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## Transnational Democracy in an Insecure World

JOHN S. DRYZEK

**ABSTRACT.** If global governance is consequential, its legitimacy ought to rest on principles of democracy. However, unilateral action such as that taken by the USA in Iraq and elsewhere has hurt the most visible such project, cosmopolitan democracy, by undermining its liberal multi-lateralist foundations. Other democratic projects have not been quite so badly damaged, in particular, the idea of a transnational discursive democracy grounded in the engagement of discourses in international public spheres. The discourse aspects of international affairs are important when it comes to issues of war and peace, conflict and security, no less so here than elsewhere. Democracy faces competition in the informal realm of discourses from both the “war of ideas” and “soft power” projections, but can hold up well against them, and can more easily pass the test of reflexivity. Discursive democracy can help constitute effective responses to global insecurity.

*Keywords:* • Cosmopolitanism • Discursive democracy • Global governance • International public spheres • Soft power

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### Global Democracy and Its Setbacks

The past two decades have seen increasing interest in extending democracy into an international system long inhospitable to democratic projects beyond the level of the nation-state. The main justification is that systems and institutions of global governance have become increasingly consequential, and that, just like any system of governance, their legitimacy ought to rest on democratic principles (Patomäki, 2003: 348). While a number of proposals have been made, by far the most prominent and well-developed approach is that of cosmopolitan democracy (Archibugi and Held, 1995; Archibugi et al., 1998; Held, 1995).

Cosmopolitan democracy favors an international system more densely populated by institutions that both secure order and are democratically accountable in a direct fashion – not just at one remove, through any accountability of states that

take part in such arrangements. Such institutions might include, to begin with, regional bodies such as the European Union, a United Nations Security Council that is more inclusive and effective, international courts (such as the International Criminal Court), cross-national referenda, and international military authorities. Institutions would exist at multiple levels, not necessarily subordinate to higher levels as in a federal system. They would, however, be subordinate to a common legal framework, “a system of diverse and overlapping power centres shaped by democratic law” (Held, 1995: 234). The project looks forward ultimately to an international legal system enforcing democratically determined laws, a global parliament to hold all other global institutions to account, and international control of a military that would in the long run yield demilitarization (cosmopolitans can accept the distant and utopian character of these latter aspirations). It is distinguished by “its attachment to the centrality of the rule of law and constitutionalism as necessary conditions for the establishment of a more democratic world order” (McGrew, 2002: 276). David Held, the most prominent cosmopolitan democrat, also anticipates an interventionist and transnationally social-democratic economic policy, matching economic globalization with “global social integration and a commitment to social justice” (2004: 56) under the auspices of cosmopolitan institutions.

Much ink has been spilled debating the pros and cons of the cosmopolitan model (see, for example, Holden, 1999). I intend here no comprehensive accounting of these debates or critique of cosmopolitanism. Instead, I suggest a shift in emphasis in transnational democracy in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the Iraq war of 2003, which have set cosmopolitanism on the back foot. This alternative highlights the engagement of discourses in transnational public spheres; its roots can be found in Habermas (1996, 2001), Bohman (1998), Cochran (1999), and Dryzek, (1999, 2000: 115–39). This alternative is sometimes associated with an emphasis on the role of civil society in international politics (Thompson, 1999), but its discursive aspects can transcend civil society, which is just one source of communicative power.<sup>1</sup> In addition, civil society has many forms and meanings, some of which are highly problematic from any democratic point of view, for example when it is invoked in support of neoliberal governance (Chandhoke, 2003; Heins, 2004).

Transnational discursive democracy rests on the notion that discourses and their interactions are consequential in producing international outcomes through their influence upon and constitution of actors. The democratic question then becomes how dispersed, critical, and competent influence can be established, bearing in mind the oppressive and constraining form that discourses can also take. Diffuse and decentralized control does not of itself signal democracy; perfect markets are decentralized, but not democratic, as is perfect Hobbesian anarchy. Followers of Michel Foucault point to the degree people apparently acting freely may, in truth, be under the sway of dominant and oppressive discourses. Thus decentralized control is only democratic to the degree it involves communicative action by critical and competent individuals, acting as citizens and not as consumers, enemies, or automatons.

Transnational democracy of this sort is not electoral democracy, and it is not institutionalized in formal organizations. Instead, it is to be found in communicatively competent, decentralized control over the content and relative weight of globally consequential discourses, which in turn resonates with theories of deliberative democracy stressing communicative action in the public sphere

(Chambers, 2003). The public sphere encompasses social movements and media communications, and can reach into corporations, states, and intergovernmental organizations. It is an informal, communicative realm that can be contrasted with the constitutional exercise of authority (though it can, of course, influence the latter).

Cosmopolitanism and discursive democracy are not necessarily direct competitors, and perhaps each has its niche. However, I suggest that the struggle for transnational democracy is now most fruitful in the informal arena of the engagement of discourses – if only because the more formal route has been blocked. In the informal realm, discursive democracy's opponent is not cosmopolitanism, but rather the "war of ideas" and "soft power" projections, both of which I will discuss in due course. I will argue that in the post-Iraq world, the more informal discursive approach has enhanced plausibility in comparison to the formal apparatus central to the cosmopolitan model – though both are troubled by more centralized and hierarchical responses to international insecurity.

