# The Democracy Makers: Human Rights and the Politics of Global Order

by Nicolas Guilhot, Columbia University Press, 2005, 288 pp.

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A great deal of intelligence can be invested in ignorance when the need for illusion is deep. Saul Bellow

With reform ferment in the Arab world, an emerging democracy in Iraq, and the colour-coded democratic revolutions in post-communist societies, a hitherto relatively obscure field of global civic activism has acquired political salience and strategic significance. The US administration's renewed commitment to democracy promotion as a foreign policy priority has even prompted a degree of healthy transatlantic competition, if not one-upmanship, in proclaiming democratisation credentials. 'In promoting democracy, the EU is certainly the actor with the best record in the last 10 years,' insists Nicole Gnesotto, director of the EU Institute for Security Studies. [1] 'We're the people who do regime change,' claims Robert Cooper, Director General for External Relations at the EU Council. 'Just look at Turkey or Ukraine,' he argues.

The principal catalyst for this shift was of course 9/11, an event that not only highlighted the democratic deficit and consequent political pathologies within the broader Middle East but also confirmed the limitations of technocratic approaches [2] to political liberalisation, not least in their neglect of its ideological and cultural dimensions. The bipartisan 9/11 Commission, for example, threw its moral weight behind the view that the 'struggle of ideas' is a critical factor in defeating jihadist ideology. 'One of the lessons of the Cold War,' the report argued, 'was that short-term gains in cooperating with the most brutal and repressive governments were too often outweighed by long-term setbacks for America's stature and interests.' Radical Islamists will remain impervious to persuasion, the panel concedes, but stressed that 'it is among the large majority of Arabs and Muslims that we must encourage reform, freedom, democracy, and opportunity.'

The panel's report struck a chord with a variety of commentators. 'We need to set up the sort of intellectual mobilisation we had during the cold war,' wrote *New* 

York Times' columnist David Brooks, [3] 'with modern equivalents of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, to give an international platform to modernist Muslims and to introduce them to Western intellectuals.' The struggle against radical Islam is indeed comparable to democracy's confrontation with radical secular ideologies, declared Olivier Roy, research director at the Paris-based French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS.) For both Islamic fundamentalists and the West's secular revolutionaries writes Roy, a 'quest for mythic, messianic, transnational movements of liberation remains the same, as does the enemy: America's imperial colossus.' [4]

Given this context, one salivates at the promise of an analysis which purports to trace the lineage of current democracy promotion efforts to the cultural Cold War and to reveal the contemporary 'democratization industry' as an engine of regime change. Curiously, at a time when progressives appear to have ceded the cause of global democratisation to conservatives, Nicolas Guilhot's *The Democracy Makers* is not concerned to reclaim those credentials, although he hints at doing so by claiming to reveal the roots of democracy promotion in the politics of anti-communist Left intellectuals. Rather, his complaint is two-fold: democracy promotion agencies, leading global human rights NGOs and even the World Bank have not only appropriated the idealism and 'emancipatory activism' of the Left but they have also professionalised the field, replacing grass-roots organisation and ideological commitment with technical specialisation and professionalism.

For Guilhot, democracy and human rights have no independent existence 'outside a dense network of activists, practitioners, institutions, bureaucrats, documents, monitoring technologies, normative practices, legal doctrines, styles of activism and learned credentials.' It is across such networks that the terrain of global civic activism has been invaded by 'state institutions, international bureaucracies, and professional networks [which] have colonized the turf of social movements.' This encroachment has effectively co-opted successive generations of progressives and reformists, foreclosing genuinely independent and radical strategic options, and effectively consolidating the rule of capital by providing new sources of legitimation and validation for American hegemony. Official, corporate-friendly and pro-American forces (Europe's own extensive democratisation efforts merit no mention) have secured control of ostensibly independent NGOs, trade unions and other civil society forces. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly for post-modernists like Guilhot, they have colonised the discourse since, 'as in any process of colonization, they have appropriated the local resources for themselves:

the languages, the concepts, the strategies, the outlooks' (p. 3.) Consequently, democracy and human rights, 'once weapons for the critique of power, have now become part of the arsenal of power itself.'

