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Political Culture and Democratic Transition: A Reassessment

الثقافة السياسية والانتقال الديمقراطي: ملاحظات عامة

Abstract: This paper explores the concept of political culture and its origins, establishing four main theses. First, the nature of a country's system of government cannot be concluded from its political culture. Second, political culture cannot be extrapolated from the broader general culture. Third, direct conclusions about political practice are unlikely to be drawn from political culture. And fourth, the impact of the political culture of elites during the democratic transition should not be underestimated. The paper addresses the importance of both "civic culture" in preserving democratic stability and the belief in liberal democratic values. It makes a distinction between political culture as attitudes and as behavioural trends. It contends that the emergence of theories linking the nature of the system of government to the prevalent culture in a given country was due to Cold War alliances between Western democracies and their loyal dictatorships. There is no truth to the claim that the political culture of a society must be democratic as a precondition for establishing a democratic system. Conversely, this assumption obscures the true condition for democracy, which is the political culture of the elites, and the latter's adherence to democratic principles during the democratization process.

Keywords: Political Culture; Civic Culture; Democracy; Democratic Transition; Public Ethics.

الملخص: تبحث الدراسة في مفهوم الثقافة السياسية وجذوره، بغية التأسيس لأربع فرضيات. تتمثل الفرضية الأولى بأنه لا علاقة ضرورية بين طبيعة نظام الحكم والثقافة السياسية في بلد ما، وترى الثانية أنه لا يمكن اشتقاق الثقافة السياسية من الثقافة عمومًا، وتقول الثالثة إنه من غير المرجّح أن يجري استنتاج الممارسة السياسية من الثقافة السياسية مباشرة، وتفيد الرابعة بأنه لا يجب الاستهانة بأثر الثقافة السياسية للنخب السياسية في مرحلة الانتقال إلى الديمقراطية. وتتطرق الدراسة إلى أهمية «الثقافة المدنية» في الحفاظ على استقرار النظام الديمقراطي، والإيمان بالقيم الديمقراطية الليبرالية. وتميّز بين الثقافة المدنية بوصفها مجموعة مواقف من جهة، وبوصفها توجهات سلوكية من جهة أخرى. وترى الدراسة أن نشوء نظريات تربط طبيعة نظام الحكم بالثقافة السائدة في بلد ما هو نتيجة لتحالف دول غربية ديمقراطية مع دكتاتوريات موالية في حقبة الحرب الباردة. وتجادل في أنه لا صحة للادعاء بأن الثقافة السياسية لمجتمع ما يجب أن تكون ديمقراطية من أجل تأسيس نظام سياسي ديمقراطي. ففي المقابل، يحجب هذا الافتراض الشرط الحقيقي للديمقراطية، وهو الثقافة السياسية للنخب وتوافقها على الالتزام بالخيار الديمقراطي، بوصفه شرطًا أساسيًا في أوقات الانتقال الديمقراطي.

كلمات مفتاحية: الثقافة السياسية؛ الثقافة المدنية؛ الديمقراطية؛ الانتقال السياسي؛ الأخلاق العمومية.

On Civic Culture

It is widely agreed that Gabriel Almond (1911-2002) and Sidney Verba (1932-2019) set the terms of the contemporary discussion on political culture with their work on civic culture. Verba defined political culture as the system of beliefs, expressive symbols, and values that form the backdrop against which politics unfold.[1] Almond had stated earlier that "Every political system is embedded in a particular pattern of orientations to political action. I have found it useful to refer to this as the political culture".[2] Since the publication of their work, *The Civic Culture*, in 1963, political culture has been defined as those values, attitudes, and orientations that strengthen or weaken a political system and political institutional order. Scholars in the field are primarily concerned with patterns and types of political orientations, behaviours towards the political system and its various components, and attitudes towards the role of the individual or citizen in this system.[3] Two decades after the publication of their book, Verba said that his work with Almond did not constitute a theory per se. It was rather an attempt to propose formulas and establish what he perceived to be significant relationships between, on the one hand, the individual's beliefs, values, and attitudes towards the political system and, on the other, the consolidation and stability of that system. While his research with Almond was moderately successful in collecting materials, delineating categories, and defining political culture, he acknowledged that the effort to establish a connection between political culture and the system of government was somewhat forced or tenuous.[4]

There is no school of philosophy since antiquity, or more recently, of sociology, anthropology, or psychology that does not accord significance to human values and attitudes, albeit using different idioms. Norms, institutions, social morals, and symbols (lingual or otherwise) influencing social and individual attitudes, and before taking the individual's reflections into account, are usually subsumed under the rubric of culture. Since Johann Herder (1744-1803) critiqued Montesquieu (1689-1755) and even Giambattista Vico's (1668-1744) association of a people's culture with its natural environment and climate, cultural studies have taken great strides, putting Herder's studies on culture under the critical lens as well.

The field as we know it today emerged in the 1950s, when cultural studies came to be grounded in a positivist, scientific approach. Concepts were formulated to allow the adoption of hypotheses that could be examined and tested against empirical facts, such as individuals and their orientations, rather than proceeding from a presumed culture that exists independently of a people or from what were seen by positivists as metaphysical properties, such as the values inherent in social institutions. With his attempt to establish a positivist science of society, Auguste Comte (1798-1857) had pointed in this direction, but behavioural theory and structural functionalism in political science and sociology, as well as behaviourism in social psychology, converged to lay the groundwork for this approach.

Political science's embrace of behaviourism gave rise to a methodology that first defined political culture and its types, and then operationalised these concepts by constructing empirically provable and refutable hypotheses about the relationship of individuals to "political objects". According to this methodology,

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[1]　Sidney Verba, "Comparative Political Culture," in: Lucian W. Pye & Sidney Verba (eds.), *Political Culture and Political Development* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 513.

[2]　Gabriel Almond, "Comparative Political Systems," *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 18, no. 3 (August 1956), p. 396.

[3]　Azmi Bishara, *Fī al-Masʾala al-ʿArabiyya: Muqaddima li-Bayān Dīmuqrāṭī ʿArabī*, 4th ed. (Doha/Beirut: Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, 2018), p. 135. See also: Gabriel A. Almond & Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 12-13.

[4]　Azmi Bishara, *al-Intiqāl al-Dīmuqrāṭī wa-Ishkāliyyātuh: Dirāsa Nadhariyya wa-Taṭbīqiyya Muqārana* (Beirut/Doha: Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, 2020), p. 420. See also: Sidney Verba, "On Revisiting the Civic Culture: A Personal Postscript," in: Gabriel A. Almond & Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture Revisited* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1989), pp. 394-410.

individuals' attitudes to political objects consist of three elements: cognitive, affective, and evaluational.[5] As for political objects, they are four in number: the political system in general, the roles and structures that make up this system, its incumbents, and government policies. Individuals' orientations to political objects were grouped into three types of culture: parochial, subject (most compatible with an authoritarian regime), and participant, which is the culture most congruent with a democratic system. Proponents of this approach assert that civic culture is characterised by a reliance on the active role of the self in the polity, a belief in the importance and impact of political participation, acceptance of the law and its authority, and a tendency to participate in guiding the political authority.[6]

In considering these features, two thoughts spring to mind: firstly, they are quite similar to what republicanism calls civic virtues; secondly, they cannot emerge under an authoritarian regime. A political culture compatible with democracy is generated when citizens take advantage of the practices and possibilities offered by the democratic system, such as freedom of expression and political participation. Such possibilities are not available under despotism. This approach and subsequent studies produced surveys aimed at determining the respondents' attitudes based on questions, that simply require a yes or no response (with the option of "do not know" or "refuse to answer"). After the data is collected, it is sorted into categories representing attitudinal types. Initially, political culture was studied in Italy and Germany to establish whether, after the victory over Nazism and fascism, it had the elements necessary to sustain democracy and avoid the risk of totalitarian ideological forces coming to power through democratic pluralism, as had occurred during the Weimar Republic in the 1930s. European societies under communist rule were also studied to examine their resistance or adaptation to it.