The US-led invasion of Iraq was a setback for the cosmopolitan project because it undermined the liberal multilateralism on which cosmopolitanism is founded. The invasion was justified by American neoconservatives in democratic terms, in the expectation that liberal democracy could be transplanted into Iraq, which would then become a more peaceful actor on the international stage. But neoconservatives have no interest in democracy above or across the nation-state, and the unilateral military means they prescribe are decidedly antidemocratic. Held (2003) condemned the war as a "return to the state of nature" (in Hobbesian terms), producing a "crisis of legitimacy" for existing international institutions, which are "cast aside . . . if they fail to fall in line with the interests of the most strong." Held's (2003) response to both 9/11 and the Iraq war is to reaffirm the need for "an alternative strategy for a rule-based and justice-oriented, democratic multilateral order." But he allows that this cosmopolitan alternative is "temporarily lost from view. We must fight to regain it."

Now, a cosmopolitan optimist might argue (contra Held) that US unilateralism provokes a multilateralist reaction on the part of the rest of the world. After all, the Kyoto Protocol on climate change came into force and the International Criminal Court was established despite US opposition. However, a cosmopolitan democracy with the sole superpower standing outside and persistently trying to undermine it would be very fragile, and very distant from the kind of international order sought by cosmopolitan democrats themselves.

I will argue that transnational discursive democracy has not been so devastated by these events as cosmopolitanism. Its impact on the actions of states is impeded by polarization of the world by terror and counterterror, its discursive space is invaded by associated "wars of ideas," and its normative commitments are attacked by unilateralists contemptuous of international public opinion (Kaldor, 2003: 148). However, I will argue that the discourse dimension remains important when it comes to contemporary international security and conflict, and that this realm has also witnessed developments conducive to more decentralized and competent influence in the engagement of discourses.

Exploration of the prospects for transnational discursive democracy requires openness to the different ways democracy can be practiced in an international system in which formal institutions are either resistant to democratization, undermined by unilateralism, or both. One could argue the case for such a democracy on purely normative grounds, but any such case would only have real-world bite to

the extent it could build upon existing discourse aspects of international affairs. My argument will therefore have empirical as well as normative aspects. The empirical components come largely from constructivist accounts of the way key aspects of the international system are socially constructed, stressing the role of discourses in this construction. The normative aspect comes from discursive democratic accounts associated with critical theory; the work of Habermas and others increasingly looks to the international level as the crucial test for this kind of theory (Scheuerman, 2006). Constructivism is sometimes accused of emphasizing structural determinism at the expense of agency of the sort that interests critical theorists (Checkel, 1988: 325). However, constructivism and critical theory are ultimately compatible because "Constructivism problematizes both agents and structures, it explores the dynamics of change as well as the rhythms of stasis, it calls into question established understandings of world politics, it is analytically open not closed. For these reasons it is necessarily 'critical' in the sense meant by Habermas" (Price and Reus-Smit, 1998: 288).

The two traditions use the term "discourse" somewhat differently. For constructivists, and especially post-structuralists, discourses are mostly constraining, constituting actors in particular (to post-structuralists, oppressive) ways. For Habermasian critical theorists, in contrast, "discourse" entails freedom rather than constraint, a realm of competent intersubjective communication. To make matters clear, when I use the term "discourse" it is in the constructivist sense, and when I use the term "discursive" it is in the critical theory sense, especially when paired in "discursive democracy" (except when I refer to Bourdieu's "discursive field" concept, which is closer to a constructivist position). Discourses in the constructivist sense do, however, provide the grist for discursive democracy.

So how important are the discourse-related aspects of international affairs, especially when it comes to international security issues? Furthermore, are they amenable to democratic control?

### **The Informal Basis of International Democracy**

Those who have recognized the informal aspects of international affairs emphasize the roles played by language, norms, ideas, culture, and (especially) discourses. A discourse is a shared set of concepts, categories, and ideas that provides its adherents with a framework for making sense of situations, and which embodies judgments, assumptions, capabilities, dispositions, and intentions. It provides basic terms for analysis, debate, agreement, and disagreement. Its language enables individuals who subscribe to it to compile the bits of information they receive into coherent accounts organized around storylines that can be shared in intersubjectively meaningful ways. Discourses construct meaning, distinguish agents from those who can only be acted upon, establish relations between actors and others, delimit what counts as legitimate knowledge, and define common sense (Milliken, 1999). Discourses are a matter of practice as well as words, for actions in the social realm are always accompanied by language that establishes the meaning of action. Discourses can embody power in that they condition the norms and perceptions of actors, suppressing some interests while advancing others. Important discourses in the contemporary international system include market liberalism, sustainable development, human rights, and Islamic radicalism. Discourses such as market liberalism and sustainable development facilitate and help constitute "governance without government" (Rosenau and

Czempiel, 1992) in the international system; discourses such as Islamic radicalism are more disruptive (though market liberalism is also quite capable of causing disruption).

The key empirical evidence on which transnational discursive democracy rests can be found in histories that trace changes in practice to shifts in discourse. For example, Litfin (1994) explains the Montreal Protocol for the protection of the ozone layer in terms of a shift to a discourse of precaution, which received impetus from the rhetorical force of the idea of an "ozone hole" over Antarctica. Torgerson (1995) traces the widespread impacts of the global shift from a discourse of limits and survival in the 1970s to one of sustainable development in the 1980s. However, the degree to which such accounts support the idea of a democratic engagement of discourses rests on the interpretation of immanent possibilities informed by normative political theory. (The same might be said of cosmopolitan and other liberal multilateralist projects, though they would deploy different sorts of evidence.) In these interpretations, empirical illustrations can be brought to bear concerning the role of diverse actors and transnational public spheres in affecting the weight of different discourses.