His focus is centred on a small group of individual actors deemed responsible for employing "new repertoires" of international politics' or, more specifically, for applying skills and dispositions acquired in one context (anti-Stalinist Left politics) in an altogether radically different institutional context (promoting Reaganite/ neo-conservative foreign policy.) Occupying pivotal positions at the intersections of academia, NGOs, international institutions, and activist movements, such individual actors are, quite literally, 'double agents.' While the book begins with a quote from the novelist John Le Carré, Guilhot does not suggest clandestine or subversive intent (although why then state that the democratisation industry makes possible 'all sorts of interference and occult influence?' p. 30.) Rather, these double agents practice duplicity without deceit. A 'false consciousness' allows them to perform dual roles and straddle different arenas of engagement. In fact, it is their very integrity and genuine commitment to democratic ideals that 'turns activists into double agents' and makes them so well suited to the role. As civil society, grass roots, non-state or NGO representatives, they enjoy the legitimacy required to represent and articulate the interests of civil society to power and to police or constrain such interests. Consequently, such double agents occupy 'the best position to make hegemonic institutions more sensitive to emancipatory claims, while at the same time disciplining or moderating NGOs and activists' (p. 14.)

In this respect, the 'democratization industry' has 'systematized' the previously disparate initiatives undertaken by liberal foundations, labor unions and the Cold War intellectuals around journals like *Encounter*. It occupies a 'new space of politics where knowledge, techniques, networks, ideas, and ideologies are traded and circulated' (p. 18.) Hitherto Leftist or independent intellectuals and activists have been co-opted and incorporated into a discourse and, by extension, a political practice supportive of neo-liberal corporate globalisation. While he would no doubt disavow such an unfashionable formulation, Guilhot's analysis suggests that democracy makers perform a 'transmission belt' function analogous to the Leninist conception of trade unions.

Although he argues that 'democratization is now part of a 'policy of capital,' Guilhot is at pains to present his account as a 'more fine-tuned sociological analysis of the making of this new paradigm of international government' in contrast to

crudely *marxisant* accounts which posit the creation of market democracies as a functional requisite of global capital. This sociological calibration comprises two organisational case studies – of the US-based National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and the World Bank – a few brief pen-portrait biographies of key actors, and an academic literature review of modernisation theory, democratisation studies and international relations which betrays the book's origins as a Ph.D. thesis. The choice of the Bank is a particularly curious case since it has been notoriously averse to democracy promotion, preferring to focus on 'governance,' and promoting markedly technocratic and incremental approaches which invariably stress efficiency above equity. Similarly, although engaged in civil society development, the Bank's commitment to empowerment is defined in ways that preclude challenges to state institutions or actors, demonstrating an aversion to engaging such politicised actors as trade unions or dissidents.

Consequently, Guilhot's depiction of democracy promotion ultimately rests on his case study of the NED. While a plethora of democracy promotion agencies – from the International Foundation for Electoral Systems to Transparency International - are mentioned or alluded to, only the NED is addressed in any detail. An organisation that 'stands out as a pioneering institution,' the NED has, he notes, 'contributed decisively to structure a distinctive field of democracy and human rights, in particular in the way it has assembled a wide-ranging network of political and scientific actors and has fostered the development of a "political science" of democratization.' (p. 32) The NED was, claims Guilhot, 'established in 1983 by a cadre of neo-conservatives close to the Reagan administration' (p. 10.) Yet he concedes elsewhere (p. 83) that NED is a thoroughly bi-partisan organisation and that as early as 1967 it was in fact a Democrat, Florida Congressman Dante Fascell, who first conceived such an organization. Guilhot notes that Lane Kirkland, head of the AFL-CIO union federation and no friend][5] of President Ronald Reagan, was also a principal architect. The significant influence of the German stiftungen or party foundations – as practical example and precedent if not as organisational model – particularly in supporting the democratic transitions in Greece, Portugal and Spain, is another omission, probably because such influences further undermine his organisational caricature.

Although the NED is presented as an ideologically coherent and disciplined agency, Guilhot recognises that it operates principally as a grant-giving body through four autonomous agencies, representing the Democrat and Republican parties' international institutes, business, and organised labor. The notion that such

politically diverse rivals conspire to promote a shared strategic goal of securing American hegemony and acting as a conduit to transmit US foreign policy imperatives through the world of transnational civic activism is risible to anyone even vaguely familiar with the range of views, programs and perspectives they encompass (although Guilhot's approach allows ostensible differences to be readily dismissed as reflecting no more than the 'deep splits that travail even hegemonic 'blocs.')

