A Proposition "Bhutan is a Democracy": Beyond the Constricted, Popular Wisdom of "Democracy"

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Abstract

This article seeks to dissect, with reference to Bhutan's polity, how the Eurocentric, popular wisdom of democracy, privileging liberal democracy, inadvertently enforces closure to other plausible, non-liberalistic interpretations. In Bhutan, the monarchy and Buddhism carry moral authorities constraining the arbitrary use of governmental power, and nurturing associative bonds in society. This "natural democracy" contravenes the orthodoxy of liberal democracy, according to which the state, as a neutral arbiter, must not accord a special status to any leader or religion. For this reason, political analysts tend to doubt whether Bhutan is a democracy. The circumscribed, liberal-democratic notion emanates from the history in which European universalism has been fabricated as a universal standard to be disseminated throughout the globe. It has thus served to rank different societies in a linear trajectory that positions Europe at the pinnacle of "progress". The case of Bhutan potentially helps to rectify the constricted wisdom of democracy, to facilitate more open, thorough deliberations, and to start conceptualizing a multipolar world.

Introduction

> [W]hether Bhutan is a democracy is doubtful. … The King remains the ultimate authority though "political power" is handed over to the elected political

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> executive. Minus king [*sic*] the politico-ideological edifice of Bhutanese political structure is incomplete. This is certainly against the spirit of democracy in its European and non-European meanings.

This is an excerpt from the comments of an in-house reviewer of a journal published by a major university in the US. The reviewer made the comment to the effect that my earlier article on Bhutan's democracy would not merit a full-fledged review. My article was to explore an alternate route to democracy other than the orthodox route. It was intended to call our attention to the country's time-honoured "home-grown natural democracy" (Dessallien, 2005, p.71), which rests on the benign monarchical authority and cohesive rural communities.

The reviewer acknowledged the topic as worth investigating, but viewed the case of Bhutan as unsuited for the task. In Bhutan, unlike in other places, democratization did not arise out of regime disunity, but was accelerated on the initiative of the 4th King (who reigned from 1972 to 2006). A royal decree was issued in 2001, to enact the country's first constitution that would transfer the King's leadership role to the people. The move was in line with the assertion consistently and repeatedly made by the 4th King since the1970s, about a major pitfall of monarchy; it places much reliance on a single person, who may not always make the right decisions about how best to attain greater peace and prosperity in future.

The Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan was subsequently promulgated in 2008, which stipulates that the form of government shall be that of "democratic constitutional monarchy". Among the major changes effected is the introduction of the parliamentary system in which the members of the National Council (NC) and the National Assembly (NA) are elected by universal suffrage, and the Cabinet is formed by the ruling party holding the majority of seats in the NA.

Before the 2008 political change, the King identified ministerial candidates, who would form the Cabinet upon official approval by the NA. The Ministers would serve the post of the prime minister on a rotational basis. The NA had existed since 1953 and drawn local representatives from all the twenty districts of Bhutan. However, unlike the current NA, one wing of the bicameral legislature that makes plans and laws and discharges oversight functions over the executive branch, the role of the previous NA was largely limited to deliberate national plans and laws put forth by higher authorities (although the local representatives did not simply defer to, but often contested the decisions when they entailed grave implications for their localities).Unlike the present NA/NC members, moreover, the local representatives were not given mandate through ballot, but were selected in a meeting held in their respective localities.

The 2008 political change was to effect liberal-democratic reforms, that is, "the dominant form of political force in the developed world, and increasingly in the developing world" (Heywood, 2012, p.39). Liberal democracy upholds "the twin principles of limited government and popular consent expressed at election time" (Heywood, 2004, p.251). In Bhutan, accordingly, the multi-party system has been adopted for the NA[1], which prompts different groups of politicians to compete with each other, to frame policies that best respond to the preferences of the general populace. The ruling party is in need of responding to popular pressures owing to the fact that the voters can remove them through the ballot box. For the first time in the history of Bhutan, the public can directly grant or withdraw consent to the government in power, mandating it to exercise its power in line with their demands.

[1] A multi-party system has not been introduced to the NC or local-level elections, to constrain the proliferation of divisive, partisan politics. The first elections of the NC and the NA were conducted in 2007 and 2008, while the second elections took place in 2013. The Cabinet was formed in 2008 and 2013 respectively to start its five-year tenure as the popularly elected government.

At the same time, Bhutan's "democratic constitutional monarchy" deviates from the orthodoxy of liberal democracy; its monarchy has not receded but has taken on renewed importance, nor has the advent of democracy diminished the role of religion. In the constitution, the King is stipulated to be "the upholder of *Chhoe-sid"*, namely the religious (*chhoe*), and political (*sid*) values of peace and prosperity. The King, as guardian of the nation state, seeks to preserve a cohesive society bound by mutual trust and obligation, and to avert divisive politics that would jeopardize social harmony, by positioning himself at the helm of *tsawa sum* (the "three foundations") comprising the nation, the people and the King. The notion of *tsawa sum* is founded on the Buddhist notion of the holy trinity (Buddha, *darma*, and *sangha*), and is a vital condition for the nation state to flourish (Karma Ura, 2004, p.314).