The more basic empirical evidence supporting the importance of discourses could also be deployed by rival nondemocratic projects, such as the "war of ideas" and "soft power," which I will discuss later. This evidence can also underwrite a more skeptical attitude to transformation possibilities. Some analysts who have deployed the discourse concept, especially in international relations, see discourses as pervasive, insidious, and encompassing, conditioning, and generally disciplining those enmeshed within them (for example, George, 1994; Walker, 1993). This attitude accompanies a postmodern desire to destabilize established understandings of the international system (such as realism and liberal multilateralism) and to expose the way such understandings have been constructed to embody power and oppression. Postmodernists are alive to the constitutive influence of discourses, but reluctant to say what, if anything, can be done to reshape discourses (see, for example, George, 1994), let alone to promote the kind of diffuse and conscious reshaping that transnational discursive democracy would require. Beyond paying homage to "resistance," practices that might change the pattern of discourses for the better have generally been neglected by international relations discourse analysts (for discussion of this omission, see Neumann, 2002).

While allowing that discourses can have a pervasive disciplining character, discursive democracy treats them as potentially subject (if rarely simply) to influence from the reflective choices of human agents, which can be arrayed more or less democratically. Indeed, it is because of the potential for such choices to become consequential in the contemporary world, including the international system, that the extent of the importance of discourses for intelligent action becomes apparent. The possibilities for such action are actually enhanced to the degree postmodernists are right that we are witnessing the dissolution of meta-narratives that defined the modern era. In short, discursive democracy rests on a tension between two related phenomena: first, the importance of discourses in ordering the world (and its conflicts); and, second, the potential for the structure of discourses itself to become the target of decentralized reflection and conscious action.

The tension here arises because if discourses were readily manipulable by human agents, then they would lack any independent ordering force of their own. But they are not manipulable at will. Human action takes place within the context

that discourses provide: discourses themselves both enable and constrain actions.<sup>2</sup> Actions can draw selectively on existing discourses, and so subtly affect the content and relative weight of discourses (Neumann, 2002). To use the language of Bourdieu (1993), the structure of a discursive field constrains the positions that can be taken by actors, but is itself reproduced by subsequent actions and interactions. Most actions and practices simply reinforce the prevailing constellation of discourses – and, according to Walker (1993), this includes the effects of the practice of international relations as a discipline. However, reflective action can sometimes bend it in different directions (especially in times of crisis). As Wendt (1999: 375) argues, the system of states is increasingly able to secure “critical self-reflection” in “the public sphere of international society, an emerging space where states appeal to public reason to hold each other accountable.” Such appeals and critiques can also be made by non-state actors.

Other constructivist analysts have recognized possibilities for competent decentralized influence over the content and weight of discourses (Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001: 400). Think, for example, of anti-globalization movements in recent years. From Seattle in 1999 to Genoa to Melbourne to Evian in 2003, economic summits such as meetings of the G8, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and World Economic Forum (WEF) are now routinely accompanied by carnivals and protests. The protestors themselves are part of a far larger transnational public sphere questioning economic globalization. The protestors and critics were at first widely ridiculed by governmental leaders and the mainstream media alike for being a disparate bunch with no common program, only a range of contradictory concerns. These concerns included the protection of the environment and jobs in the developed world, an end to the exploitation of cheap labor in the third world, and better terms of trade for the developing world. But the protestors and critics were successful in getting a range of issues on to the agenda of these summits and the international organizations and governments that attend them. As Joseph Stiglitz (2002: 20) puts it: “The protests have made government officials and economists around the world think about alternatives to the Washington Consensus policies as the one true way for growth and development.” Indeed, the critics’ lack of a coherent program from the outset was actually a sign of the degree to which they were participants in the decentralized construction of a counter-discourse to oppose global market liberalism. So from the point of view of more diffuse and democratic control over the global constellation of discourses, this absence of a program was actually a positive sign. As Young (1997) points out, difference can be a resource when it comes to democratic communication.

Eventually, the protestors were joined by Stiglitz (2002), former Chief Economist at the World Bank, and before that Chair of President Clinton’s Council of Economic Advisors. But even as one of their leaders he felt he could not bend the market liberal discourse that held them in its grip. Only when he left those organizations could he join the discursive struggle against market liberalism. As Stiglitz himself recognizes, the ground for this intervention was prepared by all those who had participated in protests against globalization, joined nongovernmental organizations that questioned market liberalism and its international institutions, wrote critical pieces in newspapers, magazines, or on the Internet, or even just participated in critical talk about the global political economy. The cumulative weight of small interventions in the discursive field can be substantial – which is just how it should be in a democratic world of discursive reconstruction. It may take



substantial time and effort for this weight to be felt, but as Max Weber put it long ago, politics is often about the slow boring of hard boards. That is especially true in the international system; think, for example, of the number of years it has taken for the Kyoto Treaty on climate change to receive ratification from a significant set of states. So discursive democracy is by no means unique in this respect.

The anti-globalization example might suggest that transnational discursive democracy succeeds to the extent it renders international institutions such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and WTO more directly accountable to the global citizenry and therefore more truly cosmopolitan – a further illustration of the complementary character of the two democratic projects. However, such an interpretation would not be quite on target, because transnational discursive democracy can take effect in the absence of any formal international institutions, simply by affecting the decisions of states with the capacity to make authoritative decisions within their jurisdictions, corporations, and the diffuse governance mechanisms stressed by Rosenau and Czempiel (1992). So international public spheres associated with the rights of indigenous peoples, global justice, or opposition to bio-piracy take effect largely in the policies of states and corporations. Claims for transnational discursive democracy would stand even in the absence of any formal international institutions. Transnational discursive democracy is not, then, just another twist to liberal multilateralism, for it does not rest on the constitutionalization of the international system.

