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Democracy, Power, and Our Failing Imaginations

A Review Essay by Paul Bell

Liberalism and Its Discontents
Francis Fukuyama. London: Profile Books, 2022.

Disorder: Hard Times in the 21st Century
Helen Thompson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022.

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These are hard times for liberal democracy. On 24 February 2022 an electoral autocracy, Russia, invaded an electoral democracy, Ukraine, and swore to wipe its sovereignty off the face of the earth—the consequences need no elaboration here. On the same day the V-Dem Institute published its annual review of the global state of democracy; it made grim reading: 'The level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen is down to 1989 levels'—thirty years of democratic advance have been

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wiped out. 'Dictatorships are on the rise and harbor 70% of the world population—5.4 billion people'; 26 per cent of the world's population live in closed autocracies and 'electoral autocracy [is] the most common regime type and harbors 44% of the world's population—3.4 billion people'.[1]

A fortnight later, I received for review two books that were published within weeks of one another, and that seemed to bookend my own attempts to understand both the war and the retreat of liberal democracy captured by the V-Dem report. The first was Francis Fukuyama's *Liberalism and Its Discontents*; the second, Cambridge don Helen Thompson's *Disorder: Hard Times in the 21st Century.*

If you're born into a democracy, you probably think Winston Churchill was right in telling the British House of Commons in 1947, two years after the defeat of Nazism, that democracy was the worst form of government except for all the others that had been tried. In 1989, as Soviet communism was retreating from its military hegemony in Eastern Europe, Fukuyama published his seminal essay, *The End of History*, sticking the word 'liberal' in front of 'democracy' and saying much the same thing: there could be no advance beyond liberal democracy to some better form of governance—and he's been living down the (unwarranted and uninformed) scorn this provoked ever since.

In a smooth and studied tone of thoughtful warning, Fukuyama delivers his 'discontents'—which, as I read them, are largely the outputs and outcomes of exploitation by populists, identity activists, and our geopolitical adversaries, of perceived inequality and grievance in every possible sphere and class of our liberal democracies, all massively amplified by the internet. He is making to all intents and purposes a plea for moderation. He observes that while democracy, or what passes for governance in the name of the people, is almost universally accepted, it is liberalism and the three pillars on which it rests that have come under attack. The first pillar is pragmatic: liberalism is the best means

1 V-Dem Institute, *Democracy Report, 2022*.

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we have for managing the economic, social, cultural, and religious diversity of our societies. But that pragmatism is now under pressure from different groups who have difficulty accepting the diversity that exists in their societies. The second pillar is moral: liberalism confers equally on citizens the right to make decisions for themselves without undue interference from governments or broader society. But that is threatened now by multiple failures to recognise that human autonomy is not unlimited, and by the growing power of nationalist and group identities. The third pillar is economic: property rights and the freedom to transact powerfully connect liberalism to growth and modernisation, while democracy tempers the inequalities created by market competition. But that has been damaged now by neoliberalism and its increasing detachment from equality and justice, and from the inequalities that have flowed from that in the name of efficiency.

In the final analysis, it is our liberal democracies that Fukuyama is addressing, in particular the United States. Probing its political fragility, its gridlock, and that vital ingredient of a functioning democracy that is vanishing before our eyes—losers' consent—he warns that 'if the US does not fix its underlying structural problems, it will not be able to compete effectively with the world's rising authoritarian powers'.

Fukuyama's remedies? Conservatives need to accept that demographics are real and not going away. A warning to the progressive left that, whatever its devotion to critical theory, actual diversity is not going away either, and to public representatives that it is the *quality* and impersonal even-handedness of government, rather than its size, big or small, that are important to electorates—and following on from that, the desirability of devolving power to the lowest appropriate levels of government, and of protecting both free speech and the idea that citizens do *not* owe each other uniformity of thought. Fukuyama asserts the primacy of individual rights over group rights, regardless of the extent to which individuals are shaped by their group identities—but he adds a corollary: there are limits on human autonomy; autonomy may be 'a basic human value [but it is] not the sole human good that trumps all other visions of the good

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life'. In a pointed rebuke to cancel-culturalists and economic freebooters, Fukuyama writes that successful liberal societies

> cannot be neutral with regard to the values that are necessary to sustain themselves as liberal societies. They need to prioritize public-spiritedness, tolerance, open-mindedness, and active engagement in public affairs if they are to cohere. They need to prize innovation, entrepreneurship, and risk-taking if they are to prosper economically. A society of inward-looking individuals interested only in maximizing their personal consumption will not be a society at all.