Taking the findings of Almond and Verba as an example, in the five countries they studied, a civic culture was prevalent only in the United States and the United Kingdom. Did this civic political culture result from prolonged living under a liberal, democratic system, or was its existence rather the basis of the durability of the system? Did the lack of a civic culture *à la* Verba and Almond weaken the democratic system in Germany and Italy after the Second World War? We do not know. But we do know that neither the civic culture's weakness nor its absence subverted the political system in these two countries, which was apparently sustained by other factors until a civic culture as defined by Almond and Verba was consolidated.

What does it mean for a political culture to be compatible with a particular political system? How does it function to support system stability? Almond and Verba considered this question from the perspective of structural functionalist theory, which examines any social function in terms of its role in maintaining the equilibrium of the entire system. From this perspective, the function of civic culture is to mediate contradictions and tensions in the democratic system, in particular the tension between government power, competence, and accountability.

The citizen inculcated with this civic culture is, like a person with a "parochial culture", interested in their own affairs, and, like a person steeped in a "subject culture", obeys the law. Yet this citizen is also prepared to participate in politics and hold the government accountable, which helps to ensure popular oversight.[7] Thus, "parochial" and "subject" political cultures are not distinct, self-contained entities. Avoiding politics when necessary and obeying the law are part of the culture of the participant citizen as well – sustained mobilization and excessive political engagement do not support democracy and in fact introduce tension to the system. The distinction is that the citizen with a civic culture does not merely vote and then leave everything else to elected officials; they join unions and civic bodies and takes part in government oversight and local government.

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[5] Of course, pace Almond and Verba, people's attitudes cannot be neatly divided into cognitive, emotional/affective, and evaluative. These may be distinct aspects of a single attitude, supportive or critical of political conditions. All of these faculties overlap when forming an attitude or position on an issue, person, policy, or institution.

[6] Almond & Verba, *The Civic Culture*, p. 18.

[7] Ibid., pp. 341-346.

Social psychology's approaches to the subject have suggested that the stability of political systems depends on the alignment of mainstream political values with institutional practices.[8] The setbacks experienced by liberal democracy in a number of countries over the second and third decades of the twenty-first century offer rich material for a reconsideration of political culture. Rising populism is clearly an important node of intersecting political, social, and cultural factors. Those who adopt populist discourse or are influenced by its propaganda evince diminished trust in democratic institutions and negative attitudes towards political elites and the rights of minorities. These attitudes become elements of political culture. However, the important question here is whether or not populist policies affect people's attitudes not only towards existing institutions and political elites, but also vis-a-vis the centrality of fundamental, liberal democratic values such as freedom of expression, civil liberties, respect for political pluralism, and respect for the independence of the judiciary.[9]

Here a distinction must be made between civic culture and core democratic values. Theoretically, such values can remain dominant, despite negative attitudes towards elites and the mistrust in democratic institutions. For example, citizens who might not believe that existing institutions and elites apply democratic values, and thus view them negatively, would still adhere to the values of liberal democracy. In reality, these are not wholly distinct, isolated variables; they interact and exert a reciprocal influence one on another. For example, historical experience shows that when populist leaders assume power at a time of widespread public mistrust in democratic institutions and political elites, the public is more susceptible to propaganda that erodes core democratic values as well. It is here that the consolidation of institutions and the adherence of broad segments of the elite, the public, and those working in state institutions to liberal democracy and its core values become decisive factors.

Thus, the adherence of broad segments of the public and the elites to liberal democracy, as well the commitment of state institutions, is crucial for maintaining the system when it experiences severe economic and social crises and wars, which could otherwise pose an existential threat. A mainstream civic culture in support of democracy, coupled with well-entrenched institutions, can thwart attempts by anti-democratic forces to exploit crises in order to overthrow the system using its own tools.

The dominant political culture consists of social norms on public issues, as well as people's knowledge and opinions about the state, power, social and political hierarchy, loyalty, and rights and duties. It can be discerned from surveys of attitudes, whether in the form of questions asked of a sample of the population or perhaps, now and in the future, through an analysis of social media data following collection, filtering, and classification. In all cases, however, no causal relationship should be assumed between, on one hand, values and attitudes and, on the other, political practice (including actual, public positions), which together constitute the two dimensions of political culture.

I will not address here the enormous difficulty social media poses as a source of data about political culture. The unprecedented way it jumbles up cognitive, emotional, and evaluation attitudes, the exhibitionism on display that incentivises taking stances to win admiration, the amplification and exaggeration of any position in a bid to attract attention, the conformity that develops within small groups that share the same orientations, and self-censorship of political attitudes in fear of verbal intimidation or, the defiant, extreme articulation of opinion – all of this hinders the identification of attitudes on a broad scale. Add to this the continuous torrent of information, rumour, and spin that, true or false, can be cited as evidence in support of any opinion.

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[8] Pippa Norris & Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 422.

[9] Ibid., p. 436.

Culture and the Shift from Attitudes to Political Behaviour

Political culture does not necessarily correspond to a people's culture, but nor is it wholly independent of it. It is based on contexts and relationships that are known by various labels, such as the customs of a people, their mores, prevalent popular beliefs, including both the socially desirable and objectionable which may intersect with religious values, the diverse values of freedom, loyalty to the collective, equality, one's stance on the prerogatives of birth and on the autonomy of the individual, and the sense of duty towards the individual, the collective, and the nation, and everything Tocqueville called "the moral and intellectual state of a people", as well as "habits of the heart".[10] These are the dominant norms and the axiological foundation of public ethics, as distinguished from individual ones, or what Hegel called *sittlichkeit* as differentiated from *moralität*.[11] They do not constitute a political culture, but we presume that some of their aspects influence the individuals' political orientations.

According to many analysts, the dominant culture – that is, the culture of an entire people – can directly serve to entrench authoritarian political systems. I disagree for the following reasons: 1) an entire people do not share a single, homogeneous political culture; 2) correlations between the nature of the system of government and culture are purely interpretive, and proving a clear, causal relationship between them is difficult. Typically, a researcher links an existing system of government with a culture whose features are inferred from surveys or based on an interpretive analysis of the dominant culture; 3) this assertion tacitly assumes some political participation by the people in question, but typically people who live under authoritarian rule are excluded from politics; 4) values and social customs organize people's relationships within the group or the broader society, but the relationship of the individual and the group with the modern state is often dictated by the state, and the state sets the rules for any direct contact between them. That said, if the state is weak, modern state institutions will be strongly influenced by communities and traditional social institutions; and 5) the impact of values and social norms – constituent elements of political culture – on political behaviour can only be understood through their interplay with social conditions and interests, including the way they themselves are influenced by the existing political system and its policies.[12]

But is it not the case that any authoritarian regime, through educational curricula, media propaganda, and the coercion of allegiance by intimidation, clientelism, and patronage, produces its own compatible political culture? It certainly does, and this culture may become prevalent at the popular level. But there must be some groups of citizens who are unencumbered by this culture, with aspirations for a different regime.

There is a reciprocal relationship between social ethics, norms, and social institutions, for institutions also influence and reshape public ethics and norms. In the case of complex social phenomena, causation is not a one-way street, but an interactive process. Moreover, there are good reasons to reject the idea that any people's culture has an immutable, essential core, and that culture is a single, organic whole expressed similarly in all its parts such that the whole and the part can be deduced one from the other. There is no genetic code for a people's culture. That said, we cannot deny that a particular society in a specific time and place has a culture.