### **Discourses of War and Peace**

How does recognition of the informal discourse side of international affairs play out when it comes to issues of war and peace, conflict and security? What scope is there for democratization here? At one level this is an area where formal sources of order remain ubiquitous, especially when hierarchically organized states and their militaries confront one another. But at another level, informal discursive coordination is important here too, even under a realist understanding of international relations. Realism assumes that the international system is basically an anarchy, a potentially hostile environment in which violence is an ever-present possibility, such that states must maximize their strategic situation vis-a-vis their potential adversaries. However, as Wendt (1992) argues, “anarchy is what states make of it.” That is, the particular kind of anarchy which realists see as an immutable feature of international affairs is, in truth, immutable only so long as key policymakers believe it to be the case. Hobbesian anarchy is itself a social construction (though anarchy as simply the absence of a state-analog at the system level is a basic fact of the system). The recent undermining of the presumption of Hobbesian anarchy by neoconservatives in the US government who believe that removing dictatorial governments will lead to a more peaceful system confirms Wendt’s insight, if from a surprising direction.

Realism grounded in Hobbesian anarchy is, then, a discourse, and as such is sustained by the understandings of the actors participating in it. Realism has always had competition from other discourses – originally, from liberal idealism and multilateralism, and more recently (in the USA) from a neoconservative view that believes anarchy is not inevitable, but can be tamed either by conquering or frightening undemocratic states opposing the hegemon.

Others present now include several discourses that are “civilizational” in Huntington’s (1996) sense. These would include Huntington’s own “Atlanticist”



interpretation of the liberal discourse that helps define the West (but should not be treated as universal); the extension of the “Asian values” discourse into international relations in Southeast and East Asia; and Islamic radicalism. These last two do not accept the standards and practices defined in discourses with western origins, be they realist, liberal multilateralist, or neoconservative.

Networks such as al-Qaeda can both draw sustenance from and contribute to the discourse of Islamic radicalism, which can motivate individual Islamists to seek out the network, such that it consequently has no need to recruit (Burke, 2003: 6). Military success against al-Qaeda in tangible, physical terms may actually strengthen the discourse that remains. Such attempted destruction on the part of its adversaries is very much part of this discourse’s own script. For massive military retaliation against the Islamic world is what Bin Laden hoped for, in order to reveal the West in all its oppressiveness and the treachery of the governments of Islamic states in all their obsequiousness. These events were seen to be necessary in order to strengthen the discourse, so as ultimately to move the vast majority of Muslims to rise up against the West and their own corrupt rulers. Of course, this has not happened. But the discourse can still be a major nuisance, even well short of such apocalyptic scenarios.

The general point here is that the realm of global security issues is home to a constellation of discourses, some of which seek to order the system and some of which seek to disrupt it. Intelligent action in this setting just has to be sensitive to these discourses and how they operate and relate to one another. I will now explore and compare three ways that this territory can be negotiated. The first is unilateral, treating discourse contests as a “war of ideas” organized centrally. I will argue in the next section that such an approach is likely to prove counter-productive – though it does have the effect of threatening the prospects for transnational discursive democracy (paralleling the way unilateral military action diminishes the prospects for cosmopolitan democracy). The second approach makes a substantial concession to multilateralism in deploying “soft power,” but suffers a number of paradoxes in its application. The third approach is discursively democratic, taking aim at a system of global insecurity rather than a particular disruptive discourse within that system.

### **Unilateral Discourse Manipulation: A “War of Ideas” and Its Limits**

There are historical examples of reasonably successful centralized discursive manipulation in the international system, both unilateral and multilateral. For example, the global rise of market liberalism owes much to the ideological reorientation of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund in 1981 under prompting from the Reagan administration (Stiglitz, 2002: 13). In 1987, the publication of the Brundtland Report to the United Nations, *Our Common Future*, confirmed that henceforth sustainable development was to be the dominant discourse in international environmental affairs (though Brundtland did not actually invent the idea of sustainable development, which had been stirring for several years). Weldes (1996) argues that US policymakers constructed the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 in order to consolidate the identity of the USA in its leadership of the free world. Neumann (2002) shows how political leaders could establish new understandings in Norwegian–Russian relations, and so overcome bureaucratic resistance in their own government. More generally, symbol manipulation has long been recognized as a staple of elite political action (Edelman, 1971).

The examples of market liberalism, the Cuban missile crisis, and Norwegian–Russian relations suggest that leaders of states can sometimes manipulate the content and weight of discourses successfully. However, there are difficulties in achieving the requisite subtlety. Critics of central planning from Friedrich A. von Hayek (1948) to James C. Scott (1998) have pointed out that the view from the top generally means simplifying complex social systems. One pervasive simplification treats engagement across discourses as a “war of ideas.” Such a “war of ideas” can be approached instrumentally through propaganda offices, through planting stories in the press, through the cultivation of sympathetic reporters, publications, and television networks, through staging events for television, and so forth.

The *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, published by the White House in September 2002, declared that “We will also wage a war of ideas against international terrorism” (2002: 6). As US Secretary of State Colin Powell put it: “we’re selling a product. That product we are selling is democracy” (cited in Van Ham, 2002: 250). Part of the idea is to “rebrand Osama bin Laden as a mass murderer to millions of Muslims,” as *Time* magazine put it, in referring to the administration’s employment of a leading figure from the world of advertising (cited in Van Ham, 2002: 249). The clash of discourses is therefore treated like the competition between products in a marketplace, to which corporate public relations can be applied. Success here would dramatically reduce the maintenance costs to the USA of a world order to its liking. But the very fact that the USA is trying to legitimate a wholly new world order means the challenge is enormous.