The argument is occasionally illuminating, as in describing the shift, prompted by disappointment with the Carter Administration, to a commitment to human rights 'based not upon law but upon struggles for rights and civic activism' (p. 82.) This shift spurred the emergence of a transnational civic activism which recognises that human rights can only be sustainably secured through the transformation of regimes and states rather than through appeals to international jurisprudence and a largely impotent or indifferent international community. However, despite its title, The Democracy Makers tells us next to nothing about democracy making, with no description or analysis of NED programs (the bibliography cites only a single NED annual report), or for that matter of any other democracy promotion or human rights group. Guilhot is content to state, but never demonstrate, democracy promotion's function of lubricating forms of regime change conducive to US hegemony and corporate-led globalisation. On the day of writing this review, news breaks of Chinese authorities raiding the premises of a NED-funded human rights monitor shortly before the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights arrived in Beijing to discuss the country's human rights performance with senior Communist Party officials. One searches in vain in Guilhot's book for details of programs or initiatives, leaving the impression that the field is one of abstract discourse rather than one of politically diverse and contentious praxis.

On the rare instance when programmatic interventions do appear, an unrepresentative sample of NED-funded programs is cited, including programs aimed at 'fostering an entrepreneurial culture' and 'easing the internationalization of neo-liberal economics,' which might appear to buttress Guilhot's characterisation of democracy promotion as a facilitator of neo-liberal corporate globalisation. As he appears to have consulted only a single NED annual report, it is probably predictable that he would miss recent NED-funded trade union programs to 'raise awareness of, and spur opposition to, labor rights violations,' projects to create country-based workers' rights networks, enhance union capacity, and develop workers economic literacy.

This may be due to sheer disinterest in the mundane business of grass-roots activism but one suspects it is also because the empirical evidence of labor union capacity building, anti-globalisation handbooks and training programs, and programs promoting democracy, human rights and labor unions in countries like China, would tend to cast doubt on the veracity of the claims that democracy promotion is a form of imperialism and that the differing orientations of the wide range of democracy promotion organisations can be reasonably subsumed under a single ideological rubric.

Although Guilhot contends that the US is the principal purveyor of democracy assistance, by some measures at least that status is claimed by the EU. Significantly, there is not a single reference to the extensive European democracy promotion initiatives – by the EU, national governments and NGOs. Programs of indubitably social democratic provenance would not slot easily into Guilhot's theoretical construct.

Guilhot's disproportionate focus on the intellectual antecedents and on recent academic literature betrays an ideological orientation for which discourse is as significant as praxis, perhaps more so. Guilhot translated Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's book *Multitude* into French and both proffer enthusiastic dust-jacket endorsements. Guilhot's analysis shares their debt to the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. His central contention – that initially progressive, prodemocratisation forces have been neutered and institutionalised in the service of capital – reflects the Deleuze-Guattari conviction that efforts to secure hegemonic control only generate fresh contradictions and paradoxes. Likewise, Hardt and Negri's obsession with 'intellectual, immaterial, and communicative labor power' and corresponding disinterest in material forces of production and the actual practice of politics also helps explain Guilhot's disinterest in what democracy promotion actually entails, and what 'democracy doctors' and 'double agents' actually do.

Guilhot's most interesting chapter examines the genealogy of democracy promotion. He traces the political and intellectual antecedents of those who, in the transition from cold warriors to democracy makers, have sold and 'institutionalized' the international skills and expertise acquired through progressive or reformist politics. In short, 'today's exponents of new international orthodoxies are often former heretics' who have successfully 'converted this critical knowledge into a dominant international expertise.' Yet Guilhot seriously misreads the ideological

provenance of democracy practitioners by glibly suggesting they 'represented a militant, fervently internationalist and revolutionary political culture' (p. 67) and that having been 'trained in the Marxist tradition [as] "professional revolutionaries" was not the worst preparation' for becoming democracy makers in the 1980s (p. 68.)

When he seeks to analyse of 'the social trajectory of the old anti-Stalinist Left and to understand the internal logic of its paradoxical conversion to Reaganism, Guilhot buys into a myth - that an umbilical link exists between the anti-communist Left and contemporary neo-conservatism (this myth remains stubbornly resilient despite being consistently refuted [6].) In identifying the intellectual antecedents of current democracy promoters to the 1930s' anti-communist Left around Partisan Review and The New Leader, Guilhot overstates his case. A number of notable individuals shared part of the transition from '30s anti-communism to Cold War cultural politics and mainstream social democracy. Such activist intellectuals as Sidney Hook, Melvin Lasky, Irving Kristol and Max Shachtman acquired political maturity and significance with the outbreak of the Cold War and the attempt by anticommunist liberals and social democrats (not 'Left-wing intellectuals') to establish a 'democratic international' in the shape of the Congress for Cultural Freedom to counter the Soviets' ideological offensive. But only Kristol made the further step to neo-conservatism and he was notably sceptical of democracy promotion (see below.) And while he is correct to note that some former Shachtmanites, inspired by the CCF example and/or a progressive variant of internationalism, did become prominent democracy promoters, not least within the ranks of the AFL-CIO, only a conspiratorial preconception could lead one to suggest that such politics informs or determines the labyrinthine and highly-contested field of democracy promotion.