Acknowledging the existence of such a culture anchored by a language and perhaps a single religion, with a written and oral heritage, multivalent symbols, an architecture, lifestyles, etc, does not mean that at the heart of this culture lies a single moral essence. Nor is this culture homogeneous in the present, fixed throughout history, or equally shared by various social groups. Needless to say, the culture of any people is

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[10] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Henry Reeve (trans.), vol. 1 (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), p. 379. See also: Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Eduardo Nolla (ed.), James T. Schleifer (trans.), vol. 1 (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2012), pp. 466-467.

[11] *Sittlichkeit* is derived from "sitten", meaning mores.

[12] Bishara, *al-Intiqāl al-Dīmuqrāṭī wa-Ishkāliyyātuh*, p. 409.

neither homogeneous nor free of conflicts, contradictions, and normative tensions. One could conceivably draw conclusions about a political culture from the general culture, but this political culture does not arise from some cultural essence, but from the fact that people of diverse subcultures within the same mainstream culture interact in different ways with prevailing social and political conditions. It is impossible for such a dynamic to produce a single, homogeneous political culture.

Even if we conclude that a specific political culture is dominant by identifying it based on a prior definition, classifying it according to predetermined criteria as supporting or hindering democracy or authoritarianism, and then verifying its existence among a specific people or population using quantitative, survey-based analysis, textual and semiotic interpretation, or through analysis of popular trends on social media – assuming methodological difficulties are addressed – we cannot establish a relationship between the totality of people's actions and this political culture, especially in daily life.

People's behaviour in their daily lives is not the outcome of their orientations as categorized within a specific political culture. It is the product of multiple factors: habit, the need to secure a living, fear for oneself and family, calculated interest, devotion to social rituals that reinforce group belonging, the desire to please others, gain recognition, or improve one's social status, and love and belonging. Most of these elements are not associated with a specific culture; indeed, we find them among all peoples to various degrees. There is no doubt that the political behaviour of population groups is influenced by values, orientations, and attitudes that can be inferred from an interpretation of expressive manifestations, discourse analysis, or surveys. But the political behaviour of these groups also influences and modifies their attitudes. The causal relationship between rational/moral/emotional beings and social phenomena is not unidirectional. By the same token, people's orientations cannot be easily classified as either compliant, enthusiastic about, or obedient to the existing political system, or resistant to it, as these orientations may simply be ways of people's adaptation to their surroundings.

The position that a person has free will and that their moral decisions and practices are freely chosen from multiple options is not only a philosophical analysis of what it means to be human (if freedom is a condition of moral judgment, it is the condition that distinguishes humans from other creatures). It also implies a moral judgment of what a person *should* be. Insofar as it aims to align the individual human being in our society with our understanding of human beings in general, it combines verbs like "should" and "ought" with "exists" or "is". Freedom is a key component of our conception of humankind, along with consciousness and morals, and these three components are intertwined. In fact, however, freedom is a latent potentiality within individuals. It is transformed from potentiality to actuality with the awareness and exercise of free will in specific social and cultural conditions and according to different moral sensibilities. We ought to be mindful, then, of the interplay between these elements in our understanding of human beings. Needless to say, when civil, political, and social liberties exist, freedom of choice is more easily transformed from potential to action.

People act based on perceptions, feelings, and desires, as well as on compromises between desires and possibilities. When it comes to public affairs, individuals may set aside free will, avoiding making a choice out of habit (that is, inertia and unthinking routine), to accommodate existing conditions, or based on a calculation of profit and loss or interests. Here, the moral philosopher may interject, commenting that evading choices (and thus avoiding decisions) is itself a freely made decision, a value-laden act that we can judge. This is objectively true. Subjectively, however, from the point of view of the individual, it is not.

Let us assume that, yes, a person answered a question in a survey. In daily life, however, a person may not care about such things, being preoccupied with other mundane matters that are more important to him/her. If the surveyor pressed the respondent to admit that they did not take a position based on convictions

– that they in fact preferred expediency to their moral position, and that this is itself a moral position – the respondent may admit that this is true (we may call this a moral decision). Or the respondent might declare that their behaviour is actually more indicative of true convictions than the previous response, or that politics is unimportant, or that they know that simple individuals cannot change anything at the state level, or that politics itself is all interests and expediency with no difference between one party and another, or that social and political stability is preferable, or simply that circumstances are stronger than the person is. There is no limit to the justifications that may transform into actual convictions. Moreover, action or inaction, movement or stasis, all affect the individual, who may modify their convictions accordingly. Do we then conclude that the culture a person exhibits is compatible with authoritarianism? Perhaps, but as we will see, it is not an impediment to building democracy.

The individual is not an epic hero who in day-to-day life moves from one fateful decision to another, flying in the face of prevailing social and political conditions. No doubt many people act out of conviction or align their convictions to their actions. There are pivotal situations in which a person is spurred to make decisions and take public action based on their convictions, such as when expressing an opinion out loud or participating more actively. They may be more responsive to accepting the challenge of choosing if they have a strong moral compass, if their dignity is violated or they feel a profound sense of unfairness, or when they are convinced that there is a relationship between attitude, action, and interest. Ordinary people are more likely to face such choices in dramatic situations like crises, revolutions, or major transformations in the system of government that could affect them and their families personally. If they feel that the existing system of government is weak and on the verge of change, they may take a stance without fear of the authorities.

As for elites with the most influence on and awareness of political conditions – whom we call political elites regardless of their class status – they presumably face such choices more frequently than others because they grapple with daily dilemmas and are expected to make decisions and take action. The orientations and attitudes of elites and their commitment to them also carry more weight in ordinary circumstances, when the mass public is not thrust into politics.

It is hazardous to claim, as Stephen Welch has written, that attitudes and values (extrapolated from a quantitative approach) and cultural meanings (inferred from an interpretive approach) generate political behaviour that has an impact at the macro-political level. Indeed, there is no necessary relationship between behavioural orientations, attitudes, and action[13] unless the political-cultural values and orientations that explain the behaviour are inferred from the behaviour itself, in which case it is simply meaningless, and no more than circular reasoning. If, on the other hand, they are extrapolated from semiotic interpretation or anthropological approaches to social practice in general rather than political practice, the question of the validity of causality remains.

In any case, the notion that there is an inevitable link between the nature of the political system and the dominant culture can be rejected. This does not mean abandoning the attempt to understand political culture by trying new theoretical approaches. Political culture does exist, after all.[14] In my view, it is more meaningful and useful to discern it in the behaviour of politicians and political elites in general, along with other factors such as economic interests and the struggle for power. The way elites (from various classes and affiliations) manage their interests and their conflicts is not only influenced by their political cultures; it also produces a political culture.

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13   Stephen Welch, *The Theory of Political Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 186.
14   Ibid., p. 203.

A Note on Political Culture and the Transition to Democracy

Taking culture as an independent variable that determines the form of political systems over long historical periods, as if they are dependent variables, not only assumes the existence of a fixed cultural essence, it also virtually reifies culture as race. And like discredited racial theories, it categorises humans based on external traits that are presumed to determine the morals, modes of thought, cultures, and socio-political systems of individuals and collectives.

It seems obvious to me that any inquiry into political culture is meaningless to those who believe that it is derived from some purported essence of a religion or a civilization. Since this essence determines everything else, there is no need for a mediating political culture. But once we realize that the culture of any people is diverse and mutable, we understand that political culture changes with political conditions and over time, and its socio-political valence varies according to the different role played by the social actors who share it. The study of political culture is only meaningful in specific historical contexts and periods and among specific social forces.

Political culture becomes important when we zoom in on a more detailed level, looking at shorter time frames and smaller regions than those that form the subject of Moore's work on sweeping historical trajectories. For example, the political culture of elites during the transition to democracy is significant, and the formulation and propagation of a democratic political culture assumes particular importance in the phase of democratic consolidation. The role of existing political culture cannot be ignored when studying such intense, short-term transformations, especially since an inquiry into the origin of political culture under the influence of multiple factors necessitates a return to earlier periods.