James Thomson, President of the Rand Corporation, has bemoaned the fact that in its “war of ideas” the Bush administration effectively reached the people of the USA, but failed to convince the rest of the world (*Guardian Weekly*, 2002: 14). However, this failure is not contingent, a result merely of a poor communications strategy. Rather, it follows directly from the communicative aspect of globalization, which means audiences cannot be segmented and given different information and rhetoric. When the president addresses the US media or Congress, he is heard immediately throughout the world. Messages that work so well in one location and are instrumental to, say, re-election may have quite different effects in other locations. So when President George W. Bush denounced the evil he saw abroad in the world and the perfidy of erstwhile allies, and announced US resolve to act against evil, the message played well at home. Public support for his presidency increased in the face of perceived threat. But at the same time, the rhetoric raised the stakes in the global struggle. It is in the interests of many US actors inside government to play up the threat of Islamic terror – thus making its discursive presence more consequential. A cynic might discern here more than a faint echo of George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: a government that highlights enemies in order to secure its hold over its own people. What is different is that in our globalizing world, this communicative strategy has discursive consequences beyond domestic borders – consequences which may be the exact opposite of those ostensibly sought.

If an established state hierarchy does recognize the importance of the discursive aspects of the world, it is most likely, then, to try to negotiate them through discourse engineering of the “war of ideas” sort. But while unilateral discourse manipulation is possible, the simplistic terms in which it proceeds can also, unintentionally, help to bolster the fortunes of opponents. In the case of the Iraq war, this situation was not helped by the loss of credibility on the part of governments that misled their publics (for example, through claims about the

presence of weapons of mass destruction and links between particular regimes and terrorist organizations), that unleashed spin doctors to rewrite reports that unsettled the intelligence agencies that originally produced them, that legitimated oppressive behavior by other states if it could be portrayed as part of the war on terrorism, and that tried to prevent criticism by questioning the patriotism of critics or even by casting them as apologists for terrorists.

### **“Soft Power”: Not Much Better**

At the discourse level, US actions and communications since 9/11 have often served to alienate erstwhile friends and solidify the opposition of enemies, thus producing exactly the opposite of the safety and security that is ostensibly the main concern of US policymaking. Many US-based opponents of the unilateralism with which the George W. Bush administration engaged the world at both military and discourse levels favor a more solicitous approach with an important discourse aspect. The key concept here is “soft power”: the ability to induce others to share one’s values and goals, to attract them to one’s viewpoint, and to persuade them to engage in supportive actions. The concept is associated in particular with Joseph Nye (2002, 2004).

Soft power is not necessarily a more multilateralist option than the war of ideas. As Reus-Smit (2004: 65) points out, neoconservatives in the USA can treat it as a supplement to their promotion of a particular agenda of liberal democracy and capitalism via the exercise of hard power. Moreover, the combination of a war of ideas and soft power could be interpreted in good-cop/bad-cop terms, as complementary aspects of a strategy to achieve discourse hegemony – however odd this might look to proponents of the two doctrines.

Soft power operates at the level of both cultural dissemination and public policy. Nye himself stresses the cultural aspect when he discusses the impact of Hollywood films, other products of popular culture, and the content of the Internet. He also emphasizes the role of the US higher education system (which hosts students from many countries). At the public policy level, Nye disdains propaganda on the grounds that it lacks credibility. On the other hand, he supports “government broadcasting to other countries that is evenhanded, open, and informative” (Nye, 2003). The other way to pursue soft power through public policy is through sensitivity toward the interests of other actors in the international system (except, of course, clear enemies). As Nye (2003) puts it, “To the extent that America defines its national interests in ways congruent with others, and consults with them in the formulation of policies, it will improve the ratio of admiration to resentment.”

Intelligent pursuit of soft power would avoid unnecessary alienation of actual and potential friends. The beginning of the war on Iraq was accompanied by a wave of anti-French hysteria in Washington, DC, as politicians outbid each other to pour scorn on French opposition to the war. Respect for honest disagreement with allies who, in the end, share most of the values proclaimed as the impetus for US foreign and security policy, but disagree about some of the means, would be more productive in light of soft-power considerations. Maximizing soft power would presumably also mean leading by example, as opposed to proclaiming oneself above the rules and norms to which others are expected to comply.

However, there are severe limits to the degree to which the USA can exercise soft power. To begin, many of the agents required to exercise soft power (in

particular, producers of popular culture and academics) are outside the control of the US government. Hollywood is in the business of making money, not disseminating positive images of the USA and its values. Sometimes positive images may be disseminated. Sometimes they may not. There are plenty of films that show the dark side of life in the USA. The picture when it comes to television news is different, with the major US-based networks more or less in tune with dominant views in the US government, sometimes aggressively so. However, aside from CNN, these networks are not widely viewed outside the USA. Academics for their part are a fractious lot, and among them are critics as well as supporters of various aspects of US values.

A more profound reason why coordinated pursuit of soft power by the USA is so difficult stems from the relative size of the political stakes at home and abroad for US political actors. The stakes at home can be very high, which means that the consequences abroad are either ignored or treated as secondary. The president's orientation to the rest of the world is often a by-product of domestic politics. Uncritical support of the Israeli government in its confrontation with the Palestinians makes electoral sense due to the number of Jewish and fundamentalist Christian voters for whom this is a key issue. But this kind of uncritical support undermines any soft power the USA might exercise in the Arab world. As I have already pointed out, messages that play well at home may play very differently abroad. George W. Bush declared he was a "war president," and to the degree he can keep public attention on the threat of conflict his re-election chances are improved. But to many in the rest of the world, invoking the idea of being a "war president" sounds like a declaration of belligerence.