This caused the above reviewer to contend that "whether Bhutan is a democracy is doubtful"; it contradicts two major assumptions of liberal democracy. First, monarchy is averse to democracy, in line with the Aristotelian traditional classification separating rule by a single individual (monarchy) and rule by the many (democracy). Second, the state should avoid according a particular religious persuasion a privileged status, in order to prevent religion from intruding into secular politics.

The monarchy/democracy, and religion/politics dichotomies, allegedly constitutive of "the spirit of democracy in its European and non-European meanings", originate in some historical experiences in Europe giving rise to liberal democracy. In several parts of Europe, the power of sovereign monarchs underpinned by divine authority came to be challenged by the rising middle class, from the seventeenth century onward. This resulted in the emergence of constitutional, representative forms of government, the power of which was to be restricted by constitutional rules defining the relations between rulers and the ruled.

The notion of democracy should be an essentially contestable concept, and must not accord such a special privilege to the historical unfolding of Europe. If it is to denote the virtue of "government of the people, by the people, and for the people", different peoples must be allowed to uphold their own models that occur to them most naturally. However, the academic and popular thinking on the subject is currently conditioned by the orthodoxy of liberal democracy, as if it were "the only feasible or meaningful form of democracy" (Heywood, 2004, p. 226).

As a consequence, "the twin principles of limited government and popular consent expressed at election time"are unquestionably assumed to take the form of the rule that keeps the state unaligned with any particular leader or religion, with recourse to the monarchy/democracy and religion/politics dichotomies. Bhutan's democracy, under which the King and religion continue to play crucial roles, is seen to contravene "the principle of limited government".

This article is aimed at, while drawing on the case of Bhutan, dissecting how the prevailing wisdom of democracy inadvertently enforces closure to other plausible, non-liberalistic interpretations. If we endeavour to pay discreet attention to the King and Buddhism, both of which carry moral authorities constraining arbitrary use of governmental power, we can ascertain an alternative form of "limited government", beyond our constricted comprehension of what it amounts to.

While seeking to enhance debates on democracy in this way, this article is also to contribute to a larger project of "Provincializing Europe" to rephrase Dipesh Chakrabarty (2007). Democracy is a key to our pursuit of "Provincializing Europe"; the notion of democracy has been serving since the twentieth century, as the latest rhetoric to place European, ostensibly universalistic values at the pinnacle of "progress" (Wallerstein, 2006, p.27).The above commentary inadvertently

questioning “whether Bhutan is a democracy is doubtful” is a glaring testimony.

This article will start by delving into, in the following section, the wider context in which the circumscribed, liberal-democratic conception has arisen as the rhetoric for ranking various societies in a linear trajectory. It will then explore how best to rectify the universalistic wisdom of democracy, according to which the state should, as a neutral arbiter, avoid according a special status to any particular leader or religion. The case of Bhutan, thriving on the monarchical authority and Buddhism, can bring new cultural sensibilities to bear on debates about democracy. The article concludes by illuminating the potentiality of Bhutan’s democracy to serve as a valuable intellectual resource for enriching the heritage of political philosophy.

The Rise of the Constricted Notion of “Democracy”

From Humanism to Scientific Universalism

In pursuing the objective to problematize the popular wisdom of democracy, it is imperative to ascertain the Eurocentric understanding of the modern era, as a whole. This will enable us to contextualize the Europe-centred perspective of democracy, and to grasp how it has been fabricated and imposed on divergent historical experiences of different peoples (although it is far from being a linear story of modernization taking over other “primitive” cultures).

According to a Europe-centred version of the world’s history, the modern era started in the sixteenth century, and has largely been a history of the expansion of the Western states and peoples in the world, through military conquest and economic exploitation. This expansion has been legitimized by means of three types of rhetoric championing European, “universal” values (Wallerstein, 2006, p.27), which would bring “backward” societies into the light of “modernity”; the Rest of the world had no choice but to accept Western interventions.

First, the idea of "natural law and Christianity" was drawn upon in the sixteenth century, when innovations in shipping and navigation technologies enhanced interconnections among distant societies. It was the vision of the moral order asserting that how human societies are ruled must be rooted in the transcendental wisdom given by God; it would bring all humanity the good life on earth.

Second, the rhetoric of "civilizing mission" came to the fore in the nineteenth century, when industrial capitalism and imperial expansion boosted European control over the world. It was the idea assigning missionaries and colonial administrators the role of guiding non-Europeans toward the attainment of "civilization"; uneducated, unlettered, brute "barbarians" were seen to be at lower stages of a linear, evolutionary progression toward "civilization".