And finally that plea—for it can be only a plea—for moderation: the old Greek axiom 'nothing in excess', that principle of last resort, 'for a liberal order that was meant to calm political passions from the start'.

This is all flawlessly rational, but where is reason in a world driven to ever-increasing madness by those passions, and ultimately controlled, as Helen Thompson's *Disorder* seems to suggest, by the demand for a primary power that is neither political nor philosophical but thermodynamic?

Thompson, a political economist, looks through an entirely different lens at how we got here. Her *Disorder* places energy at the heart of a century and more of global geopolitics and leaves you feeling that, however sharp and menacing the threats to liberal democracy, however fierce the clash of our ideas about how we distribute power, money, and opportunity, or about the role of the state, individualism, or identity, in all these things our political fortunes have been merely bobbing along on a turbulent global sea of oil and gas.

Disorder is an 'incredible hulk' of a book; an ugly read, relentlessly and mercilessly dry, but an immensely muscular analysis all the same. It arrived with impeccable timing, just as Russian troops were staged

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on the Ukrainian border for a war whose logic, pre-launch, seemed impossible to comprehend—even in Kyiv, where I was until days before its outbreak—yet which has also fulfilled all the conditions illustrated by Thompson's thesis: the primacy of energy supply, the iron grip of energy dependencies east and west, the determinism of the global dollar. Unless the reader has a good working familiarity with these subjects, one has to stick with it. But for all that, the picture that emerges is fascinating.

Thompson's historical breakpoint is different to the conventional ones—significantly, not the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 but the Suez crisis of 1956. Nasser's closure of the Canal provokes an Anglo-French military response. The US reaction is contrary: about to become a net importer of oil, it wants Europe to be less dependent on American oil; it also expects the British Empire to guarantee energy security in the Middle East; and yet, in this dawning postcolonial era, it will not countenance Britain and France behaving like imperial powers in defence of Europe's energy interests. Consequently, three things happen: the French turn their attention to Algerian oil; Europe begins to focus on nuclear power; and, crucially, Europe turns to Soviet oil and subsequently gas.

From here it is a fairly straight line to 2022. Ukraine's geostrategic importance as a transit route for Russian energy supplies to Europe, which Russia has been determined to diminish, and its political switch away from Russia towards the European Union. Germany shelves Nord Stream 2 in late 2021; Russia invades Ukraine three months later; Russian energy supplies to Europe are brutally cut; Russia closes Nord Stream 1; marine gas pipelines are sabotaged. Meanwhile, through the preceding three decades, the growing energy demand from China and much else besides, including the 2008 Eurozone crisis and a European Union whose individual governments and their fiscal policies are willy-nilly tied to the monetary will of the European Central Bank.

At the far end of this thesis's pipeline are the inescapable fact that economic growth and the planet's ability to feed itself are functions of energy conversion; the conundrum that the energy revolution on which

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limits to climate change depend is itself still largely dependent on fossil fuels; the pain of our transition to lower-density energy; the likelihood that geopolitical conflicts will arise where energy resources are located (look no further than Ukraine); and an uncomfortably high degree of uncertainty about whether the democracies will sink or swim in the face of it all. Thompson offers no remedies, just a hard-eyed truth about how tough this is all going to be, especially for liberal democracies, which seem increasingly unable to cohere around the difficult choices that have to be made to overcome these challenges.

The tones of these two books are quite different. Fukuyama reaches out to his reader with a sagacity tinged with sadness and measured warning, while reminding us we have will and agency. Thompson leaves her reader feeling like a laboratory specimen under the scrutiny of a magnified, emotionless eye, hopelessly pinned down by demands and events there is no controlling. Her thesis comes off the page like a philosophy-flattening steamroller—in the face of which Fukuyama's 'discontents' seem reduced to a self-indulgent identity-sideshow that merely weakens our ability to avoid the steamroller. True to his faith, Fukuyama aspires to the repair and perfecting of liberal democracy, this highest form of governance. Thompson's economic realism, on the other hand—unlike the political realism of, say, a John Mearsheimer, which derides morality as a fool's errand in a world of power and pragmatism—is that much more dismaying is its depiction of a demand for energy that, while driven by human expansionism, seems beyond all human agency to control. It is a notion that, while perhaps unintended, induces a sense of paralysis, as if our polities, democratic or otherwise, liberal or authoritarian, are trapped in the back seat of an energy juggernaut that has swept our political identities aside and taken control of our national destinies. As if the Eternal Monitor were holding out to humankind two different sets of books, one in either hand, in the left Rousseau and Rawls, in the right Hobbes and Darwin—saying of those in His left hand, 'These are terrific; they'll remind you that your life on earth has moral and individual dimensions.' And of those in His right, 'But you're going to have to fight for it, so these are more likely to get you through.'