This paper proposes a distinction between the impact of the culture of influential elites – particularly politically influential elites – and that of the mainstream culture on the democratic transition. I do not refer to economic and cultural elites, but rather to any organized, influential political leadership, be it revolutionary or non-revolutionary parties, liberal or conservative, reformist forces within the regime or politicised leaders of a popular movement.

When contemporary democratic transitions take place, suffrage is granted universally, all at once, in contrast to the trajectory of evolution and expansion of political rights in Western countries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including a long process of habituation. In addition, during the abrupt, wholesale transition from authoritarianism to democracy, elites with limited political experience are divided politically and ideologically, and the sudden political openness and demise of the authoritarian regime that had once united them in opposition may serve to further fracture them. Widespread public engagement in politics may also tempt them to adopt a populist rhetoric that appeals to the masses. These are challenges that were not confronted simultaneously by the earliest democracies.

As aforementioned, only under democracy can a democratic culture grow and thrive. The question is: Must there exist some minimum threshold of democratic culture among the political elites leading the transition from authoritarianism? The answer is most certainly yes. But in that case, what sort of democratic culture would be useful? Two characteristics are key. First, there must be a receptivity to dialogue, negotiation, and the peaceful resolution of disputes via compromise. Pluralism cannot emerge when each political force believes the others will eliminate it if they come to power or if such forces accept no less than the full adoption of their own positions by state institutions. Second, all the usual democratic procedures and institutions, now widely known internationally, should be recognised as the best framework for resolving conflicts and peacefully settling political differences. There is no need to reinvent the wheel of democracy. In practice, this may mean a willingness to not rush elections or to govern with a narrow majority, particularly in

circumstances where people are not accustomed to respecting the rule of a rotating, majority government, and where the bureaucratic and security apparatus does not respect elected politicians outside the establishment. At such stages, it is preferable to achieve legitimacy through national accord pending the necessary institutional changes and to ensure that the state apparatus respects the democratic choice. Elites could adopt this approach for pragmatic reasons without internalizing it as a part of their cultural identity, but pragmatism alone is not enough in the phases of democracy-building that follow the transition.

Democracy need not be discovered or invented. For a transition to take place, it is enough that political elites are unified in their desire to make it succeed, agree in principle to resolve their disputes through elections and the peaceful rotation of power, and to build a democratic system and institutions. In other words, it is preferable to agree to build institutions and preserve consensus. Disagreements should not be resolved before such institutions are built and the army and security forces are subordinated to them. When the time comes to draft a "permanent" constitution, other aspects of political culture become important for the elites guiding the process of institution building after the transition. In our age, democracy cannot be built through elections alone absent a commitment to the principle of democratic citizenship and the political and civil rights, duties, and freedoms it entails.

Countering the argument that democratic culture must predate a democratic form of government, Dankwart Rustow (1924-1996), one of the pioneers of the theory of democratic transition, drew on the work of social psychologist Leon Festinger (1919-1989) on cognitive dissonance. Festinger posited that the relationship between thought and action was not a one-way causal one, but rather reciprocal and mutually constitutive. Though dated, I think this theory is still useful, particularly its assertion that people's behaviours give rise to their thoughts, which then retrospectively justify their actions. According to this theory, humans seek "internal harmony, consistency, or congruity among their opinions, attitudes, knowledge, and values".[15] Democracy is not built via proselytization, propaganda, or education, but through compromise, the acceptance of pluralism, and the peaceful rotation of power. As for democratic culture, that emerges later.[16]

For Rustow, both democracy itself and the transition to democracy are the result of a conflict between political forces that cannot be settled by force. Various political factions are thus compelled to formulate some form of pluralism within the existing polity, provided there are no deep social cleavages that threaten the entity of the state itself. According to this model, democratic ideas are not a necessary precondition for democracy, but may later emerge to justify the acceptance of political pluralism, both to the self and others. There is a widely held yet erroneous belief that democracy relies on shared beliefs and a consensus on common ideas. In reality, democracy was established by agreements that followed disputes. This is true of countries where democracy emerged gradually, such as in Britain in 1832-1918, Sweden in 1890-1918, and many others.[17]

Many scholars have understood Rostow's model to mean that democracy does not need democrats; it can arise in their absence based on the balance of power and the preservation of interests. But Rostow's case studies were early forms of liberalism like Sweden, where democracy evolved gradually. In our age, it is perhaps true that bargaining between elites who are unable to resolve their conflicts could lead them to accept pluralism and the rotation of power on purely pragmatic grounds. The big difference, however, which is not considered by this model, is that the democratic system already exists and can be adopted wholesale. Moreover, the transition to democracy is no longer possible without granting universal suffrage, and to all adult citizens simultaneously. These distinctions mean that democratic elites are needed to guide the

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[15] Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985 [1957]), p. 260.

[16] Dankwart A. Rustow, "Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model," *Comparative Politics*, vol. 2, no. 3 (April 1970), p. 344.

[17] Dankwart A. Rustow, *A World of Nations: Problems of Political Modernization* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1973 [1967]), p. 233.

transition in the absence of a democratic political culture among the broad public. Can they do so without themselves possessing a suitable political culture?

Under authoritarianism, the political culture of the public cannot become democratic, one that is based on the acceptance of difference, tolerance, and respect for individual freedom, the rule of law, and the legitimacy of elected bodies. At this particular juncture, influential elites should, at a bare minimum, have a commitment to the basic democratic model as we know it, even at moments of heightened conflicts over power. There is no need to reinvent the democratic order anew. Schumpeter made a minimalist definition of democracy as a mechanism for regulating competition for power among elites to ensure its peaceful rotation. For him, the broad electorate had no role beyond voting. But when he came to a more detailed discussion of the democratic process and the role of competing elected elites, he found himself delving into cultural and ethical issues he had previously overlooked such as: 1) the need for competent political elites and the cultivation of leaders if necessary; 2) the competence of the bureaucracy; 3) democratic self-control, by which he meant fidelity to democracy and rejection of one-upmanship, and letting elected officials do their job as "electorates and parliaments must be on an intellectual and moral level high enough to be proof against the offerings of the crook and the crank, […] miscarriages that will discredit democracy and undermine allegiance to it may also occur if measures are passed without regard to the claims of others or to the national situation. The individual proposals for legislative reform or executive action must, as it were, be content to stand in an orderly breadline; they must not attempt to rush the shop […] this involves a lot of voluntary subordination"; and 4) the acceptance of pluralism and tolerance of the others' opinions.[18]

Certain prerequisites for democracy have become more important in the contemporary world since the broad public is able to fully participate in politics after the transition without a gradual process of habituation. Nevertheless, it is not true that the transition to democracy is necessarily linked to specific social and cultural patterns. The necessary prerequisites in my view are state stability and legitimacy, political elites' commitment to democracy, the lack of opposition to the transition on the part of the army and security services, and, in some cases, a regional environment that is not hostile to democracy.[19] We cannot ignore that ready-made democratic systems and ideas are available to adopt, even partially, whether with the intention of creating ideological harmony through consensual practise and acknowledgement of the pluralist reality, or for other reasons, for example, the belief that democracy is the best system for managing political conflicts and guaranteeing civil rights.

In our era, even before the rise of democracies in Southern Europe, Latin America, and Eastern Europe, democracy was instituted in Federal Germany after the defeat of Nazism in the Second World War and the fragile democratic experience of the Weimar Republic. Germany opted for a pluralist, federal system that attached great importance to the role of political parties. Democracy was also established in Japan. How was this possible? Had a grassroots democratic culture taken hold and flourished in the brief window following their military defeat in the Second World War? Unlikely. Rather, there was the influence and the direct presence of the triumphant powers, the ready-made democratic model to import or imitate, and the political elites willing to adopt it for various reasons, including their political convictions and their refusal to return to dictatorship. They did not wait for popular political culture to democratize. Nor should we forget that an entire international order was invested in the success of this experiment, which was translated into economic and military assistance. The old regime's security apparatus was defeated, and the new regime could build its own apparatus and army due to the presence of the armies of the allies, especially the American one.