Third, the rhetoric of "democracy" emerged in the twentieth century, as the latest instrument justifying the supremacy of Europe in the world. The liberal-democratic model, upholding "the twin principles of limited government and popular consent expressed at election time", has come to be, and continues to be mobilized as an objectively verifiable benchmark to measure the extent to which a particular society has attained "progress".

The rhetoric of democracy arose when "the concept of science that was outside 'culture'" (Wallerstein, 2006, p.77) was called for, to change the manner in which European universalism was fabricated as all-embracing standards. Earlier "humanistic universalism", founded on the naturalistic fallacy of the European superiority, came to be replaced by "scientific universalism", valuing scientific, true/false inquiries as a means of dissecting "objective" laws governing human evolution (Wallerstein, 2006, pp.51-70).

The two earlier modes of moralizing rhetoric had not enabled "barbarians" to catch up with the "civilized", thereby failing to prove their worth. This had given rise to cultural relativism

over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, questioning Europe's ostensible supremacy, and casting doubt on the righteousness of hierarchizing a diverse set of human groups in naturalistic manners.

Scientific universalism, in turn, has compartmentalized academic pursuits into two camps, namely, the scientific camp (the search for "truths")and the humanistic camp (the search for "values") [2]; The former includes the tri-modal, nomothetic social science, composed of political science, economics, and sociology; these disciplines are to elucidate "general" laws concerning human societies, through empirical research of the "advanced" European present that is seen to define yardstick that the Rest of the world should aspire to.[3]

The birth of the scientific camp and the concomitant rise of the tri-modal social science have provided a fertile ground for the rhetoric of liberal democracy to establish dominance in today's academic as well as popular thinking on politics. First, the tripartite delineation of human activity into the political, the economic, and the socio-cultural fields resonates with, and helps to promote the liberal ideology that upholds the primacy of the individual. The liberal creed calls for a society in which individuals enjoy autonomy from the state, and freely pursue their aspirations in the "economic" and the "social" arenas. In the "political" realm, the state should

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[2] The humanistic camp includes history, anthropology, and Oriental studies, to describe the uniqueness of "particularistic" social phenomena, such as those observed in the European past, and in non-European society, past and present.

[3] The three nomothetic sciences came into being, not only as the empirical justification of European universalism, but also out of the need, within Europe, to arrive at theories and models to analyse and tame social changes (Wallerstein, 2001). In nineteenth-century Europe, there existed growing concern among the elite, about the worsening socio-economic conditions generated by the industrial growth, as well as about the concomitant rise in anti-capitalist movements (the emergence of Marxism pointing to the inevitability of socialist revolution, and the growth of conservatism calling for the need to put brakes on precipitate social change).

refrain from encroaching on religious or other "private" affairs (the religion/politics dichotomy), and operate in an open and competitive manner. Moreover, political power must not be left in the hands of a particular ruling elite (the monarchy/democracy dichotomy).

Second, normative inquiries into what democracy "should" be have given way to descriptive examinations of what "is" at work in a given liberal democracy, as if liberal democracy were "the only feasible or meaningful form". This is because the truth/value epistemological divide, opened up in tandem with the scientific/humanistic bifurcation, has relegated political philosophy to a "second-order discipline" exploring the meanings of politics, law, and society (Heywood, 2001, p.10). Political science has instead ascended to the status of a "first-order discipline" focusing on disclosing "truths" through "value-free" inquiries into what institutions and conditions are required of liberal democracy. In the name of analysing and explaining politics in a rigorous, neutral way, value judgments about democracy have receded, in favour of empiricism biased toward "facts" and "evidence".

Thirdly, the flourishing of empirical studies of liberal democracy has been accompanied by the emergence of what F.A. Hayek (1982) calls "constructivist rationalism", according to which political ideals are to be achieved through consciously induced changes. The "general" laws of liberal democracy are to be discovered through empirical studies of the "advanced" European present, and are to be deliberately emulated throughout the world. To paraphrase Michael Oakeshott (1991, p.45, parentheses added), "making (new) arrangements" in line with "the twin liberal-democratic principles" has become the benchmark of democracy, while ruling out an alternative route to democracy of "attending to the (vernacular) arrangements" that are anchored in social and religious traditions in different areas.

"The Cave" Unduly Privileging Political Science

The present-day supremacy of liberal democracy has not spontaneously arisen from innate human desires to become free, autonomous individuals. On the contrary, it has historically come about under the sway of scientific universalism and its derivative, namely, "the concept of political science that is outside 'culture'"; "universal" laws governing politics were identified through empirical studies of Europe's *de facto* "local" realities, leading to the prevalence of the Eurocentric pseudo-scientific determinism of dissociating monarchy and religion from democracy.

