

Defining Democracy: The Evolutions of Commonwealth Scholarship and Ideas of Democracy

Democracy is a key issue for Commonwealth governmental and civil society organisations, forming one of the twelve core values (and implicated in most of the others) reiterated at the Trinidad and Tobago Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in 2009.¹ Ideas of democracy are incredibly powerful but also complex. Chief Emeka Anyoaku, former Commonwealth Secretary General illustrates this complexity as he explains the attributes of a democratic culture:

The first is that the people must be free to choose—and change—their government at credible and regular elections. At every level, democracy is fundamentally about choice. Free elections, in turn, entail freedom of speech and of association. Without freedom of speech, including freedom of the press, there can be no genuine national debate and no real criticism of government. Without freedom of association, open political party and civil society activity is impossible. None of these freedoms can be secured without the rule of law... The remaining ingredients of the democratic ethos are accountability and transparency... These are what I would call the universal attributes of democracy...²

To this definition which takes as its scale of debate the national level, we must also add elements that work at a more-than-national scale. Practices and ideas of development, conditional aid, good governance and international sanction come into play in a Commonwealth context. Democratic processes, then, take place not only within national borders, but also in the context of international relations of power, and of particular geopolitical histories of empire and decolonisation. Parliamentary democracy, along with a wealth of legal and linguistic connections was, at least

¹ In full: '**Democracy**: reaffirming our belief in the inalienable right of the individual to participate by means of free and democratic political processes in shaping the society in which they live; underlining that not only governments but all political parties and civil society also have responsibilities in upholding and promoting democratic culture and practices as well as accountability to the public in this regard; and recognising that parliaments and representative local government and other forms of local governance, are essential elements in the exercise of democratic governance'

http://www.thecommonwealth.org/document/181889/34293/35144/216908/commonwealth_values_and_principles.htm

² Emeka Anyoaku, 'Cultures of Democracy: A Commonwealth Perspective' *The Round Table* (2000) **357** pp.529-536, p.532

initially, a common denominator that united Commonwealth countries as a result of a shared imperial past.³

The title given to me here - The evolutions of Commonwealth scholarship and ideas of democracy – is potentially vast. Scholars have taken legal, political, and international relations perspectives and focussed on the historical, spatial and cultural aspects of ideas of democracy. In this paper I will try to briefly review some of the key themes in this writing, whilst drawing on two quite different fields of scholarship which do not often cross paths, namely *Commonwealth Scholarship about democracy* written by Commonwealth specialists, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA), other civil society practitioners and the Commonwealth Secretariat for example, and *Scholarship about democracy in Commonwealth countries* written by academics in a range of disciplines. I will suggest possible useful points of contact between these two bodies of research.

The title *Evolutions* of Commonwealth scholarship gives me licence to focus on the historical and geographical genealogy of these ideas as well as on more contemporary directions in this research. The rest of this paper is divided into four sections: the first focuses on *Histories of Commonwealth Democracy*, discussing early ideas of the Commonwealth as an international democratic space. The second discusses *Legacies of Empire in Commonwealth democracy*, setting out some of the ways that the Commonwealth's imperial history has been debated and critiqued, with particular regard to the place of democracy in broader Western ideas of progress and development. The third section focuses on *Cultures of Commonwealth democracy* and brings the story up to date. The final section discusses *Productive points of contact* between the two different literatures. My work primarily considers the Commonwealth from a British perspective, and this is reflected in the discussions of democratic scholarship that follow.

Histories of Commonwealth democracy

This conference is part of broader celebrations of the centenary of the *Round Table* and it is to early contributors to this journal that we can turn in order to get a sense of the origins of scholarship about the Commonwealth and democracy. Published by the Round Table group based in Oxford in the years following 1909, the journal provided the mouthpiece for a series of ideas about the future of Empire, relationships with the Dominions and, from 1919, the Commonwealth. Alongside the

³ James Mayall, 'Introduction' in James Mayall (eds.) *The Contemporary Commonwealth: An Assessment 1965-2009* (Routledge, London, 2009)

development of democratic and politically independent nation states within the Empire, articles in the *Round Table* focussed on the possibilities of closer organic union within the Empire perhaps leading to world government. Lionel Curtis, a key member of the Round Table group utilised the idea of Commonwealth to argue for these closer political connections between Britain and the Dominions. Broader internationalist visions of Empire challenged the hegemony of the nation state; emphasising the use of mechanisms and associations like that of the Empire/Commonwealth in pursuing world government and viewing them as compatible with, or a precursor to, the League of Nations and other international organisations such as a European Union.⁴ In this conception Empire-Commonwealth stood for freedom, progress, international cooperation and peace. Early ideas then, discussed the Commonwealth as an international democratic space, even if this was a political community drawing on a cultural community and producing a democracy which for the most part excluded the non-white Empire.⁵