Guilhot describes the Congress for Cultural Freedom as 'an early example of these ambiguous crusades': ostensibly radical and independent but objectively supportive of a 'hegemonic agenda.' But while otherwise highly sensitive to the contexts of politics, and adamant in insisting that discourse shifts according to the site or arena of struggle, he is surprisingly disinterested in the context of the origins and evolution of the Congress. Far from a manifestation of a politically aggressive 'cold war project,' it was in many respects a belated and defensive initiative. The CCF was established not to advance but to resists a 'hegemonic agenda' – that of Soviet communism. While Hook, Lasky, Arthur Koestler and others were conceiving the Congress, Willi Munzenberg,[7] Otto Katz and other Comintern functionaries already had a 30-year start in this particular war of ideas, having honed their skills

creating front organisations, manipulating fellow-travellers and pursuing deeply effective entrism across an impressive array of institutions, from European labor parties and unions to Hollywood studios and the US State Department.[8] As elsewhere, Guilhot's research is too superficial to elicit genuine insight, showing little familiarity with the growing literature on the cultural Cold War [9] beyond the tendentious work of Frances Stonor Saunders.[10]

Curiously, Guilhot is dismissive of the Congress – 'this democratic crusade was a failure' – while crediting it with inspiring current global democratisation initiatives. Others more familiar with the work of the Congress credit it with transforming the climate of opinion, not only amongst neutralist or fellow-travelling intellectual circles during the Cold War, but also with helping to secure the victory of social democratic and 'revisionist' forces on the European Left, particularly in the UK, in a victory which even hostile commentators [11] credit with facilitating the demise of 'pure' socialism and, ultimately, the ideological triumph of Blairism. Hugh Wilford notes that the Congress 'did not make non-communist left British intellectuals into Cold Warriors, revisionists or Atlanticists. They already were these things.' [12] Nevertheless, he ultimately concludes, in creating a new intellectual-cultural milieu which legitimised and validated certain ideas in public discourse, it was genuinely hegemonic. [13]

A continuum from the anti-Stalinist left to current neo-conservatism is insinuated but hardly demonstrated. There is indeed a fascinating story to be told here. One might even imagine some of Guilhot's democracy practitioners jumping at the chance to claim exalted parentage from such celebrated intellectuals as Sidney Hook. Sadly, Guilhot fails to join the dots, other than indicating interpersonal links, using brief pen-portraits of a few individuals – including Jeanne Kirkpatrick, former US Ambassador to the UN, NED president Carl Gershman and political scientists like Seymour Martin Lipset. His treatment of the intellectual trajectory of contemporary democracy practitioners is unfortunately marred by a tendency to generalise from the particular. While certain key practitioners within US democracy promotion groups may have served their political apprenticeship on the anti-communist Left, or at least identify with that lineage, they are by no means representative of the diverse range of groups, orientations and traditions that comprise the democracy promotion community. Intellectual cold warriors may have once influenced the leadership cohorts of organised labor. Not now. Across the broad swathe of democracy promotion organisations, from the International Republican Institute to George Soros's Open Society Institute, few practitioners

will have heard of Max Shachtman or Scoop Jackson, let alone been influenced by them.