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Three decades have passed since Fukuyama published that seminal first essay. In that time we've had Gulf War One, the disastrous mission-creep that was Afghanistan, the hubristic invasion of Iraq (as if a big dose of democracy would also deliver a stable oil supply), an unproductive War on Terror, the 'Arab Spring', the rise and fall of Islamic State, and the turmoil, savagery, and repressive backlash that followed; the rise of China, of populism, and of revanchism; the retreat of US military engagement in the Middle East. Throughout that time, while Fukuyama was defending his thesis, I—a mere speck of tumbleweed in these crosswinds—have found myself caught up and close up in three struggles for democracy in countries whose fates were or have become precious to me—first in Africa, then in the Middle East, and now a third in the Caucasus.

These days I live in Georgia, a former colony of the former Soviet Union. Most Saturdays, about lunchtime, I stroll down the hillside above Tbilisi's historic Old Town towards the shops along Rustaveli, the capital's principal boulevard. I pass through the upper reaches of Sololaki, down its gently decaying streets, past its dilapidating nineteenth-century apartment blocks with their buckling window frames, iron beams buttressing them against the risk of tremors from the southern Caucasus. I skirt the potholes, tread carefully across the cobbles, keep an eye downward for the *merde de chien* deposited on the pavements by the city's strays, and observe with growing love and melancholy the signs of Tbilisi's gradual surrender to forces beyond its control. A population suddenly grotesquely swollen by the influx of Russians escaping sanctions or the draft. A *faux*, inflationary boom floating on a stagnant economy. A neglectful regime that daily machinates to impede Georgia's desire to move closer to the West.

As I walk down the hill, I pass a school. It specialises in mathematics and science. It's a weekend, but inside its classes are packed, and out on the street, mothers and fathers, siblings and grandparents are waiting, men sitting silently in cars, mothers milling about at the gates and

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chatting animatedly among themselves, the street quietly buzzing with anticipation as they wait for the bell and for their children to emerge from their morning of lessons. And always as I pass by, I experience a feeling that is hard to describe. Part the pleasure of seeing these strivers strive, and part the passing of the shadow of a sadness that falls where hopes glimmer on a dark and swollen sea, like trawlers at night. Here are parents putting into their children's education whatever means they can muster because it is the best they can do to secure them against a future that for Georgia is increasingly uncertain. Sadly, with that education, the best of those young people are that much likelier to leave the country, taking their skills in search of opportunity in Europe and the US that Georgia cannot provide. They will contribute instead by sending money home to support their families. This isn't growth, it's managed decline, while Georgia's rich get richer and its poor … well, tough luck.

The Georgians are a people of intensely felt national identity yet also a nation which struggles—or so it seems to me—to cohere around a sense of national community and mutual responsibility. Most of them aspire to a democratic form of government and they are pretty clear-eyed that Georgia is very far from being one. But barring a small minority among Georgia's elite, its people have little idea how to achieve it. Georgia's political elites have done little more than acquire the language of democracy, and they use it not as the floor on which to build a liberal democracy, but as plaster they slap onto a wall of concrete power built on traditions of authority and absolutism that militate against any development of the habits and practices on which the functioning of a liberal democracy depends.