Joseph Nye (2003) argues that "Now that we Americans have a big stick, we should learn to speak softly." The problem is there is no "we" to do this collectively. Instead, there are many American "I's," be they presidents, members of Congress, lobbyists, corporations, popular culture producers, or academics, whose particular interests point in quite different directions.

A still more fundamental problem with the idea of "soft power" is that it works best to the degree that the rest of the world is a *tabula rasa* in discourse terms. The imagery involves dissemination of US values, norms, and viewpoints. But those on the receiving end have their own values, norms, and viewpoints too. The "war of ideas" metaphor at least recognizes that there are other powerful points of view, though only in terms of opponents that need to be defeated. "Soft power" looks like it takes the views of other actors seriously because it recognizes the need to work with them. However, there are limits to how seriously these other points of view can be taken before the whole idea of soft power dissolves.

The important distinction here is between imposition of one's own discourse on the rest of the world and serious engagement with the discourses of others. Even if accompanied by subtlety and solicitude, soft power will betray the intentions of its proponents to the degree it involves attempted imposition or manipulation. But if it eschews imposition entirely, then it is hardly "power" at all, or, rather, it is a "power" that many others in the international system can exercise too.

When it comes to issues of security, discourse within the USA is quite different to that in most other countries of the world (except perhaps Israel and one or two eastern European states). The run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq was not accompanied by much in the way of an attempted exercise of soft power by the government of the USA. But let us imagine it had been. The events of 9/11 left

the USA with a sense of righteous victimhood, which became allied to a renewed and almost messianic nationalism (Lieven, 2004b). Should soft power have been exercised in order to persuade leaders of other countries and their societies to accept this discourse? As Lieven (2004a: 31) points out, Europeans in particular remember the catastrophic consequences of their own messianic nationalisms in the 20th century, and as a result built international institutions such as the EU to suppress them. The reasons for the European position deserve respect; but respect here would involve bringing European discourse into critical engagement with the dominant US discourse. There would be no guarantee that soft power would ensure that the US discourse prevailed.<sup>3</sup>

It may be that the values pushed by the USA would emerge on top in such an engagement, but they might not (and in all probability, would not). This indeterminacy might make even proponents of soft power in the USA uncomfortable. For soft power is still in the end about power, and the right to wield it over others seems backed ultimately by the fact that the USA dominates when it comes to economic and military resources. Letting go of this link moves us closer to discursive democracy. So soft power can best be thought of as an uneasy halfway house between unilateral discourse manipulation and transnational discursive democracy. Contemplation of the limits of soft power points directly to a more decentralized and potentially more democratic engagement of discourses.

### **Democratizing Responses to an Insecure World**

Discursively democratic responses to international insecurity can draw upon the secular increase in recent decades of the unwillingness of individuals and societies to accept the authority of those who would subject them to unwanted hazards. Discourses get reproduced in the choices of the individuals subject to them. In an unreflective world, one where traditions are treated as immutable and taken for granted, the norm is one of obedience to and so reinforcement of dominant discourses. This is the kind of history often portrayed by Michel Foucault and his followers. But the ratio of questioning to obedience is not necessarily constant, and would appear to have undergone secular increase in recent decades – certainly in more developed countries, and possibly beyond. To corroborate this point, think back to all sorts of impositions upon society that were accepted and unquestioned in the 1950s and which today would be matters of sharp controversy. These include the massive deployment of nuclear weapons and the associated risk of nuclear holocaust, the development and expansion of nuclear power, the construction of freeways without any possibility for public challenge, large-scale urban redevelopment and population transfer with no opportunity for comment by those subject to it, and the adoption of new technologies with no recognition that they might have negative consequences. Ulrich Beck et al. (1994) argue that the “de-traditionalization” of society extends now to the traditions that entailed acceptance of economic growth and whatever new technologies it brought, heralding a “reflexive modernity.” To the extent that a questioning attitude to such matters is now more widespread, effective discursive reconstruction can be influenced by agents who will be subject to the discourses in question.

Terrorism is an unwanted hazard. The chances of any individual being the victim of a terrorist attack are statistically quite small. According to the US State Department’s annual report, in 2002 there were no terrorist incidents in the USA, nine in western Europe, and only 199 worldwide, the lowest total since 1969 (US

Department of State, 2003). Yet the risk loomed large psychologically. What is the source of this perceived hazard? At one level the answer is obvious: terrorists. But the objective risk from this source is magnified by political leaders and the media, which in turn raises the stakes for states whose legitimacy rests in part on their promise of safety and security, but whose actions in practice are perceived by their own publics and those in other states to undermine safety and security. It is public perceptions that are crucial here when it comes to legitimacy. Opinion polls show that most people in most countries felt *less* safe as a result of the military successes in Afghanistan and Iraq. A Gallup International Survey in April/May 2003, immediately after the Iraq war, found that a majority of people in 42 of the 45 countries surveyed believed the world was a more dangerous place as a result of these military actions. Aside from Albania and US-administered Kosovo, the only country that departed from this assessment was the USA (where 48 percent felt that the world was safer and 36 percent felt it to be more dangerous). The numbers in countries whose governments joined the war in Iraq, such as the UK and Australia, were little different from countries such as France and Germany, whose governments opposed the war. The more interesting cases are those states whose governments supported the war. It is in these cases that the legitimacy of the state was undermined as their own populations lost faith in their ability to provide safety and security, and indeed thought it might be doing exactly the opposite. Even in the USA, a majority (47 percent to 44 percent) disagreed with the statement that "The threat of terrorism has been significantly reduced by the war." (In the UK, 71 percent disagreed with this statement; in Australia, 69 percent disagreed.<sup>4</sup>) There is also a sense in which *both* sides in the "war on terror" joined in imposing a hazard-imposition complex upon global society, especially given that anti-western extremism came to be itself sustained in part, however unintentionally, by the rhetoric emanating from Washington and its allies in the media. Further, the *degree* of that threat is in part a social construction by these same agents.