Before proceeding to analyse how Bhutan's democracy, according importance to the monarchy and Buddhism, can rectify the constricted conception of democracy, I will further delve into the context in which scientific universalism has persisted till today; the majority of political analysts continue to be bogged down by it, such as the reviewer quoted at the beginning of this article, uttering "whether Bhutan is a democracy is doubtful". For this purpose, it is useful to turn to Bruno Latour (2004), who analogizes our conventional thinking on politics to "the Cave".

According to Latour, the Cave consists of two chambers, namely one of human subjects, and the other of nonhuman objects (such as political concepts, models, and institutions[4]). The imagery of the Cave, composed of the former chamber laden with conflicting, fallible human "values", and the latter governed by objectively verifiable "truths", works to authorize scientists to move back and forth between the two chambers; scientists are qualified to conduct rigorous, empirical

[4] Latour focuses on ecological politics in his book, and thereby construes that the second chamber is composed of objects examined by natural scientists, such as astronomers, biologists, chemists, and physicists. This article directs Latour's argument at studies of democracy, and thus regards the second chamber to consist of nonhuman objects, including political institutions, concepts and models, which human beings draw on to engage in democratic politics.

research into the laws governing nonhuman objects. Scientists are thereby in a position to "tell the truth without being challenged, put an end to the interminable arguments through an incontestable form of authority", and "bring order to the assembly of humans by keeping its members quiet" (Latour, 2004, p.14).

We can draw on the Cave framework, and illustrate how it stifles equal and open deliberations about democracy, and constricts academic and popular thinking on the subject. It is those political scientists immersed in the orthodoxy of liberal democracy, who promulgate such popular wisdom as the monarchy/democracy and religion/politics dichotomies.

To rectify this situation, Latour proposes to abandon the truth/value divide, and to open the floor to other scholars or lay persons who have thus far been restrained from questioning these basic premises. This is to ensure a due process in which a range of "propositions" about democracy are duly noted and examined. A "proposition" is not a "statement" that is judged to be true or false by scientists (in terms of "rightness"). It is assessed whether they are articulated well or badly (from the viewpoint of "goodness"). This strategy potentially serves to reverse the overall trend of Western political thought (Murdoch 1970), in which the idea of "goodness" has historically been superseded by the idea of "rightness" in the heyday of scientific universalism.

This renewed arrangement builds upon a knowledge movement called "cultural studies" that has arisen in the last third of the twentieth century; according to it, what are regarded as "truths" are implicated in "values" that are preponderant in society. The epistemological truth/value bifurcation that underlies scientific universalism diverts attention away from such truth-value nexus, and is detrimental to intellectual pursuits, in that they become liable to succumb to dominant groups.

This pitfall inherent in the truth/value divide is well illustrated by the malaise of today's orthodox debates on democracy; liberal democracy is privileged even though it often creates a gulf between government and its subjects, irrespective of its alleged promise to make possible a high degree of popular responsiveness. Liberal democracy tends to cause political power to concentrate in the hands of small groups with money, power, and position. As a result, its *de jure* virtue of individual freedom and autonomy often works to mask the *de facto* dominance by the privileged few, while reducing the majority of citizens to passive roles. The sway of empirical studies into the actualities of liberal democracy deters value judgments, and deflects criticism against its propensities to spread unbridled individualism and destabilize social harmony.

This corroborates a warning given by Latour; that is, "[t]he more one distinguishes between facts and values, the more one ends up with the bad *common world*" (Latour, 2004, p.99). Debates about democracy, if they are to result in a better *common world*, should move between descriptive analyses of what "is" at work within a given (liberal-) democratic system (assuming that the system is "truly" democratic), and normative inquiries into what a democracy "should" be (exploring a "valuable" alternative to the system). In this way, we could ascertain that liberal democracy is a cultural artefact. The truth-value nexus causing liberal democracy to hold sway would be untangled, while its particularistic, non-absolute nature would come to light.

This would lead political discussions to go beyond the routine comprehension of what is "democracy", to embrace other "illiberal" stories that would otherwise be filtered out of the deliberative arena. The notion of liberal democracy would no longer be presented as the optimal, unobjectionable option; its implicit values would instead be exposed and examined vis-à-vis other plausible perspectives, thereby resulting a more open deliberations.

This does not mean, at the same time, that we should lapse into relativism that sees any truth claim to be equally valid. Certain propositions are more legitimate than others. Value judgments are called for, in order to weigh various propositions against each other. The mainstay of the renewed strategy is to vivify the idea of "goodness", which has been swamped by the idea of "rightness" in the history of Western political thought mired by the pseudo-scientific determinism.

Bhutan's democracy can potentially serve, not only as a promising Proposition, but as a guidepost in arranging in rank order different propositions about democracy. The case of Bhutan, to paraphrase Michael Oakeshott quoted in the preceding section, centres round "attending to the (vernacular) arrangements" that have historically bound the people by mutual trust and obligation, rather than "making (new, allegedly 'universal') arrangements". It thus defies the Cave framework that unduly privileges "all-embracing" laws of liberal democracy.

