I will first consider prominent democratic theories concerned with the definition and meaning of the concept of democracy. Secondly, I will discuss the evolution of democratisation in the US and its own adherence to the democratic principles that it itself espouses. Finally, I will analyse instances of US aggression towards Latin American nations and how, in the interest of protecting its economic interests, it has established “relationships of convenience” with reactionary regimes – many of whom were violently right-wing and, in some cases, genocidal – in order to undermine left-wing governments and revolutionary movements. In so doing, I will highlight how vague notions of democracy, arbitrarily defined and advocated by the US, render the concept redundant. Instead, the real purpose of “democracy”, as defined by the US, is to advance capitalist imperialist structures under the guise of “protecting democracy and freedom”.

The contemporary study of democracy has generated manifold definitions of what a democratic polity should embody. While there is no overriding consensus regarding specific conceptual attributes that should be included, efforts to define democracy have tended towards a *procedural* approach as opposed to a *substantive* one. *Procedural* definitions, in contrast to *substantive* definitions that stress the objectives and effectiveness of a regime and the degree to which its citizen's interests are best served, emphasise the process through which representation, accountability, and legitimacy are assured. According to Schumpeter's *thin* procedural definition, democracy is about "free competition for a free vote" and little else (1947, p. 271). In his view, free and fair elections provide the institutional method "for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote" (Schumpeter, 1947, p. 269). However, while free and fair elections grant citizens actual participation in political life, the fundamental political rights and opportunities conferred on them in exchange for their participation in the democratic process are not defined. As a result, the exact nature and value of democracy is unclear. Therefore, free and fair elections must be used in concert with an enforceable set of political rights and opportunities. In contrast to Schumpeter, Dahl contends that political rights and opportunities are "not merely abstract moral obligations" of government but, in fact, "intrinsic elements of democracy" (2000, p. 38). In his view, "a country without these necessary rights and opportunities would as a consequence also lack the fundamental political institutions required for democracy" (Dahl, 2000, p. 38). According to Dahl's theory of polyarchal democracy, "polyarchies are regimes that have been substantially popularised and liberalised, that is, highly inclusive and extensively open to public contestation" (Dahl, 1971 p. 8). For a regime to be considered a polyarchy, Dahl's *thick* procedural definition identifies seven institutions that must be present for a country to be considered democratic: elected officials, free and fair elections, inclusive suffrage, right to run for office, freedom of expression, alternative sources of information and associational autonomy. These institutions serve to establish the rules that govern elements essential to the democratic process, such as elections, in order to ensure that they are, indeed, democratic. Without such institutions and the necessary provisions for an enforceable set of political rights and opportunities, the validity and legitimacy of the democratic process and with it, the democratic quality of the polity itself, is difficult to guarantee.

The process of modern political democratisation first arose in the US following its independence from Great Britain. Predominant democratic features of this process: namely the Declaration of Independence (1776), the US Constitution (1787) and the Bill of Rights (1791),

provided the ideological foundations for the emerging democratic government. Constructed around the idea of popular sovereignty, government was to exist to serve the people – the source of all political power – who would elect representatives to express their will. The Declaration of Independence states that, “all men are created equal” and “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights” – “Life” and “Liberty” (1776). Yet, as Douglass notes in reference to US independence, “the rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence [in the US] ... is shared by you, not by me” (1852, p. 15). Instead, the ratification of the US constitution nationalised slavery and provided it with the necessary protections to guarantee its continuance, while expanding the rights and privileges of white elites (Waldstreicher, 2009, p. 25). Thus, the US Constitution, one of the country’s founding documents, was deeply imbued with racial prejudice and inequality from its inception. The explicit purpose of which, was not to create a free and equal society, but to foster white supremacy in the newly formed nation and deprive racial minorities an equal value of life and liberty.

The end of the American Civil War, ostensibly a watershed moment in the history of US slavery, resulted in the ratification of the so-called Reconstruction Amendments to the US Constitution. Consequently, rights and privileges previously only available to white Americans were to be extended for the first time to non-whites. With the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, slavery was abolished – “except as a punishment for crime” (1865), while the passing of the Fourteenth Amendment prohibited states from depriving any person of “life, liberty, or property, without due process of law” (1868). As a result, African Americans and those formerly enslaved were effectively granted citizenship and equal civil and legal rights. Equally, the Fifteenth Amendment declared that “the right of citizens... to vote shall not be denied... on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude” (1870). Therefore, one could argue that, in accordance with Dahl’s polyarchy, by extending the franchise to African Americans and those formerly enslaved, US democracy went through a substantial transformation in its path towards becoming a “full democracy”. However, as Du Bois notes, the post-reconstruction period resulted in the “systematic disfranchisement of the Negro” (1998, p. 694). As such, African Americans were “kept from voting by force, by economic intimidation, [and] by propaganda designed to lead him to believe that there was no salvation for him in political lines” (Du Bois, 1998, p. 694). In fact, it was not until the *Voting Rights Act* of 1965 that legal barriers that previously prevented non-whites from exercising their right to vote were removed. Thus, prior to the ratification of the *Voting Rights Act*, the seven institutions required for a country to be deemed democratic, as indicated by Dahl, were not