Alongside specific visions for the Commonwealth such as those set out by Curtis and the Round Table, the early twentieth century saw a broader and more popular recasting of Empire. New versions of imperial history aligned the British Empire with 'the enlargement of freedom and independence under the British flag, leading onward and upward to a Commonwealth of free Nations.'⁶ These narratives highlighted the spread of democracy under the patronage of a paternalist imperial power as well as the graduating of the Dominions of Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa into fully equal nations as a result of the Balfour Declaration of 1926. The spread of the Westminster model of democratic government beyond the Dominions was linked to decolonisation so that democracy became, rhetorically at least, a prerequisite for independence.⁷ Narratives of imperial and Commonwealth progress were powerful into the 1950s, as William Roger Louis notes, even those aware of the active process of re-writing of imperial history to fit a more humanitarian agenda - such as Nicholas Mansergh - still ultimately 'accepted the progress of the Commonwealth

⁴ Mike Heffernan, *The European geographical imagination* (Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart, 2007); Deborah Lavin, 'Chapter 5: Lionel Curtis and the idea of Commonwealth' in Madden, F. and Fieldhouse, D. (eds.) *Oxford and the Idea of Commonwealth* (Croom Helm, London, 1982) p.97; W. David McIntyre, *The Britannic Vision: Historians and the Making of the British Commonwealth of Nations, 1907-48* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2009)

⁵ Lavin, 1982

⁶ Nicholas Mansergh, *The Commonwealth Experience* (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 1969) p.4

⁷ The performance and imagery of Independence, as well as some of the tensions underlying this display of smooth transition to democracy, are explored in Robert Holland, Susan Williams and Terry Barringer (eds.) *The Iconography of Independence: Freedoms at Midnight* (Routledge, London, 2010)

as an article of faith.’⁸ In his and in many other accounts there was a teleological argument in which progress would eventually win out.

Early twentieth century visions for the British Commonwealth, and mid-century narratives of the Commonwealth evolving from empire both had at their core particular ideas of democracy, however flawed, and of the Commonwealth as a democratic space. In the next section, I go on to explore how scholarship has examined the legacy of empire, critiqued these Western ideas of democracy and offered alternatives.

Legacies of Empire in Commonwealth Democracy

The connections between material geographies of inequality, failures of democracy, and the political economies of the legacy of imperialism have been highlighted in a plethora of critical accounts of empire that have emerged since decolonisation. Empire often left behind racial tension, difficult borders and unbalanced economies alongside parliamentary democracy, and, as recent research has shown, the Westminster Model itself was applied in multiple and mutable forms in different Commonwealth contexts, sometimes with very problematic outcomes.⁹ Criticism has also come from those who argue that the Commonwealth has failed to confront the power relations that underlie the Commonwealth’s core democracy projects.¹⁰ For example, Marcus Power has questioned the underlying relationship between ideas of democracy and good governance, and economic power, through a case study of conditional aid in Mozambique.¹¹

More recent writing about empire, decolonisation and the Commonwealth from a historical perspective has also done much to highlight the teleological bent of much of the writing that appeared concomitant with the last phase of empire and decolonisation. In addition, it has noted the euro-centrism of many of the ideas on which imperial progress were predicated: particularly of the parliamentary democracy and of the modern industrial economies that were meant to underpin

⁸ Wm. Roger Louis, ‘Introduction’ in Robert Winks (ed.) *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume 5: Historiography* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999) p.7

⁹ See for example, the work of Harshan Kumarasingham presented at the London Debates 2010 at the School of Advanced Study, University of London: *Accountability and the Westminster legacy of executive power* available at: <http://www.sas.ac.uk/768.html> (accessed 23rd May 2010)

¹⁰ See for example Ruth Craggs ‘A contemporary view of the Commonwealth’ *The Commonwealth Yearbook* (2009) pp.72-73

¹¹ Marcus Power, ‘The Commonwealth, ‘development’ and post-colonial responsibility’. *Geoforum* (2009) **40** 1 pp. 14-24

these young democracies.¹² Of further concern has been the geographical positioning - in the imperial core - of those writing about empire and decolonisation. Although the post-war period saw a rise in accounts of the colonial struggle, decolonisation, democracy and independence written by nationals of the countries concerned in newly established national universities, there has been a continued dominance of western voices, institutions and explanations.