Bhutan's "Home-Grown Natural Democracy"

The Proposition: "Bhutan is a Democracy"

How can we translate the case of Bhutan into a Proposition, which is unforeseen in the usual stories told about democracy, and thus triggers a rethink among political analysts? In this respect, it is crucial not to condense Bhutan's democracy, in binary opposition to the dominant notion of liberal democracy; the two are normally segregated to a "young, dubious democracy" and the "global" agenda taking over "local" societies (including Bhutan). It is imperative, instead, to shed light on a similar move towards "direct-access society" that cuts across the two.

We would otherwise lapse into the very binary divide underlying the Eurocentric understanding of the modern era, namely, the West and the Rest. As stated above, the dichotomy has formed the backbone of scientific universalism that privileges the "advanced" European present embodying

"universal" laws, which the Rest of world should aspire to. We should liberate ourselves from the shackles of this dichotomy, if we are to refurbish the Cave, dominated by political scientists, leaning toward the "universal" notion of liberal democracy.

The conception of "direct-access society" is put forth by Charles Taylor, who points out that the process of modernization has brought about a new moral order of society in the West, in which "[e]ach of us is equidistant from the center; we are immediate to the whole" (2004, p.158). Modern citizens, whether they reside inside or outside the West, become less dependent on intermediaries, such as lords, traders, or churches, and involve themselves more directly in the running of politics, with better ideas about the rest of their respective societies.

What is implied in the idea of "direct-access society", in the context of the West, according to Charles Taylor, in that it is "unrelated to any 'higher points'..., such as kings or priests" (Taylor, 2004, p.157), an "all-embracing" law of human evolution. This is where the case of Bhutan can offer an alternative, in that the move towards a "direct-access society" has not diminished but, on the contrary, has been propelled by the role of the monarchy or religion. This contradicts the general historical experience of Europe from the seventeenth century onward, where "direct-access society" came to the fore, in tandem with the decline of sovereign monarchs underpinned by divine authority.

The case of Bhutan can therefore give the *de facto* multiplicity of modernization its rightful place, while doing away with the linear view of modernization that pits the West with the Rest and idealizes the mainstream model of liberal democracy that has arisen from the former's history. As pointed out by Charles Taylor, a close examination reveals, even within the West, diverse trajectories of the march towards "direct-access

society"[5]. "[I]t should be all the more obvious how much greater are the differences among the major civilizations" (Taylor, 2004, p.196). Bhutan is part of the Tantric Buddhism civilization.

Bhutan's democracy is aimed at forging a "direct-access society" by "attending to the (vernacular) arrangements" that rests on the monarchical authority and Buddhism; both of them represent vernacular democratic values in Bhutan. The case of Bhutan provides a contrast to other usual cases that focus on "making (new) arrangements", and on relinquishing their respective tradition and history. It does not comply with the monarchy/democracy, and religion/politics dichotomies, which are normally regarded as the benchmark of democracy elsewhere.

This has caused the "home-grown natural democracy" (Dessallien, 2005, p.71) to thrive in the country, an illustrative example of Michael Oakeshott's maxim on the need to escape the most insidious "misunderstanding in which institutions and procedures appear as pieces of machinery ... instead of as manners of behaviours which are meaningless when separated from their context" (Oakeshott, 1991, 63). In Bhutan, the move toward a "direct-access society" has been facilitated by its "local" culture that diverges, but is not entirely distinct from the "global"; although democracy has its roots in the West, democratic values are not alien to, but have been embedded in Bhutanese society. Chief Justice Sonam Tobgye (2012, parentheses added), who served as the Chair of the

[5] This is elucidated by Taylor's compartive analysis of the enighteenth-century American and French Revolutions (Taylor, 2004, Chapter 8). The former proceeded with a generally agreed-upon goal of reclaiming the traditional "rights of Englishman" in the new colony. The latter, on the other hand, took place without an agreed-upon meaning of the revolution, except to destroy the *ancient regime*; the attempt was therefore made to recast politics in line with the abstract notions of liberty, equality and fraternity, instead of restoring a lost moral order.

Constitution Drafting Committee[6], correspondingly points out that "[o]urs was not a mandate to change the world but to assimilate (liberal-democratic institutional) change into an existing (social) system".

Monarchy

In Buddhism, monarchy is regarded as a proper mode of political organization (Sonam Kinga, 2009, pp.17-19). A king is expected to promulgate morality in society, as both a secular and a spiritual leader, while the people, in return, forego their parochial interests, to seek the good of a common humanity. This conception of kingship, from a liberal-democratic viewpoint, is typically equated with paternalism preventing people from being independent and self-reliant. Buddhism, on the other hand, regards it as enhancing the prospects of individuals' making moral choices. This is exemplified by Bhutan's Constitution, in which the King is positioned as "the upholder of *Chhoe-sid"* (Article 2(2)), or the religious (*chhoe*), and political (*sid*) values of peace and prosperity.