present. Nor were the fundamental political rights and opportunities – described by Dahl as “intrinsic elements of democracy” – fully extended to non-whites (2000, p. 38). Therefore, only after 1965 can the US be considered a “full democracy”. That said, racial minorities continue to be disenfranchised in the US through voter suppression. According to Hajnal, Lajevardi and Nielson, “the proliferation of increasingly strict voter identification laws... have [had a] negative impact on the turnout of racial and ethnic minorities in primaries and general elections” which, ultimately, serve to “distort democracy and reduce the influence of racial minorities” (2017, p. 363). In truth, democracy in the US has existed along racial lines since its inception, utilised at the behest of a white political elite who purposefully restrict racial minorities’ access to it in order to shape the political landscape to their benefit.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, US-Latin American relations were formalised by the US as it sought to establish itself as the hegemonic power in the region. The Monroe Doctrine (1823) held that any attempt by European powers “to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere” would be considered by the US as “dangerous to our peace and safety” and, thus, treated as an unfriendly act towards the US. The later addition of the Roosevelt Corollary (1904) provided the US government with a legal basis to “intervene in flagrant cases of... wrongdoing or impotence” and “exercise... international police power” within the Western Hemisphere whenever US economic interest were threatened. One of the earliest manifestations of intervention by the nascent US empire, the Platt Amendment to the 1901 Cuban Constitution, permitted the US to intervene in Cuban affairs and establish military bases on the island. Ostensibly ratified to safeguard Cuban independence and ensure “the maintenance of a government adequate for the protection of life, property, and individual liberty” the Platt Amendment (1901), in actuality, did little to foster democratisation in Cuba. In 1927, US-backed President, Gerardo Machado, secured the joint nomination of the Liberal, Conservative and Popular parties for his re-election and then later secured an unconstitutional revision of the Cuban constitution in order to extend his time in office. In so doing, as Perez notes, “all semblance of party independence and political competition” ended in Cuba (1993, p. 60). Yet, the US remained silent until a mass strike by opposition groups in 1933 forced Machado to flee the country. Therefore, by failing to ensure party independence and political competition, in accordance with Dahl’s polyarchy, Machado’s nomination for a second term fundamentally undermined the democratic institution of free and fair elections. Thus, Machado’s regime cannot be considered democratic. Yet, notwithstanding Machado’s collusion with other parties, the US government continued to support him. As an editorial in the Nation noted in 1933, Machado had “been maintained in office against the obvious will of

the Cuban people by the financial support of our great [US] corporations” (McGillivray, 2014, p. 248). Thus, it was not Cuban democratisation that the US wished to protect per se, but US corporate interests and Cuba’s incorporation into the US sphere of economic and political domination.

In 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt announced a shift in US foreign policy towards the Americas. Under the auspices of the Good Neighbour policy, the Platt Amendment was repealed and “all unnecessary and artificial barriers and restrictions which... hamper[ed] the healthy flow of trade between the peoples of the American Republics” were abolished (Roosevelt, 1933, p. 132). While the Good Neighbour policy represented a change in US tactics in the region, as Roorda notes, “the objectives of US hegemony in the American republics” remained unchanged (1996, p. 302). Instead of armed intervention, “stable military leaders... were assumed to prepare the ground for cultivating U.S. commercial and strategic interests” (Roorda, 1996, p. 302). As a result, the US established “relationships of convenience” with numerous authoritarian leaders in the region. One such leader, Rafael Trujillo – trained by US marines who occupied the Dominican Republic between 1916 and 1924 – was put in charge of the US created Dominican National Guard. In 1930, backed by US corporate interests, Trujillo eliminated his political rivals to win a rigged presidential election. Thus, the democratic institutions necessary for a country to be deemed democratic, in accordance with Dahl’s polyarchy, were subverted. Yet Trujillo continued with US government support, irrespective of the deeply oppressive and undemocratic nature of his regime. In 1937, during the Haitian Massacre, Trujillo authorised the killing of thousands of Haitian residents working in the Dominican Republic. The event threatened to damage Roosevelt’s Good Neighbour policy by drawing attention to US-backed authoritarian regimes that had developed in the wake of US intervention. However, the Roosevelt administration refrained from publicly criticising Trujillo’s actions in order to maintain the “cooperative Pan-American spirit” that the Good Neighbour policy was supposed to promote (Roorda, 1996, p. 303). In so doing, the US whitewashed a major crime and knowingly backed a fascist leader.

In a similar vein, the US willingly colluded with Guatemalan reactionaries sympathetic to the fascist ideology of the Guatemalan faction of the Spanish Falange in order to facilitate the overthrow of President Jacobo Árbenz. Opposed to the agrarian reforms enacted by the Árbenz administration which curtailed financial concessions previously extended to US cooperate interest, the US government authorized Árbenz’s overthrow. In 1952, backed by the US, Carlos Castillo Armas led a military *coup d’état* against the democratically elected leader. Consequently, a series of brutal dictatorships took hold of the country, radically transforming

society as consecutive authoritarian leaders “launched a wave of repression [against the Indian population] that the United Nations... Truth Commission has characterized as genocide” (Grandin, 2000, p. 233). In truth, the “relationships of convenience” established by the US with authoritarian regimes were essential to the preservation and propagation of US capitalism – irrespective of the wave of state violence and genocide that they caused. “While claiming to be saving democracy”, as Parenti notes, the US has continuously “used fascism to protect capitalism” (1997, p. xiii).

Examples of the contradictory nature of US democracy and the democratic principles that it imposes on other nations to enforce its domination in the Americas are numerous – too many to explore within the word limit. While in the US itself, democracy has purposefully been restricted along racial lines since its inception in order shape the political landscape to the benefit of a white elite. In the Americas, democracy has been weaponised by the US in order to protect its corporate interests and further consolidate the economic and political domination of its empire. In writing this essay, my intention has been not just to demonstrate what I have learnt this year, but to highlight the need for a critical re-evaluation in how we conceive and discuss democracy – an ideal that “under capitalism cannot but remain, restricted, false and hypocritical, a paradise for the rich and a snare and a deception for the exploited, for the poor” (Lenin, 1971, p. 88).

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