I saw the same as I came to political maturity in South Africa thirty years ago. In the course of its struggle against apartheid, the African National Congress, the country's primary liberation movement, had acquired the language of liberal democracy and used it to undermine apartheid's legitimacy and moral foundations. That language, framed by the UN Declaration of Human Rights and the dismantling of colonialism, aroused the indignation of the world against apartheid's

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iniquities and justified the use of violence to combat injustice, the denial of fundamental human rights to black South Africans, and the economic servitude and deepening poverty to which they had been consigned. There was no denying the moral power of the ANC's case for racial equality and economic justice. On the other hand, there was little examination of the actual depth, nay the superficiality, of the ANC's *actual* commitment to the liberal democratic principles it espoused and which were also essential to the achievement of its stated aspirations. To question that commitment was tantamount to rejecting the case for apartheid's abolition; if you had doubts about what would become of the country under majority rule, you swallowed them in the face of the far greater moral imperative to end apartheid, and you acquiesced in the certainty that *any* such transition was bound to be difficult. That the transition was relatively peaceful was considered more than enough to be going on with, and you should be grateful!

In my own small way I was part of that transition, serving with the electoral commission which oversaw the election that brought Nelson Mandela to power in 1994. As director of information, I was responsible for delivering a campaign whose objective was to inspire an electorate about to be enfranchised for the first time, to defend the election against revanchists and spoilers determined to see it fail, and to keep faith in the electoral commission's promise to deliver a safe and secret vote. We delivered that miracle—against all the odds. Yet five years later, with Mandela now departed from office, I left the country. Two years before, I had taken the decision to go, after an interview with the man who succeeded Mandela, Thabo Mbeki. He spent the first half castigating my magazine for the insightful analysis it had published earlier that year of his style and thinking, and which foreshadowed the arrogance, hubris, and error that saw his presidency collapse in humiliation. And in the second half, it became clear to me that his version of the new South Africa had no use for white liberals like me.

I left behind many friends whose courage in staying I applaud. They had fought alongside their black comrades, and had been jailed, banned,

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beaten, and vilified under apartheid. When Mandela took office they took up those administrative posts that became available to them before being eventually driven out by affirmative action and cadre deployment (the ruling party's placement of its own people in key positions, regardless of merit). The same happened to former colleagues from my days in newspapering—men and women were swept out who, over decades, had taken huge risks to expose the violence and myriad injustices visited on their black compatriots. From afar I saw those passionately committed efforts to support the transformation of a country being washed away by the tide of moral, intellectual, and financial corruption that welled up after Mandela's presidency.

Today, the ANC has been in power for almost three decades. In that time, the economy and state coffers have been bled dry by the ruling party's shameless abuse of power and naked self-enrichment, by staggering levels of corruption, and by the destructive, wilful neglect of national economic infrastructure. Is there hope for change? Observers grasp at straws. Support for the ANC has been slipping in the major cities and there are similar signs of slippage in the rural areas that have provided voting fodder for the ruling party. But the ANC will, if it has to, throw in its lot with a populist offshoot founded by a former leader of its youth wing, whose own moral probity is no better. Just as worrying has become the decentralisation of political power to ANC-controlled provinces, whose leaders use their centrally funded budgets to consolidate their fiefdoms, entrenching cronyism and corruption at every level of government. So deeply has this seeped into the structures of executive and legislative power, from the presidency down, that you can see no realistic prospect of its eradication. Those with power cling to it through graft, cronyism, and assassination, transforming a country whose constitution was considered one of the most progressive in the world into a gangster state whose leaders and media satraps gaslight the population into believing that their ever deepening impoverishment and hopelessness are still the legacy of apartheid.

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And finally Iraq. In 2004, a year after the US invasion, I arrived in Baghdad and began what would become an eight-year losing battle. Our job was to persuade the Iraqi people to develop the habits, practices, and institutions that might stabilise their benighted polity and deliver the security and consensus on which peace and socio-economic advancement depend. But the US occupation, meant ostensibly to convert Iraq to a progressive Middle East democracy but intended also to secure for the US a grateful, oil-rich client state, had instead collapsed that state and transformed its governance from mere authoritarian oppression, brutality, and genocidal attacks on the Kurds into a maelstrom of sectarian violence and terrorism that turned daily life, already difficult, into a murderous, destructive hell from which the country still struggles to recover.

Back then, the first thing I learned was not to talk about 'democracy'. The word was spat back at us in focus groups and in vox pops. What was left of the state was breaking down all around them. They were besieged by terror and random violence. Their streets and markets were running in bystander blood. There were no jobs. Power supplies were constantly disrupted. One of my bodyguards was shot in the leg and bled out after the Shia hospital to which his comrades took him refused to admit him because he was Sunni. 'If this is *democracy*,' people told us, 'we want nothing to do with it.' Their contempt was visceral. We dropped the word from our vocabulary. We told our stupefied client there was no choice: the entire notion of democracy had been thoroughly rubbished by the chaos that had ensued in its name. From then on we focused on ideas ordinary Iraqis had some chance of recognising—the mutual, identical suffering of families on either side of the civil war; the fact that the past would not get any better but the future still could; the *sine qua non* that was reconciliation; the hard choices that would have to be made to deliver stability, peace, and a form of government that might give them some say over their own destiny and some hope of economic security.