Partha Chatterjee and others writing from a postcolonial perspective have questioned the way that the script of colonial nationalism, decolonisation and independent democracy has been written by the West. He offers alternative versions of this history where anti-colonial resistance was fostered not in the colonial elites educated in the Western realm, but in the spiritual domain.¹³ He thus reclaims the agency for decolonisation from the West. Chatterjee's project to try to excavate a modern nationalism that is nevertheless not Western finds parallels in the aims of Nehru in his quest to create a modern - but not Western - India, and in attempts to define African versions of democracy.¹⁴ The Commonwealth also claim this lineage – drawing on Non-Western as well as Western traditions of democracy and human rights.¹⁵ Those who have tended to disregard the Commonwealth as yet another colonial remnant may find the Commonwealth of more relevance if these alternative genealogies were more widely broadcast.

Despite the non-western genealogies for democratic thought and practice claimed in Commonwealth countries and for the Commonwealth itself, the case that there is a continued legacy of imperial modes of thought around progress, development and democracy (the three imagined in tandem) has been strongly made. Research has shown how, in representations as diverse as museum displays, advertising, political speeches, aid policies, and films, imperial modes of thought have remained surprisingly present.¹⁶ Popular visions of undemocratic countries wracked by

¹² Marcus Power, *Rethinking Development Geographies* (Routledge, London, 2003)

¹³ Partha Chatterjee *The Nation and its Fragments* (Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1993)

¹⁴ Julius Nyerere, *Crusade for Liberation* (Dar es Salaam and New York, Oxford University Press, 1978); Julius Nyerere *Freedom and Development: Uhuru na Maendeleo A selection of Writings and Speeches* (Dar es Salaam and New York, Oxford University Press, 1973); Kwame Nkrumah, *I speak of freedom: a statement of African ideology* (London, Heinemann, 1961); Kenneth Kaunda, *Towards Complete Independence* (Lusaka, Zambia Information Service, 1969?); A. J. Luthuli *Africa's Freedom* (London, Unwin Books, 1964)

¹⁵ There is a broad debate around the existence of less adversarial and individualistic ideas of democracy in Asia and Africa. On Confucian principles in Singapore, see Takashi Inoguchi and Edward Newman 'Introduction: "Asian Values" and Democracy and Asia' *Proceedings of a Conference Held on 28 March 1997 at Hamamatsu, Shizuoka, Japan, as Part of the First Shizuoka Asia-Pacific Forum: The Future of the Asia-Pacific Region*. Available at <http://www.unu.edu/unupress/asian-values.html> (accessed 1st June 2010).

¹⁶ See for example Mark Crinson, 'Imperial Story-lands: Architecture and display at the Imperial and Commonwealth Institutes' *Art History* (2000) **22** 1 pp.99-123; Anandi Ramamurthy *Imperial Persuaders: Images*
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despotism, ethnic strife and corruption, which have much in common with colonial imaginaries, have been shown to have continued resonance in the contemporary period.¹⁷ It is against this backdrop the contemporary cultures of Commonwealth democracy are set. It is to these contemporary cultures that we now turn.

Contemporary Cultures of Commonwealth democracy

Although the Singapore Declaration of 1971 was the first explicit statement of Commonwealth Principles, the more recent Harare Declaration (1991) has been highlighted in the historiography as the moment when the Commonwealth began its more concerted and explicit engagement with democracy.¹⁸ The end of the Cold War and the consequently more open geopolitical scene provided a more conducive atmosphere for political change. The work of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, Election Observer Missions¹⁹ and the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) which established 'good governance at home as the price of cooperation abroad'²⁰ together bolstered this engagement. Over the last two decades, the Commonwealth has established a particular culture of political and institutional engagement with democracy (and the lack of it) in its member countries.

The relative merits, successes and failures of these institutions have been the subject of considerable research as a perusal of *The Round Table* and the 'Building Democracy' publications of the Commonwealth Secretariat highlight. There is also a lively debate over questions of national and regional democracy in the Commonwealth.²¹ This scholarship brings together views from academics but also practitioners, journalists and politicians. However, the Commonwealth, and scholarship about it, has not achieved great traction in academia or in the popular imagination, in Britain at

of Africa and Asia in British Advertising (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2003); Patricia Noxolo, 'Claims: A postcolonial critique of 'partnership' in Britain's development discourse' *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* (2006) **27** pp.254-269; Jeffrey Richards, 'Imperial Heroes for a Post-imperial age: Films and the End of Empire' in Stuart Ward (ed.) *British Culture and the End of Empire* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2001)