Accordingly, the King of Bhutan has historically sought to rest his authority in his charitable, moral actions, by serving as an agent of building a "direct-access society" for the benefit of the general populace. The start of the hereditary monarchy in 1907 marked an end to incessant feuds over succession and the civil wars that had long afflicted the populace. It has laid the foundation for the country's peace and social order, thus enabling the transition to a "direct-access society" to take place in Bhutan. Moreover, the serf system was subsequently abolished, to allow the vast majority of the people to own agricultural land.

[6] The Constitution Drafting Committee was formed in November 2001 at the authorization of the King. It consisted of thirty-nine representatives from different sections of the society (the central monk body, the twenty districts, the judiciary, and government administration), with Chief Justice Sonam Tobgye as the chairperson.

The 3rd King, “the Father of Modern Bhutan”, who ascended to throne in 1952, initiated a series of political reforms to delegate power to the people’s representatives, to start effecting a gradual, steady transition to a “direct-access society”. The National Assembly was created in 1953, with local representatives drawn from all the twenty districts, who were selected in a meeting held in their respect localities. In 1968, the Cabinet system started in order for the King to share his executive powers with the Ministers.

The 4th King, whose reign started in 1972, followed in his father’s footsteps, by forming district- and county-level assemblies in 1981 and 1991 respectively, to discuss issues to be raised at the central level, and to bring problems of the grassroots level, to the notice of the centre. In 1998, the King relinquished his chair (equivalent to a prime minister) in the Cabinet, created the post of the Prime Minister to be rotated among the Cabinet Ministers, and entrusted the ministers with full executive roles. The series of political reforms culminated when the people took an active part in the first elections of the NC and the NA in 2007 and 2008 respectively.

“The notion of the King sacrificing his power to empower the people (through the enactment of the Constitution in 2008) imbued Bhutan’s democratic transition with a strong moral dimension” (Sonam Kinga, 2010, p.169, parenthesis added). The King had not only voluntarily issued a royal decree, in 2001, to enact the country’s first constitution, but also ensured public involvement in its preparation; a copy of a draft constitution was distributed to each household, and public consultations were conducted in all the twenty district capitals. In this way, efforts were made to help the general public to understand the significance of the political change, and to accord them opportunities to comment on the draft constitution.

At the same time, the Constitution has not diminished the role of the King; “[b]y giving away the King’s right to rule, the monarchy’s ‘moral right to reign’ has been reinforced” (Sonam

Kinga, 2010, p.169). The King continues to visit the countryside regularly, and maintains his prerogative to issue a directive regarding the government's conduct, when necessary.[7] As "the Head of State and the symbol of unity" (Article 2(1)), the King ensures that the needs and wants of disadvantaged groups are addressed, and that crises are mediated when they arise from pluralistic politics.[8]

This does not mean, however, we should abstain from incorporating Bhutan into the rank of "democracies", just as the reviewer quoted at the start of this article, who reproves the King for remaining "the ultimate authority". On the contrary, one of the major changes infused into the country's polity is the idea of state and government as separate entities (Sonam Kinga, 2010, p.169), that is, a familiar step taken by a country that goes through democratisation. This has proceeded, at the same time, in such a manner as to uniquely "attend to the (vernacular) arrangement"; the King has stepped aside to allow the elective political executive to run *zhung* (the government), while remaining the ultimate

[7] For example, the King issued a directive in June 2012, when the National Assembly was deliberating a bill that would allow the government to retain larger leverage to distribute governmental land for resettlement purposes. Drawing on growing public concern about the prospects that it might accelerate land transfer to individual citizens, the King sent out a message to the effect that governmental land should be preserved in the interest of future generations. This led the government to defer the deliberation of the bill, until after the next National Assembly election scheduled for 2013.

[8] For example, when the new Prime Minister and ten Ministers were formally appointed in July 2013, the King delivered a speech, and urged politicians to forgo party rivalries that had beset 2013 election in which both the incumbent party and the outgoing ruling party had asserted their supremacy over the other party. "Politicization of issues, disagreements and disturbances during elections, the King said, was natural in a democratic process, which existed in the 2008 election as it did in 2013. Notwithstanding all that, what was most important eventually, His Majesty said, was for the people to come together and live like members of a family." (*Kuensel* newspaper, July 29, 2013)

authority of *gyalkam* (the state, literally meaning "the realm of the King"), to use the terms adopted in the Constitution.

This arrangement offers a credible alternative to the liberal-democratic orthodoxy, in that the King has assumed greater importance as the "safety net" against divisive forces that potentially arise with the advent of the liberal-democratic reform (Kinley Dorji, 2010, p.148). The state is normally positioned as a neutral arbiter among competing interests in society. This neutrality principle has tended, in the absence of a focal point that nurtures an ethos of harmony and tolerance, to cause political power to concentrate in the hands of the privileged few, thereby creating a gulf between government and its subjects. The notion of *gyalkam* shows a way to fill such a void intrinsic to liberal democracy which tends to fail to foster associative ties that shape desires, values, and purposes among individuals.