If there has indeed been a secular increase in the proportion of individuals unwilling to resign themselves to the hazards imposed upon them by their own governments (and, perhaps more importantly, the hazards imposed upon them by the governments of other states, such as the USA, UK, and Australia), then one would expect substantial public resistance to this hazard-imposition complex. This is indeed what we find, revealed not just as a matter of breadth in opinion polls showing majorities prior to the war opposed to military action, but also as a matter of depth, as revealed by protest actions. On the weekend of February 15, 2003 more than 10 million people joined in coordinated protests against the impending war in Iraq in cities across the world. In London, for example, the size of the crowd was estimated at around a million – easily the largest protest in British history. Those on the street were only some of those around the world whose uneasiness and opposition to the war were manifested not necessarily in visible action, but in everyday talk with friends, families, neighbors, and correspondents. International political theorists have been talking for some time about the idea of "international public spheres," that is, citizens engaged in communicative political interaction across national boundaries, oriented to global public affairs, but not seeking a formal share of power in states or in international government (Cochran, 1999). More than ever before, in February 2003 a transnational public sphere was tangible and visible on the world stage, its influence extending into the governments of several countries.



### **The Test of Reflexivity**

The problematic character of the “war of ideas” and “soft power” compared to discursive democracy can be highlighted further in light of the idea that intelligent action must be reflexive. Reflexivity is by definition sensitivity to the degree to which actions themselves help create the contexts for action, that is, they are constitutive of the actor’s social situation (Tribe, 1973). To the extent that this situation is defined by the relative weight of competing (or complementary) discourses, action should be sensitive to how it reinforces, undermines, or reconstructs a particular discursive field. Reflexivity requires sensitivity to the degree to which key entities and actors, their interests and goals, the shared norms that constrain them, and the relationships that either suppress or empower them are themselves continually constituted and reconstituted (Berejikian and Dryzek, 2000). Such reshaping is not, however, unconstrained, because, as pointed out earlier, individuals are themselves situated within a discursive field that constrains who they are and what they can do.<sup>5</sup> Reflexivity is not the same as autonomy, which refers to the capacity of actors freely to create their social conditions. Autonomy connotes the enabling aspect of social structures; reflexivity never forgets that structures and discourses are constraining as well as enabling, and cannot be transcended.

For all their differences, the “war of ideas” and “soft power” approaches to the navigation of international discourses fail the test of reflexivity. Both are kinds of instrumental action that imply that an actor (the US government) can stand aloof from the field of discourses, and manipulate such discourses’ content and interplay. Foucauldian analysts would point out that both treat power as standing outside discourses, rather than constructed within discourses. Any dominance of the USA in terms of military and economic power does not translate into the realm of discourses. Soft-power advocates treat the world as a *tabula rasa* in discourse terms; the war of ideas at least recognizes the discourse of adversaries.

The shared lack of reflexivity of these two approaches means that policies informed by them can have major unanticipated and unwanted effects. Actions help to undermine or constitute discourses whether actors like it or not. For example, when the USA opposed or claimed exemption from the International Criminal Court or has withdrawn from multilateral treaties such as the Kyoto Protocol on climate change, it has reinforced the discourse of Hobbesian anarchy in the international system, thus making Hobbesian anarchy more real. The constitutive consequences in such situations may, by happy chance, be positive. They may, by unhappy chance, be negative. This is surely too important a matter to be left to chance, when the unhappy consequences can be so profound. Those unhappy consequences, as I have already argued, can include discursive reinforcement of the very opponent that the US government has identified as its key global enemy and main threat, and of the kind of international anarchy in which such an opponent might find refuge.

Particularly insidious, unintended, and constitutive discursive effects can be found in antiterrorist doctrine. The *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* announced a new approach of pre-emption and prevention, alongside its declaration of a war of ideas. The USA subsequently followed this doctrine in Iraq and elsewhere, but (crucially) so did other states that picked up on the new discourse. So long as they could brand their adversaries as “terrorists,” the actions of these states could increasingly escape the constraints imposed by the inter-



national human rights discourse. Israel, Russia in Chechnya, the Philippines, and India in Kashmir could all rebrand their rebels in this way, and receive a kind of international license to oppress dissident populations. In addition, to the degree they could recast their local problems as part of the global war on terror, they could expect to receive support from the Anglo-American powers. However unintended, these consequences endangered the very values that were the ostensible justification for pre-emption and prevention to begin with – as the September 2002 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* put the matter in its opening sentence, the “single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise.”