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18   Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London/New York: Routledge, 1996 [1942]), pp. 232-302, esp. 294, 295; Max Weber, *Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946). These ideas are discussed on pp. 290-295, in addition to the need for some institutions, such as the judiciary and the army, to be exempted from electoral politics.

19   Bishara, *al-Intiqāl al-Dīmuqrāṭī*.

The crucial difference – or the irony of history, so to speak – is that the public in countries transitioning from authoritarianism directly to full scale electoral democratic participation, where a mass democratic culture has not yet evolved, plays a greater role than during the rise of the earliest democracies where participation was exclusive. Such was the case with the old liberal regimes that democratized, gradually allowing cautious mass participation.

While the direct transition can be encumbered by sprawling security apparatuses and politicised armies, capable of thwarting any democratic experiment they opposed, the critical moment is the period immediately following the transition, when the public sphere is thrown open and the broad public begins engaging in politics with political cultures forged under authoritarianism. This is the moment when effective, democratic political elites are vital, to curb the slide into demagoguery and to resist alliances with old regime or authoritarian forces that seek to defeat democratic rivals. At this stage, too, it is important to reach compromises with the army, if it is not disposed to democracy, pending a change in leadership. Thus, the task of political elites is to inculcate in the public democratic values, such as respect for election results, acceptance of pluralism, tolerance of other opinions, and respect for civil liberties. This cannot be accomplished through exhortation and preaching, whose hypocrisy is quickly exposed, but through practice: parliamentary deliberation, enactment of laws, respect for citizens' civil rights and liberties and for existing institutions, and a tolerant, non-censorial approach that accepts pluralism in principle and not as a tactic until power is attained. However, democratic transition fails if it is accompanied by chaos, a lack of security, extended economic crisis, and continuous deterioration of living standards.

The culture of the public may be neither democratic nor civic after decades of dictatorship. For the general public, the various political attributes used to describe political cultures – democratic, liberal, demagogic, populist, opportunist, instrumentalist, principled, moderate, radical – apply to parties and politicians. Robert Dahl (1915-2014) and Herbert McCloskey (1916-2006) asserted as well that democratic stability requires democratic values and norms – not among voters but among professional or career politicians.[20]

While I emphasize the proposition that political elites who lead the transition from authoritarianism to democracy must be committed to democracy, I would highlight two seemingly contrasting, latent dangers: the insularity of elites, and populism. That said, I believe that the political culture of the public plays a role in the long run. The test of the democratic system is how successful it is in spreading its culture, not only among the masses but also within the state apparatus, especially the security services and the army. Success in this regard helps the system cope with potentially destabilizing crises. A consolidated democracy gives rise to a democratic culture, which in turn helps sustain the system.

For the American political scientist Larry Diamond, democratic culture is not a prerequisite for the emergence of democracy, and there is no such thing as an abstract democratic culture distinct from the various other cultures in which it is embedded.[21] Democracies may emerge before this culture is dominant, and they can survive the presence of subcultures that are hostile or sceptical towards it. It is the survival of democracy which allows such subcultures to embrace democracy, meaning that eventually they change, are marginalised, or grow less intense. The important thing is the existence of other strong, pro-democracy social groups and that elites and the main political and social forces agree on democratic legitimacy.

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[20] Herbert McClosky, "Consensus and Ideology in American Politics," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 58, no. 2 (June 1964), pp. 361, 372-379. McClosky represents the view that consensus among voters is based on abstract principles rather than democratic attitudes towards specific issues and problems. In this view, the basis for that consensus among voters is the consensus between educated elites and those with political influence.

[21] Larry Diamond, "Conclusion: Causes and Effects," in: Larry Diamond (ed.), *Political Culture and Democracy in Developing Countries* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1993), p. 430.

On the question of the relative importance of elite culture compared to mass culture in this age of communication and social media revolution, we should not ignore the significance of the latter for the stability of democracy. In unstable democracies, whether due to poor institutional performance or a gap between expectations and possibilities, popular pressure from below can influence political elites. The exhibitionist extremes of self-expression on social media, and the engagement it receives, create favourable conditions for populist politicians and demagogues. More important is that social media and even the traditional media – which is forced to compete by joining the fray – amplifies the cacophony of populist debate in the public sphere, the unbridled self-expression, and the solipsism that arises after being denied freedom of expression for so long in authoritarian states. It further sharpens the incipient partisan struggle for power before the consolidation of the democratic system, which makes parties seem disconnected from ordinary people's concerns. When these conditions coincide with economic malaise in a volatile post-transition period, it may rapidly lead to popular disappointment and frustration and fuel people's longing for order, even authoritarian order.

All of this demonstrates the importance of disciplined political participation, the willingness to control partisan competition based on the common stake in the success of the new system, and the continual habituation of the public to democratic values within a system that gives citizens the space to participate but does not offer them undemocratic alternatives, even during crises, economic or otherwise. This is an extremely difficult balance to maintain amidst the disruptions that accompany democratic transitions. Here, the support of established democracies to transitional ones could be vital.

Democracy is a system of government made up of institutions, laws, and procedures that interact with a population comprised of individuals, interest groups, and political parties. This system influences and is influenced by social and political structures, and it is vulnerable to crises and shocks, as well as structural defects. However, democracy as a system is also about values that distinguish it from other political systems. It is true that some actors favour democracy because it is the most effective system for resolving the question of who will rule without bloodshed. Others, including educated elites and politicians, are attracted to it because of the successes of democratic, economically advanced countries. Presumably there are others still who prefer democracy because it entails pluralism and a way of life with guaranteed rights and freedoms that give meaning to citizenship. These are the democrats who struggle under tyranny, not only *against* authoritarianism, but *for* democracy.

The existence of a principled elite fighting for democracy prior to the democratic transition is not of negligible importance, no matter how small it is or is its role in the transition because it is not a primary political actor. In this case, its function is to valorise democracy through struggle and generate ideas. In their defence of democracy, these political elites express a moral, as opposed to pragmatic, preference for democracy over authoritarianism, even if the latter performs better economically in the early stages of modernization and appears to be a better guarantor of social peace.

Radical, pro-democracy elites approach democracy as the system of government most capable of balancing and applying the values of equality and freedom. Freedom here is not meant in the absolute, philosophical sense, but as civil rights and liberties that entail responsibilities and duties. Equality refers to the acceptance of moral parity among individuals and the assumption that every adult citizen can determine what is best for them, make moral decisions, and, thus, take part in the determination of their fate. It also refers to an absence of privileges acquired through birth or wealth and the need for the state to provide for equal opportunities, including by fostering the conditions that make it possible to take advantage of such opportunities. These ideas are the catalyst for the intellectual ferment needed when building institutions. They should be promoted and popularised during the phase of democratic consolidation, for they cannot be dominant during the transition itself.

How Did an Alliance with Dictatorships Give Rise to Culturalist "Theories" of Democracy?

Proponents of the civic culture approach believed that it contributed to the resilience of a democratic system, particularly when exposed to shocks. Although they did not claim that it was a condition of democracy, in the midst of the Cold War, the idea that a culture compatible with democracy was a prerequisite for it gained a foothold in the media and popular academic circles. This came about as decision-makers and experts in the West were justifying support for "friendly" dictatorships against the Soviet bloc on the grounds that the culture of these peoples was not amenable to democracy. This was the context in which the presumed link between democracy and culture became widely believed. More recently, this bit of received wisdom has become a refrain among contemporary dictators in the Arab world, who, when addressing a Western audience in interviews or speeches, are keen to emphasize that democratic standards, and even human rights, are not compatible with their peoples' culture.