Contrary to the dominant image of monarchy as a high-handed ruler of its passive subjects, Bhutan's polity had always been a "monarchical democracy" (Gupta, 1999, p.50). The case of Bhutan provides a "humble insight that there is a lot that we don't understand, that we lack even the adequate language to describe these differences", to paraphrase Charles Taylor (2004, p.196). We need to become more sensitive to the multiplicity of modernity by liberating ourselves from the shackles of the prevailing view that monarchy is averse to modernity.

Buddhism

The Buddhist notion of kingship, described in the preceding section, carries forth the long-established mainstay of the Bhutanese polity, namely, *chhoe-sid-nyi* or a dual system of religion and politics. It came into being when Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, a saint from Tibet, set to unify the Bhutanese state in the seventeenth century. Zhabdrung instituted a diarchal system of government, in which the secular leader and the spiritual authority co-existed under Zhabdrung's rule. Such a dual system has remained as a

basis of the Bhutanese polity, as it came to take the form of the hereditary monarchy in 1907, which eventually evolved into the "democratic constitutional monarchy" in 2008 (Sonam Kinga, 2009, p.11).

Accordingly, the Constitution stipulates Buddhism as the country's backbone; it includes provisions to promote a "compassionate society rooted in the Buddhist ethos" (Article 9(20)), and to protect the country's spiritual heritage (Article 3). "There is no mention of religion ... in any constitution of other countries except in the Constitution of Bhutan" which puts priority in maintaining religious values as "moral fibre", as stated by Chief Justice Sonam Tobgye (2012).

These Constitutional clauses would conventionally be seen to stifle the move towards a "direct-access society", just as the Constitutional reference to the Bhutanese state as *gyalkam* ("the realm of the King"); they risk leaving the definition of a "good society" in the hands of the few in power, who may articulate particularistic interests. There should instead be a private realm beyond the reach of the state, where individuals are given liberty to pursue their own happiness and fulfilment. Liberal democrats would propose to prevent the state from exercising such "social control" from above, and to build "secular" regimes that avoid privileging a particular religion with recourse to the separation of church and state.

This "mantra-like neutrality formula" (Taylor, 2011, p.40) is problematic, given that it often gets tainted by religious and cultural outlooks dominant in society. It is implausible to arrive at one master formula that enables us to implement the separation of church and state without excluding particular ways of life. "Now the notion of state neutrality ... has trouble making headway among 'secular' people in the West, who remain oddly fixated on (minority) religion as something strange" (Taylor, 2011, p.51, parenthesis added).[9]

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[9] For instance, there have been heated debates in the West concerning whether Muslim women can wear the headscarf in

There should therefore be a deeper normative basis if democracy is to function, instead of merely resorting to slogans, such as "freedom of conscience" and "equality of respect". As pointed out by Michael Walzer, such "neutrality formula" can be a "self-subverting doctrine" in that they do not by themselves nurture an ethos of harmony and tolerance, but often counteract associative bonds among the general public (Walzer, 2004, pp.153-154).

This leads Charles Taylor to argue "[w]hat deserves to be called secularist regimes in contemporary democracy have to be conceived not primarily as bulwarks against religion but as good faith attempts to secure three basic goals" of liberty, equality, and fraternity (Taylor, 2011, p.56); religion can form a basis for building a "direct-access society". In this respect, Taylor goes on to assert that there can be a "civil religion" in certain cases, which serves as common ethico-political principles of politics.

In Bhutan, Buddhism is the "civil religion". "For most Bhutanese, Buddhism permeates all facets of their lives. ... It informs their worldview, lifestyle, social behavior, economic practices and political thinking" (Karma Phuntsho, 2013. p.42). It has historically assigned individuals a sense of the common good, founded on its teachings upholding *liberty*, *equality*, and *fraternity*.

One central tenet of Mahayana Buddhism practiced in Bhutan is that everyone is potentially capable of self-development and edification. Buddhism is compatible with democracy, in that both are founded on a common premise of *equality*, and emphasize the personal potential and worth of

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public. They have led, in several Western "democracies", to its banning or permits given to public offices to interdict it. These moves, implicitly denying religious minorities an equal status with the mainstream population, emanate from the ill-considered presumptions that Muslim women are forced to accept the dress code by their families and male peers, and that the wearing of the headscarf is tantamount to giving an "ostentatious" religious sign.

each human being. "The Buddha proclaimed that each individual is a master of his or her own destiny, highlighting the capacity that person has to attain enlightenment" (Dalai Lama, 1999; cited in TashiWangchuk, 2004, p.841).