These examples show that, when it comes to reflexive action, traditionally powerful actors can still carry considerable weight, whether the consequences of their actions are intended or unintended. In matters of discourse no less than elsewhere, power (however “soft”) is distributed unequally, and some actors are more capable than others when it comes to creating and disseminating meanings and discourses (Weldes and Saco, 1996). Indeed, recognition of the reflexive aspects of international action could lead dominant actors to consolidate power by acting more intelligently in relation to the global constellation of discourses, so that their constitutive effects become a matter of design rather than accident. Why, then, might transnational discursive democracy more easily pass the test of reflexivity that the war-of-ideas and soft-power approaches fail? The answer is that discursive democracy is relatively immune to the kind of hubris that supposes the world of discourses can be transcended and manipulated from the outside. It has to recognize as a matter of its own democratic commitment that interventions come from myriad actors located within the discourses of the world, without the capacity to step outside them. Moreover, to the extent that Beck et al. (1994) are accurate in their portrayal of a reflexive modernity in which ever-increasing numbers of actors are exercising a capacity to influence their social relationships rather than simply accept them, effective engagement with the world has to be reciprocal and democratic.

When discursive democracy and reflexive action are joined, agency can be distributed more widely than is possible in the war-of-ideas or soft-power approaches, which centralize agency. There are points at which widespread engagement concerning the terms of discourse is possible. Even the most routine action helps perpetuate the discourse in which it is located by affirming the precepts of that discourse (for example, a financial transaction reinforces the monetary system).

Diffuse reflexive action has in common with liberal multilateralism and cosmopolitanism the idea that the creation of a better international system will require action by many actors. However, diffuse reflexive action has a major advantage over multilateral construction of international institutions. It can help bring into being changed situations without the need for coordinated collective decision-making. Required only is that actors reason through the broader consequences of their individual decisions and acts. More systemic change (that is, change in the discursive field ordering the international system) can then come about as a result of reflexive action by some critical mass of actors. It is this potential which paves the way for a more democratic approach to international affairs – including security issues.

Consider, in this light, international protests against the Iraq war. A cynic might say, here, that in the end the protests and broader global discontent amounted to

nothing: after all, they did not stop the war. But this would be to focus on the instrumental effects of these protests and miss the constitutive ones. While the protestors failed in instrumental terms, they may have been more effective in reflexive terms, that is, in the way they help reshape the global constellation of discourses. Moreover, the protests in western countries (along with the positions taken by governments such as France and Germany) helped to show the Islamic world that the peoples of the West were not against them, even if a few western governments appeared to be. In the face of that reality, it became harder for Islamic extremists to maintain the rhetoric of a titanic clash between the West and Islam. It also became harder to argue that terror should be directed against the ordinary people of the West, most of whom were so clearly not in favor of war against Iraq, let alone against the Islamic world more generally. This did not, of course, prevent attacks against the ordinary people of the West (for example, in Madrid on March 11, 2004 and London on July 7, 2005). However, even al-Qaeda eventually showed responsiveness to western public opinion. Osama bin Laden in a tape broadcast in April 2004 referred to “public polls” in European countries showing opposition to the Iraq war, and so offered a “truce” with European countries if they were to leave Iraq. With that statement al-Qaeda began to look like a more conventional sort of terrorist organization with which western governments have long dealt – one that makes negotiable demands.

It is very difficult to demonstrate the impact in the Islamic world of the western antiwar protests and public opinion – but no more difficult than it is to demonstrate the impact of forced regime change in Afghanistan and Iraq on the global strength of Islamic extremism. However, this comparison is not quite appropriate, for transnational discursive democracy located in the public sphere is not directed against any particular enemy. Rather, it ought to be evaluated in terms of how it can influence and reconstruct processes of global governance, and so help combat the global insecurity to which many sides contribute. In the wake of the Iraq war, it is obviously not decisive when it comes to global security issues, but neither can it be ignored by conventional powers such as states. In this sense, its prospects are somewhat brighter than the more formal democratic institutionalization sought by cosmopolitan democrats.

In principle, the discursive emphasis has always been more feasible than the cosmopolitan project because the latter requires two steps: first, the establishment of stronger system-level institutions; and, second, their democratization. US unilateralism in Iraq and elsewhere has made the first of these steps still more problematic. Transnational discursive democracy, in contrast, requires only one step: the democratization of existing discourse-related sources of order.

### **Conclusion**

The insecure world that exists in the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the Iraq War of 2003 has produced setbacks for both cosmopolitan and discursive approaches to transnational democracy. Cosmopolitanism has been hurt by the unilateralist undermining of its liberal multilateralist foundations. Discursive democracy grounded in the transnational public sphere has been damaged by propaganda, deceptions, spin doctoring, and the divisiveness of Anglo-American governments and their supporters, as well as by “war-of-ideas” campaigns. I have tried to show that discursive democrats might, however, be

heartened by the degree to which responses to global insecurity can still be crafted in the engagement of discourses in transnational public spheres. So while cosmopolitan and discursive democracy do not have to be direct competitors, the latter now looks a bit more plausible.

### Notes

1. Group activity in civil society is also a part of the cosmopolitan model, though ancillary to more formal institutionalization in the international system.
2. Anthony Giddens (1984) speaks of social structures in these terms: as both enabling and constraining action, which in turns helps reproduce structures.
3. Lieven himself does not draw the same lesson from his own work that I do, ending as a proponent of the USA's exercise of soft power.
4. In Australia, the public perception was shared by the Director General of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, Dennis Richardson: "The fact that we are in close alliance with the US and the fact that we were early and actively engaged in the war on terrorism does contribute to us being a target" (*Canberra Times*, 2003: 1).
5. Risse (2000) identifies three categories of international action: the logic of strategy associated with rational choice theory, the logic of appropriateness characterizing constructivism, and a logic of arguing based on Habermas's theory of communicative action. Reflexive action represents a fourth type; so we can speak of a "logic of reflexivity."

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