Theorists in the socialist bloc offered another rationale for opposing democracy, arguing that it was a form of bourgeois dictatorship – their term for liberal democracy – which was a superstructure that served and gave expression to an exploitative, class-based, capitalist system. Their argument for opposing democracy was thus that it was merely a front for exploitation. In contrast, they argued that autocracy was necessary to prevent the enemies of socialism from conspiring against it by spreading "delusions of democracy". Of course, the Soviets also supported dictatorships in allied states. In this regard, their position was more internally consistent insofar as the system of government in both their own countries and these allied states was authoritarian.

History has shown that the provision of civil rights and liberties (which communist thinkers considered a façade, or formalities without substance) contributed to the attainment of greater social rights. Conversely, economic equality without freedom produced a lower standard of living and a bureaucratic, authoritarian form of state capitalism. Moreover, the Soviet system held no appeal for most residents of democratic states, not only because of the relatively low standard of living compared to advanced capitalist states, but also because of the lifestyle. A way of life that encompasses rights and liberties that take root over time such that they come to be taken for granted is unquestionably a component of citizens' culture and norms. And this way of life does not come into being before people enjoy such rights and realize their benefits, and before a second generation is raised on them.

Democracy in the West initially sustained itself without a politico-cultural consensus on basic values, thanks to a general agreement that legitimacy resides exclusively in the institutions of the democratic system. In the absence of a consensus, there is compromise and an acceptance of the legitimacy of institutions and of time-bound, majority rule. This encourages politicians and the public to abandon zero-sum solutions and accept the compromises that enable co-existence. With time, a minimum consensus has taken shape to accept the rule of those elected by the majority for a set duration, and to respect civil and political rights and liberties enshrined in the constitution and law, as well as the rules governing citizenship, participation, and behaviour in the public sphere. This consensus has been largely bound up with national identity, and these rules and principles have not applied to people outside the nation. In some sense, the ethnic national group replaced organic, communitarian groups. However, relations within a nation of citizens remain relationships between individuals presumed to enjoy moral autonomy and to maintain their private sphere vis-à-vis the public sphere. Their relations are ostensibly governed by rights, duties, law, and public ethics rather than belonging, status, social hierarchy, and privileges of birth or lack thereof. In fact, this remains a point of conflict in modern societies and is far from settled.

Although the concept of citizenship has expanded to give political rights to workers, women, and minorities, and social rights have evolved along with civil rights, these rights, as well as the degree to which minority rights enjoy social acceptance and become part of political culture, remain a site of various struggles. Here, I must stress that it would be wrong to downplay the importance of disseminating the principles of the democratic system in school curricula, the media, etc. If the political elites declare their commitment to these principles, tensions or conflicts may arise due to the gap between professed principles and political realities and practice. At that point, there is a clear need for a democratic elite (in politics, the media, the academy, the judiciary, and unions) to form coalitions with embattled popular forces and demand the application and expansion of these principles, whether they are enshrined in the constitution or even in the absence of a constitution. This shifting, evolving dynamic – arising from contradictions between, on the one hand, professed common values like civil liberties, equality before the law, and later the demand for equal opportunity and, on the other, the actual practices of the authorities, or the gap between expectations and reality – is one of the most important features of the democratic system. State institutions adopt and enact civil and political rights and freedoms in response to pressure from social and political alliances and struggles, but the degree to which these rights and liberties are embedded in the public culture plays a role in the struggle to see them realised.

The commonly held belief that the lack of a culture conducive to democracy in the Third World explains the absence of democracy is based on the unstated assumption that democracy in the West was founded on just such a conducive culture. This belief is ahistorical or, dare I say, reverses cause and effect by holding up the democratic culture in the West as prior to the democratic system itself. Some scholars have very earnestly traced the origins of this culture to specific features of the Nordic peoples and their histories, such as the assemblies of Germanic tribes before Christianity, or to Greek philosophy and Judeo-Christian culture. In fact, these "tribal councils" – assuming they existed – and collective decision-making were not exclusive to Germanic tribes, and the idea of a Judeo-Christian heritage, if such a thing exists beyond its use as a mechanism to exceptionalize the Holocaust in the history of Jewish-Christian relations, was postulated after democracies were established. In fact, the Jewish and Christian traditions, like those of other ancient religions, contain far more anti-democratic than democratic elements, with the latter being typically attributed to those traditions retrospectively.

The truth is that what we think of as the dominant democratic culture, which fosters commitment to the rule of law, citizens' rights, and political pluralism, is the product of the gradual rise and evolution of the democratic system and in stages. This process, which included habituation and acculturation to democracy, lasted more than a century in the West. As for the democratically humble beginnings of the liberal order, they cannot be explained by any specific culture that predated it. The emergence of that order can only be explained with reference to historical conditions and anomalies: relations, conflicts, and the balance of power between the king, the aristocracy/landowners/feudalists, and the nascent bourgeoisie in Britain and France, and other conditions in the United States. The experiences in these three countries undoubtedly influenced one another. The subsequent development of democracy in other countries did not grow out of the same social, political, and economic milieux that prevailed in these countries, nor did it follow the same trajectory.

Political Culture and Slavery between Tocqueville and Moore[22]

Barrington Moore's (1913-2005) study on the social roots of dictatorship and democracy is one of the most important contributions in the field. Moore approached the divergence between the long historical trajectories leading to authoritarian and democratic forms of government by looking at agrarian systems

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[22] This and subsequent sections are a reworking of the chapter on political culture from my *al-Intiqāl al-Dīmuqrāṭī wa-Ishkāliyyātuh*. Some passages are taken directly from that text, while others have been revised.

and whether they had led to peasant revolutions, analysing relations between feudalists and peasants and the role of the bourgeoisie. The path to democracy, he concluded, is one in which there is no peasant revolution, and agrarian relations are transformed as the bourgeoisie spearheads a process of modernization. Relying on an analysis of social class structures, Moore asserted that the emergence of the democratic system was not associated with any particular essential cultural core, religious or otherwise, but was rather related to the development of social structures and associated political conflicts.[23] Theda Skocpol commended his analytical emphasis on social structures rather than culture,[24] at a time when American political science was more oriented to behaviouralist, culturalist, and institutionalist approaches. Moore concluded that historically, democracy was predicated on the development of capitalist relations in agriculture and arrangements that forestalled the prospects of late peasant revolutions, like those in China and Russia. The early alliance between capital and landowners, Moore said, spared these societies the kind of top-down modernization led by fascist regimes.[25] Here, of course, he is speaking of the earliest democratic and fascist regimes.

Moore did not take the dominant culture into account. His view was that the culturalist explanation rests on a circular argument.[26] The political system is a product of culture, this explanation suggests, but each political system, as it comes to dominate society, produces its own prevailing or hegemonic culture, thus reducing the system's reliance on violence, for no system can be perpetuated by violence alone.

The culturalist explanation is indeed a logical fallacy when one is talking about developments across historical epochs, but when the subject is a particular case in a specific time and place – a revolution or a contemporary political shift in a certain country – then cultural, political, and economic factors must be taken into account. In his discussion of a short-term development like the American Civil War, Moore recognised the limits of the economic explanation. Although two different economic systems did exist in the North and the South, which could be used to explain their different attitudes towards slavery and could be assumed to have produced two different cultures that in turn fuelled mistrust between people with different moral values,[27] the Civil War was driven by the conflict over the supremacy of the federal law and the mode of production as well as by a question of grave moral and cultural import, that of slavery.

Although the North and South shared a common religion, language, and heritage, two distinct cultures arose as a result of various economic and historical circumstances. The conflict over laws, the secession of the southern states, and the eruption of war cannot be understood without reference to cultural difference.