¹⁷ For example, Pat Ahluwalia, 2001 has discussed the relevance of 'Afro-pessimism' in *Politics and Post-colonial Theory: African Inflections*, (London: Routledge, 2001)

¹⁸ James Mayall, 'Introduction'

¹⁹ Arthur R. Donahoe, 'The Commonwealth and Democracy at the Start of the 21st Century' *The Round Table* (2000) **354** (183-189)

²⁰ James Mayall, 'Introduction' p.19

²¹ See for example Fahimul Quadir 'The Politics of distrust in Bangladesh' *The Round Table* (2010) **99** 406 pp.65-73; F.W. de Clerk 'The recent election and the Zuma Presidency' *The Round Table* (2010) **99** 406 pp.27-33; James Hamill and John Hoffman 'Quiet Diplomacy or Appeasement – South African Policy towards Zimbabwe' *The Round Table* (2009) **98** 402 pp.373-384; Manoah Esipisu and Isaax E. Khaguli *Eyes of democracy, the Media and Elections* (Commonwealth Secretariat, London 2009)

least. Only when Commonwealth election monitors came to observe a General Election in the UK in 2010 did these regular missions make the *Today Programme* - the morning current affairs offering of BBC Radio 4 -with a rather dismissive attitude from the presenter.

The perceived failures of the Commonwealth to make a difference in the democratic processes of its member states may in part explain the lack of attention that it receives in academic, popular and political culture. These failures have not only highlighted the difficulty of making 'a particular kind of political system into the Commonwealth's new *raison d'être* and strategic goal',²² they have also undermined the external image of the Commonwealth. As Zoe Ware cogently argued last year, 'a voluntary association of sovereign states committed to upholding democracy, human rights and diversity has the potential to be a true voice of moral authority on the world stage.. .but every time the Commonwealth appears to shy away from acting with clear moral conviction, or turns a blind eye to the inconsistencies in its own back yard, it distorts this image.'²³

There is much work going on that explores the particular functioning of democratic processes in individual nations, regions, and localities. Moreover, the Commonwealth as an institution has particular culture of democracy which it supports. However, democracy, as idea and practice, is complex and contested, and nowhere more so than in the particular historical and geographical space of the Commonwealth. It is crucial to the future of individual Commonwealth nations and to the continued potency of the Commonwealth as an association.

Productive contact?

Drawing to a close, I find that this review has, thus far, sounded a negative note. This is in part, of course, because democracy running smoothly is rarely front page news. Research has tended to focus on the problematic histories of the idea of democracy in the Commonwealth, and on the undemocratic spaces in its member states today, rather than on the more mundane, but important constitutional developments of stable member states. So, can we be more positive about the state of Commonwealth scholarship? At first glance no. Peter Lyon in his preface to Krishnan Srinivasan's (2005) *The Rise, Decline and Future of the British Commonwealth* decried the lack of Commonwealth

²² James Mayall, 'Introduction' p.20

²³ Zoe Ware 'The Commonwealth at 60: Thoughts from a new generation' *The Round Table* (2009) **98** 404 pp.547-554

scholarship,²⁴ and it is certainly true that formal teaching about and research into the Commonwealth is thinner on the ground than it once was. However, as I hope to have shown in this brief overview, there is actually lots of work being produced that engages directly with the key ideas of the Commonwealth, if not directly with the term Commonwealth or its institutions. Bringing these areas of scholarship into productive tension with the work going on under a more explicit Commonwealth banner can provide us with useful new avenues to explore.

Insights from history, geography, politics, sociology and postcolonial theory could be used to support work coming from the Commonwealth sphere and enable a broader and more critical understanding of the diverse genealogies of democracy that are at work in the Commonwealth. Conversely, I would advocate a broader engagement in academia (beyond the Commonwealth sphere) with the Commonwealth as an institution. The Commonwealth plays an active, though often understated, role in supporting democracy in the contemporary period and also practices its own system of consensus decision making which merit further investigation. In addition, the Commonwealth's long histories of thinking internationally about democracy and citizenship have thus far been underplayed in academic debate. Finally, new approaches in geography and beyond have highlighted the ways that non-Western spaces are often imagined as undemocratic – in Britain at least – but arguably, have done less to produce alternative, more positive narratives. A greater dialogue between the Commonwealth's institutions, actors and commentators on the one hand, and those in different disciplines on the other, may bring about useful correctives by stressing the complexity of stereotypical images, highlighting more positive stories, and raising awareness of the historical and geographical relationships into which our contemporary policies and practices of democracy fit.

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²⁴ Peter Lyon, 'Preface' in Krishnan Srinivasan, *The Rise, Decline and Future of the British Commonwealth* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2005)

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