Success was hard to measure. Notably I remember making an ad which ran on television for several weeks in the two months before the January

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2005 election. Its objective was to persuade Iraqis to band together in the face of intimidation at the polls, and come out to vote. And in *The Times* the day before polling day, I saw an interview with a former Iraqi air force colonel who told the reporter he had a plan. He and his friends would vote in the morning, and if it was safe they would go back home and fetch their wives to vote in the afternoon. 'We got the idea from the ad,' he said. After the first wails of my newborn children, those seven words were the happiest sound of my life. *That* was impact. The election was conducted without disruption or significant intimidation. As to the rest of our eight years of campaigning, whose scale and intensity were unprecedented and have not been seen since, I used to tell my team, 'Look, the more successful we are, the fewer people will die.' It was the only measure of any real importance to me. If there was any point in being in Iraq, it was that, and I know that sentiment motivated many otherwise deeply disillusioned US soldiers and diplomats. It was the best we could hope for. After the surge in 2007, numbers of deaths *did* begin to decline significantly, but it was impossible to disaggregate the impact of our communications from a multiplicity of other factors. In the end, we were mood music; the credit belongs to the soldiers and civilians, Iraqi and coalition, the men and women on the ground.

Then America went home, the sectarian conflict roared back to life in the shape of Islamic State, and today, if Iraqis are any better off, it is only to the extent that they are not dying in as many numbers as during the occupation. As for their politics, it remains gridlocked and at the mercy of armed militia, all protecting their political factions, while the economy, which should be rich, is moribund with unemployment almost twice what it was at the end of the occupation. My Iraqi friends, including those who lost loved ones to Saddam's torturers or American missiles, are either in despair or in exile—the latter being, as my Georgian and South African friends will also testify, merely a better quality of despair.

South Africa, Iraq, and Georgia are vastly different countries, but apart from their histories of colonial occupation and their vanishing middle classes they have in common a culture of power in which the winner

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takes all; an experience of democracy that runs little farther than the acquisition of its language—then travestied by their ruling elites in the name of 'the people' in order to legitimate or mask their entrenchment and self-enrichment; and the demonisation of political adversaries.

The Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari, whose book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, published in 2014, has since made him a philosophical superstar, has postulated that humankind succeeded in overtaking the Neanderthals and other early human predecessors by developing language, learning to cooperate, and imagining what we cannot see. This enabled us to drive other species into extinction. (How should we feel about that?) Now he is arguing that technological advances will see us fusing artificial intelligence into our biological beings, evolving into a more advanced form of human in which consciousness (our ability to feel things) and intelligence (our ability to solve problems) begin to diverge, and that this phenomenon will inevitably be limited to the rich, which will see humanity diverging into weaker and stronger species. That's all in the future—two hundred years if we last that long. Right now we have to figure out how to deal with that—along with climate change and the struggle over energy. And yet here we are, steadily losing our capacity to do all that because we are losing our will and desire to communicate, to imagine what we cannot see, or to cooperate—particularly, most worryingly, within our own nations.

Hariri, interviewed in the London *Sunday Times* in October 2022, talked about

> the breakdown of a unifying nationalism. At its core, nationalism is the feeling that you are connected to the other people in your country, that you care about them. For instance, you pay your taxes so that somebody you never met on the other side of the country will have good healthcare. But in many countries, politics is so divided that this unifying identity has broken

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> down. One of the key conditions of democracy is the ability to have a public debate about the key issues of the day, that we can talk with one another. Once people see their political rivals as enemies, democracy simply becomes untenable.[2]

And there's the rub. We are making our democracies—liberal or electoral—increasingly less tenable in a world that is otherwise drifting dangerously towards what the V-Dem 2022 report calls 'autocratization'. Autocracies are strengthening while we are weakening our own ability and resolve to resist that trend.