After the war, political change was imposed on the South before its culture changed. Cultural change came gradually, as the struggle for the rights of African Americans and against discrimination persisted for more than a century, even after the demise of slavery as an economic system, and under an ostensibly democratic system and nominal legal equality. Indeed, this history proves an important point: culture does not change immediately with a change in regime. It endures, and the policies and laws laid down by a government, along with the conditions they create, have a profound impact on political culture. However, it is difficult to determine for certain the degree to which the values and attitudes towards slavery held by Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) and Republican congressional leaders influenced their decisions. We cannot deny their intellectual and ethical impulses, but we must also recognize the importance they accorded to

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[23] This is in contrast to the socio-historical approach of Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt (1923-2010), who distinguished between civilizations that had evolved mechanisms for government accountability and others that did not as religions emerged in Axial Age. See: Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt, "Cultural Traditions and Political Dynamics: The Origins of Modes of Ideological Politics," *British Journal of Sociology,* vol. 32, no. 2 (June 1981), pp. 155-181.

[24] Theda Skocpol, "A Critical Review of Barrington Moore's Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy," *Politics and Society*, vol. 4, no. 1 (September 1973), pp. 1, 34.

[25] Bishara, *al-Intiqāl al-Dīmuqrāṭī wa-Ishkāliyyātuh*, p. 146.

[26] Barrington Moore Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*, with a new foreword by Edward Friedman and James C. Scott (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993 [1966]), p. 486.

[27] Ibid., pp. 117-118.

federal sovereignty over the southern states, as well as the significance of economic factors such as the industrial North's diminishing need for slavery relative to the plantation-based economy of the agrarian South. Even the dispute over whether the United States was a single country subject to the same laws or a confederation had a cultural dimension.

Moore wrote that human beings, individually and collectively, do not react and interact with their reality the way that chemicals react in a test tube. There are always intervening variables between people and objective reality, consisting of needs, expectations, and ideas derived from the past and chiefly from culture. These "filters", as Moore called them, obscure parts of "the objective situation" and highlight others.[28]

Writing about the same topic a century before Moore, Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) made no effort to distinguish economic and social factors from cultural ones, nor did he elaborate a theory to explain the relationship between them. He observed that the New England settlers in the first half of the seventeenth century came from English Puritan communities and subsequently attracted people like themselves. Adherents of this sect tended to hail from educated, middle-class backgrounds.[29] The early settlers who immigrated to the area that would later be known as New England in 1620 were driven in search of freedom of worship and to escape religious persecution and compulsion. Some of these regions were granted a form of political autonomy. Tocqueville stressed the high degree of homogeneity among the settlers in terms of language, culture, religious sect, and the desire to build a better society.[30] For Tocqueville, this self-rule was the nucleus of American democracy.

However, the settlers of the South, who had earlier arrived in Virginia, had more diverse class origins. They often lacked economic resources and were not united by any particular sect or ethical code. In fact, they were initially united only in their quest for gold. The introduction of the slave system set in motion a major sociocultural shift, which Tocqueville summed up as the emergence of a new, class-based nobility who were narrow-minded, lazy, and arrogant. For him, the system of slavery was explained by this combination of what he called the "English character" with customs and traditions forged in the South.[31]

The important point is that settlers in both the North and the South were English and were descended from the same environment and culture, though they immigrated with different aims and went on to construct two entirely different socio-economic systems. There were cultural differences between the settlers arising from social status or religious sect, which would subsequently interact with conditions in their local areas. As we seek to understand the outcome of this interaction, we cannot separate cultural background, social status, and how a group approaches reality from reality itself. Tocqueville's modest approach to documentation and interpretation therefore seems persuasive and logical, albeit not heavily theorised or academically sophisticated. It nevertheless offers rich material for those who wish to theorize, though it cannot easily be shoehorned into a simple unidirectional relation of cause and effect.

Cultural Critics and the Struggle for Democracy

Criticism of dominant cultures is undoubtedly important, especially in the context of a struggle for rationalism and in defence of moral values over nihilism. I believe there is no escaping these "culture wars", but a radical change in political culture is not a condition which societies must meet in order to acquire citizenship-based rights in a democratic state.

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[28] Moore, p. 485.
[29] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Eduardo Nolla (ed.), pp. 53-54, 59-61.
[30] Ibid., p. 59.
[31] Ibid., p. 52; Bishara, *al-Intiqāl al-Dīmuqrāṭī wa-Ishkāliyyātuh*, pp. 416-417.

Elie Kedourie's work is exemplary of the confusion between culture in general and what Almond and Verba called political culture. Kedourie's monograph *Democracy and Arab Political Culture* is a paradigmatic example of the tendency to take historical legacies, customs, traditions, and experiences with governance as indicative of a timeless, immutable essence with a decisive impact on the nature of contemporary political systems. Viewing contemporary Arabs and Arab culture through this lens, he comes to the conclusion that democracy is not possible in the Arab world. He even chided British politicians for trying to impose it during the Mandate period. Referring to the "mindset of Islam" – not even Muslims, but Islam – he asserts that concepts such as representative constitutional government, an independent judiciary, elections, political institutions regulated by laws enacted by elected parliaments, popular sovereignty as a basis for governmental legitimacy, and even the idea of the state as a specific territorial entity that enjoys sovereignty are all alien to modern political traditions in the Arab world since the First World War and to Islam's "mindset". The Islamic political tradition, he wrote, began with the community in Medina and later evolved into the caliphate, the sole type of governance that Islam knew, in which the caliph was simultaneously ruler, judge, and military commander. It is unclear here whether he is discussing factual events in Islamic history or what he calls "the political theory of Islam", a theory one cannot trace and for which he provides no clues, except simply and falsely declaring the caliphate as a specific system of rule.[32] In any case, Kedourie considers the absence of democratic concepts to be a characteristic of Islamic history but he does not explain how such concepts came to exist in what are now established democracies before the rise of democracy.

Following a review of parliamentary government in interwar Iraq and Egypt and post-independence Syria, Kedourie concludes that this era was in no way a liberal age, caustically dismissing claims to the contrary. Political pluralism was but a cloak for governance by traditional elites insulated from the masses and ravaged by corruption. Even more, Arab governments in the "liberal age" were all phoney and about formalities, having come to power through widespread electoral fraud.[33] In his discussion of the parliamentary experience in Syria and Iraq, Kedourie asserts that Arabs generally support and vote for strongmen, turning voting behaviour under systems of political feudalism into a feature of Arab political culture.[34] Democracy did not take root in the Arab world, he writes, because its underpinnings were too different from the despotism and total acquiescence to which Arab societies had become accustomed, which remained little changed from the time of the Sassanids and Byzantines, and the Islamic caliphate that replaced them.[35]

Leaving aside Kedourie's inability to see anything new in the interwar Arab liberal experience, is his analysis not similar to the grumblings of ordinary people who, expressing their discontent with conditions, declare that Arabs are only fit for despotism? Kedourie's impressionistic narrative of events and facts is presented as evidence of a cultural defect, from which it is concluded that any Arab democracy in the future will inevitably fail. This is tantamount to claiming that Arabs will not have democracy in the future because they never had it in the past.

Not all critics of Arab political culture share Kedourie's obvious antipathy to Arabs. But some of those who critique "Arab political culture" from within do turn away from the struggle for democracy because they find themselves in a vicious circle. Assuming that political culture must change first, they do not join the fight for democracy; nor do they join the cultural fray because they see cultural criticism in academic frameworks itself as an alternative to participation in the production of an alternative culture through practice.

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[32] Elie Kedourie, *Democracy and Arab Political Culture* (London: Frank Cass, 1994), p. 8.

[33] Ibid., pp. 85-86.