Guilhot also particularises from the general. He confers on a small number of individuals, representative status as bearers of broader political or intellectual trends. This is particularly misleading when ideological designations are so carelessly applied. The appellation 'neo-conservative' is fast losing descriptive let alone analytical value and this account is as guilty as most others in employing it in a cavalier fashion. Guilhot uses Reaganite and neo-conservative interchangeably, for example, and appears to believe that neo-conservatives are not only a monolithic force (recent schisms over Iraq suggest otherwise) but have always been steadfast democracy promoters. Not so. Some neo-conservatives have been more comfortable with classically Realist views on foreign policy and particularly suspicious of democracy promotion. Neo-conservative 'godfather' Irving Kristol described the proposal to establish the NED as 'one of the most inane foreign policy initiatives in living memory' which 'will inevitably abort.' [14]

'One cannot but admire the rough-hewn simplicity of Dr. Adler's argument,' said Bertrand Russell, in a famous rejoinder to classicist Mortimer J. Adler. For all its efforts at conceptual nuance, its declared sensitivity to contradiction and paradox, and eschewing of overly instrumentalist or functionalist theories, Guilhot's arguments are ultimately crude. He knows his Gramsci and Dezalay well enough to insist on the autonomy of the political and the 'materiality' of ideas. But those determinist and reductionist instincts are so darn irrepressible. Modernisation theory, we are told, was merely a 'political weapon' (p. 108) in the Cold War and the whole field of democratisation studies amounts to 'devising technologies of smooth regime change' (p. 26) to facilitate neo-liberal economic transformation. Democratisation studies are no more than the 'academic reflection of emerging technologies for the global administration of political regimes, thereby generating a 'certain type of knowledge allowing for the active management of democratic transformations' (p. 223.) From Chile to South Africa, Poland to Iraq, democratisation is no longer the result of human volition. Dismissing the efforts of activists, Guilhot's technocratic democracy maker appears as the only active agency with everyone else reduced to the role of Althusserian träger, mere bearers of historical forces.

An old joke has it that after yet another defeat by the Israelis, the Egyptian army's chiefs of staff conclude that it's all the fault of their Soviet advisers. Well, they had advised them to retreat into their own territory and wait for winter. As with

military strategy, political strategies are not easily transferable or reproducible. Yet this account informs us that democracy promotion programs are designed for 'conforming foreign political systems to US national interests by exporting political, legal, economic and social technologies' (p. 79.) Democracy promotion ultimately amounts to a form of imperialism based on the 'exportation of a *specific mode of production of policy knowledge*.' Similarly, the West's tragically belated and reluctant nation-building interventions in the likes of Bosnia, Kosovo and Sierra Leone are exposed as 'an instrumentalization of human rights for the *direct imperial control* of foreign regimes' (p. 79, emphasis added.)

Guilhot's individual mistakes – Robert Kagan is not a Realist (p. 26), the CIA historian is Michael Warner not Werner (p. 38), Nathan Glazer had no institutional affiliation with the American Enterprise Institute (p. 66), the international arm of the AFL-CIO is the Solidarity Center, not the Free Trade Union Institute (p. 85) – are perhaps more forgivable than the distortions resulting from squeezing such a vitally topical and strategically important field of inquiry through such a narrow ideological prism.

This book will provide some pseudo-academic legitimation for those who follow *Libération* in characterising one of our time's great causes as merely the 'missionary democracy' of the USA. Thankfully, others appear more willing to depart from Left Bank orthodoxy. A new generation of radicals and social democrats, facing the threat of a fresh totalitarian ideology, has begun to shed certain illusions and recognise democracy promotion as a compelling and progressive imperative rather than a symptom of the hegemony of Empire. [15] The empirically-rich and theoretically-informed primer on democratisation that could inform and inspire this next generation remains to be written.

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#### Notes

- [1] Gnesotto 2005.
- [2] The European Union's Barcelona Process committed a billion euros a year to its Euro-Mediterranean neighbours with negligible results in terms of liberalising Arab polities. Contrary to EU orthodoxy, democratisation will not arise from a blend of free trade, technocratic modernisation and improved governance.
- [3] Brooks 2004.
- [4] Quoted in Democracy Digest, July 29, 2004, Volume 1, Number 13.
- [5] See Puddington 2005, especially chapter 5.
- [6] Muravchik 2003; Boot 2004; Friedman 2005.
- [7] McMeekin 2004.

- [8] Radosh and Radosh 2005.
- [9] See, for example, Scott-Smith 2002; Krabbendam and Scott-Smith (eds.), 2003; Caute 2005.
- [10] Saunders 2000. The assessment of the Saunders book by Walter Laqueur 'political bias and primitive moralizing, unencumbered by knowledge of and interest in the historico-political context of the organization' will strike a chord with readers of the book under review. See Laqueur 1999-2000.
- [11] Wilford 2003.
- [12] Wilford 2003, p. 204.
- [13] Wilford 2003, p. 290.
- [14] Coleman 1989, p. 246.
- [15] Berman 2005; Cushman (ed.) 2005.