I was in Ukraine just before war broke out, supporting its territorials with the development of a strategy for a campaign to drive recruitment. We produced the campaign very fast—we could have had it out in half the time, had it not been for the cumbersome process of securing authorisation to launch. Tick tock, tick tock. In the event, within days of the launch, Putin took over as recruiting sergeant, doing a far finer job than we could ever have done. The campaign theme was simple enough, 'We're defending what's ours—our homes, our families, our land', and it was spot on. Putin, lost in his own fog, had no idea what lengths the Ukrainians would go to, to defend what is theirs. Our campaign became redundant the moment the first shot was fired. And yet before that shot, the horrifying reality of this war had seemed unimaginable to Ukrainians.

And so it is with us, too, the citizens of our liberal democracies, even here on the doorstep of a brutal war that is being fought as totally and remorselessly as the Russians dare. We, too, are suffering a failure of imagination. Lost in the narrows of our identity politics, handcuffed to self-interest and our obsession with power, we are failing to imagine the consequences for our way of government of our ever more manipulative, toxic-narrative-making, framing, mythologising, disinforming public discourse. We look at Putin's Russia, or read Margaret Atwood's

2 Olaf Blecker, 'Yuval Noah Harari on "Good Nationalism", Putin and the Future of Democracy', *Sunday Times Magazine* [London], 16 October 2022.

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The Handmaid's Tale, and think, 'That's awful, but it couldn't happen here.' But the signposts are there—the 2016 Brexit vote, the 2021 invasion of the US Capitol, the regression of liberalism in Poland and Hungary, the rolling back of abortion rights, to name just some of the lowlights.

Given all that, where does it leave my commitment to stratcom? In one dimension, anyway, I've had to think carefully about election campaigns and whether or not to get involved in them. Winning has become so ugly. No one is interested in policy; it's too complicated and dull. Publics are increasingly focused on identity, the media are interested only in controversy, and politicians care only—I know this is a cynical generalisation—about votes and power. Public service, and that sense of the nation as an overarching 'community of communities' in which we pay taxes and observe laws for the sake of the common weal and people we'll never meet but we know are us, is all but dead. It's true that those opportunities that come my way are often with opposition parties challenging for power, and possessed of all the language of social justice, equity, reform, and honest, open, accountable government. Yeah, yeah … Take a deeper look and you see the likelihood that those you help win will soon become like those you helped replace. They have the language; it's the behaviours they lack. You can, of course, just not get too overinvested; take your clients at face value; deploy the simplistic, divisive, and destructive narratives that winning demands in these times of identity politics, dismally short attention spans, and saturation micro-targeting—they know how *that's* done and *that's* what they damn well want; and take the money and run. And there are, too, always going to be circumstances in which the adversary is so bad that campaigning to get rid of them warrants dispensing with overindulging in concerns about whatever comes next—that was certainly the case in South Africa.

In another dimension, I've had to think about how the liberal democracies spend money on strengthening democratic institutions and practices in less democratic—or *de-democratising*—states. From what I've seen, the governments don't participate; it's not in their interests. It's the opposition parties that participate, and the outcomes, if anything, serve mostly to

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sharpen division. Certainly my experience of Georgia has suggested we need to go deeper, and perhaps rethink the nature of influence, rather than stratcom per se, as we try to address the long-long-term challenge of helping other cultures to make that deep shift in the meaning and purpose of power: from power held at almost any cost in defending one's position, privilege, and patronage, with all the precariousness that entails, to power shared and ceded, and therefore able to stabilise because it serves more widely across the diverse interests contained within a nationhood.

In a de-democratising polity, this is a massive leap. There's no making it in one bound, in the course of one electoral cycle, let alone a donor financial cycle. This is intensive, backroom work, in every corner and corridor where the elites, those in and out of power, meet and clash. This is influence work, different to stratcom, under the radar, below the level of conventional diplomacy and development aid, where identifying common interests, dealing with fears on every side, and building trust layer by dermal layer must take place if we are to help people to *imagine* a better way of managing their affairs and futures. *That* is how I think of stratcom now, and of where it can most count. I think of it as influence, creating acts of experience that enable people to imagine their futures differently, and using those to build domestic *peace processes* across those societies in which our own (pretty fractured) democracies engage. For all my apparent ennui and disappointment, I'm still enough of a believer to believe the effort worthwhile. The alternative, as a long-dead South African president once said, is too ghastly to contemplate.