[34] Ibid. p. 52.

[35] Ibid., p. 102.

Moreover, some liberal-leftist circles in the West – previously considered a contradiction in terms – count certain personal liberties won in the past three decades in parts of Western societies as basic human and civil rights (e.g., freedom of sexual orientation and gender identity) and they wish to impose them on conservative segments of their own society. They even seek to impose them on other societies still living under authoritarian regimes, where communitarian morality is still prevalent in the public sphere – where personal morality has not yet been separated from public ethics – and functions as a bulwark against cynicism and nihilism under authoritarianism. In this, they are practicing a kind of paternalism that can devolve into cultural imperialism.

The 1990s saw a proliferation of works in Arabic exploring the causes of the Arab world's enduring imperviousness to democracy. Some scholars traced it back to the legacy of Arab political culture as reflected in medieval writings "where violence reigns supreme",[36] as Fuad Ishaq Khoury had it, or the "sultanic mindset" that had developed over centuries of monarchical rule and persisted in the culture of individuals, or to the patriarchal system. These cultural critics typically neglected two issues: the nature of the ruling regime in their countries, and the democratic transition. For all of these authors, the causes listed above are either unchangeable, or they must change for it to become possible to uproot autocracy and transition to democracy.[37] Hisham Sharabi wrote, "If we want our Arab society to overcome its burgeoning crisis, regain its vigour, and take part in history once more, then it must undertake a process of civilizational critique to enable it to create a new independent self-awareness and restore a purposeful rationalism".[38] Sharabi's approach to constructing this new consciousness is a two-part process. The first involves a recognition of "the hegemony of patriarchy in contemporary Arab society", while the second rests on finding "means to pull it up by the roots". He defines this form of patriarchy as "power diffused throughout the social structure represented by the patriarchal model, arising from it, and embodied in societal relations and all of Arab civilization".[39] This diffusion of power throughout the levers of society is not too distant from the theorizing of postmodern thinkers. Its fatal flaw is that it does not see the qualitative difference between these diffused powers and political power. Certain omissions therefore become manifest as they skirt around the question of the system of government or what their people call "the ruling regime".

In any case, I do not think there is a single country among the old, established democracies that abolished the patriarchy or the patriarchal social and cultural order prior to the emergence of democracy. A critique of patriarchal culture is important in theory and practice, but its eradication is not a prerequisite for democracy.

Various intellectuals and scholars, approaching the topic from different perspectives, have competed to identify cultural defects and have traced them back to cultural heritage and social structures. Some of them – Abdallah Laroui, Hisham Sharabi, Fuad Ishaq Khoury – have offered constructive theses, but they have generally failed to appreciate the role of contemporary authoritarian regimes in the modern state and their impact on society and its culture. They have further showed little understanding of the need to dismantle authoritarianism, first for the sake of justice and second in order to change the culture that thrives in the shadow of these regimes.

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[36] Fuad Ishaq Khoury, *al-Dhihniya al-ʿArabiyya: al-ʿUnf Sayyid al-Aḥkām* (Beirut/London: Dar al-Saqi, 1993).

[37] Muhammad Hafiz Yaqub, *al-ʿAṭab wa-l-Dalāla: fī al-Thaqāfa wa-l-Insidād al-Dīmuqrāṭī* (Ramallah: Palestinian Institute for Democracy Studies, 1997), pp. 132-145. I will simply note my agreement with Yaqub's response to Laroui regarding the "sultanic mindset" as a timeless aspect of Arab culture. The purpose of this study is not to critique the Arabic literature on the topic, but simply to refute the idea that a democratic or pro-democracy culture is a necessary precondition for the democratic transition.

[38] Hisham Sharabi, *al-Naqd al-Ḥadārī li-l-Mujtamaʿ al-ʿArabī fī Nihāyat al-Qarn al-ʿIshrīn* (Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 1999), p. 10.

[39] Ibid., p. 11.

In avoiding the issue of the nature of the system of government in specific states, many thinkers have occupied themselves with relatively benign debates that do not disturb power or any authority. Authoritarian regimes share the belief that their peoples' culture is not equipped for democracy and so must first be changed. They have no objections to discussions about culture's capability to change and its relationship to customs, heritage, and identity. Yet, there is another debate to be had that might be equally inoffensive to the authorities, but which merits greater attention, and that is public ethics.

A Remark on Public Ethics

Having put paid to the idea that political culture can be derived from culture in general and having questioned the validity of making direct inferences about political practice based on political culture, it should be noted that our focus on political culture – on its importance for the political elite during the democratic transition, – may distract us from important aspects of the dominant culture that may affect people's lives as much as politics. They may influence politics as well, although they are not strictly speaking part of political culture in the sense of orientations towards a particular type of political behaviour. I refer here to public ethics, meaning morals and standards of conduct in the public sphere.

Authoritarian government warps not only political culture, but also public ethics, especially under the modern state, where a public sphere has emerged, transcending communitarian groups, in which the individual behaves in accordance with public values and ethical codes of conduct towards other people and institutions with whom they have no bonds of kinship or personal attachment. Public ethics may be so twisted by authoritarianism that they subsequently hinder the construction of a democratic system. Specifically, I have in mind the way authoritarianism damages a person's understanding of their obligations towards others, fosters a mistrust in state institutions and the Other in general, gives license to do what it takes to secure one's personal interest and get a leg up on others by, for example, cultivating personal relationships with state employees in a position to do favours. Authoritarianism wholly undermines the very idea of a public interest that transcends one's group. It nurtures hypocrisy and duplicity and the corrupt exploitation of positions meant to promote the public good. It subverts the belief that merit is the basis of public employment, while fostering an adversarial or exploitative, instrumental approach to public institutions. If such ethics become prevalent – and I emphasize, they are typically not considered part of political culture – it becomes difficult to build institutions based on broad public participation in the election of various authorities, to establish unions and federations, and to exercise oversight over state authorities.

These ethics are a site of struggle, covert and overt, in societies that are modernized from above and ruled by authoritarian regimes. The perversion of public ethics is resisted, on a daily basis, by people who, having assimilated modernity and its values, are endowed with individual morals and public ethics, despite the top-down nature of modernization. These people may form unions and associations dedicated to specific issues, but their chief struggle takes place in their daily lives. At the same time, traditional forces resist the social atomization that modernization brings in their own spheres, where there is no separation between individual morality and public ethics. These forces do not present a different view of public interest, nor do they press for public ethics at the state level; they rather engage in a conflict of group interests. However, various modern ideological forces resist by offering comprehensive alternatives, including different understandings of the public good, but their focus is less on public ethics per se and more on espousing their ideology.

Public ethics, along with economic conditions, are a key determinant of the quality of social life, regardless of attitudes, political orientations, and political action, with an important impact on people's buy-in to the political system. Life may be hellish under any system of government if there are no tacitly

agreed-upon public ethical standards. A person would step out of their home unsure of what sort of behaviour awaits them from people on the street or in the workplace, the shops, the clinic, and the police station. This state of anomie occurs when the collective breaks down during the process of modernization under an authoritarian regime. Modernization effectively fragments communities due to migration to the city or relocation to earn a livelihood, and alters frames of reference, class divisions, and the process of education, which cuts across and through groups. At the same time, the authoritarian system precludes the emergence of civic virtues, i.e., the sense of responsibility and duty towards others, an awareness of the common interest, a responsible approach to public space not as ownerless but rather as belonging to the public, and an ethical posture that transcends traditional and modern communal groups, whose ethical standards apply to those within the group but do not govern behaviour towards those outside of it. None of these issues are assigned political or ideological weight, but they may become most important in life and can exert a crucial, albeit indirect influence over politics by fostering a climate of mistrust and fear of freedom, and by encouraging people to look to the state to impose norms. Despite their significance, research on political culture rarely touches on these issues.

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