At the same time, a key factor in the process of self-development is the liberation from one's predisposition to equate *liberty* with the removal of restraints on each individual's volition to exercise sovereign control over his/her own life. Buddhism regards such restraints as the fundamental condition of human existence; one cannot sustain himself/herself without immersing himself/herself in a network of interrelationships with others, human and non-human. According to Buddhism, liberty is attained when one liberates himself/herself from the false belief in the possibility of "an independent self", and awakens himself/herself to the interdependence of various life forms, and arrive at a proper understanding of "a relational self".

Moreover, not only liberty and equality, but *fraternity* is essential to Buddhism. As long as one practices a religion that seeks similar spiritual development, that is the goal of every religious path, one is said to practice the dharma. "[O]ne may practice the dharma by following the teachings and practices of non-Buddhist traditions such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, or Hinduism" (Dalai Lama, 1980; cited in Powers, 2007, p.26). As aptly hinted at by the title of a conference held in May 2012 in Bhutan, *Buddhism Without Borders*, and as pointed out by one of the speakers, Khenpo Phuntshok Tashi (2013, p.117), "Buddhism has no clear boundary, or border, as a religion that needs to be defined, protected or expanded". It neither propagates expansionism nor promotes conversions.

Buddhism thus teaches us not to intrude on others, but to overcome our enemies within, that is, the delusive albeit captivating belief in "an independent self". The resultant view of "a relational self" is to set the tone of Bhutan's democracy; political leaders seek to attain an altruistic determination to

pursue the well-being of all, instead of being motivated by such negative goals as to impress others, or to exercise influence over others. "The starting point for social change in a democratic system cannot rest on the demands we place on governing others, but the demands we place on defining and governing ourselves" (Halkins, 2013, p.33), in order that we gain wisdom and compassion for the benefit of others.

As Tenzin Rigden (2013), the Press Secretary at the Office of the Prime Minister during the first democratically elected government (2008-2013), reflects on the country's political leaders in the past and present, to state that "as staunch Buddhists, the rulers were guided by the Buddhist tenets of humility, wisdom and compassion in their dealings with the subjects" and that "all probable excesses that could have otherwise arisen were thus prevented". To carry forth this historical role of Buddhism, the National Assembly (NA)/National Council (NC) halls are decorated with altars and *thangkhas* (Buddhist paintings and drawings), while solemn ceremonies invoking divine blessings take place at the beginning of every session. This is in line with the Tantric Buddhism tradition; one meditates to gain insight into the nature of reality, and surrounds oneself with symbols of religious attainments, to pacify the mind and cultivate feelings of compassion for others.

Moreover, as stated above, Buddhist teachings are woven into the fabric of the people's daily lives in Bhutan. Thriving on these vernacular forms of *liberty*, *equality*, and *fraternity*, that inculcate a sense of associative bonds, grassroots self-government has customarily been in practice in villages (Tashi Wangchuk, 2004, pp.840-845); decisions affecting localities are taken in village meetings, attended by at least one representative from every household. While this type of decision-making is usually seen elsewhere to risk playing into the hands of powerful actors, in Bhutan, all are given an equal say, debate various opinions, and work out mutual differences to arrive at a conclusion.

The tradition of grassroots self-government has long been drawn on in Bhutan's politics. For instance, the members of the NA, before it was reconstituted as a house of the bicameral legislature in 2008, used to be selected in meetings held in their respective villages or towns. Any candidate who stands for the NC, established in 2008, needs to secure approval in a gathering held in his or her locality. Moreover, any major governmental decision or programme affecting a particular area, just as in the past, continues to be deliberated in a village or town meeting, to accommodate the aspirations of the people.

In Bhutan, just as the monarchy, Buddhism serves to prevent its liberal-democratic institutions from creating a gulf between government and its subjects. It likewise deters the prevalence of unbridled individualism, and instead nurtures associative ties among the general public. It has thus provided a fertile ground for the country's move to nurture "direct-access society" in which "everyone is equidistant from the center and is immediate to the whole".

Like-minded Political Philosophers in the West

The Proposition about the Bhutanese way of weaving monarchy and religion into democracy can help to bring new cultural sensibilities to bear on today's mainstream academic and popular thinking on the subject; the widely held view on democracy, which emanates from the overall historical experience of Europe, leads us to cast its "local" values as "universal" standards to be emulated in the Rest. Bhutan's democracy that "attends to the (vernacular) arrangements" could play a central role in exposing the fallacy of the prevailing wisdom that ranks various societies in a linear trajectory and thus prompts the Rest to "make (new) arrangements".

At the same time, this does not mean that we need to look to non-European areas in our endeavours of "provincializing Europe". As pointed out by Charles Taylor (2004, p.183), central ideas that legitimatize the European supremacy,

including the notion of liberal democracy, are not merely ideological, but have been constitutive of counter knowledge within the West. Various political philosophers have consistently raised critique against the liability of liberal democracy to degenerate into mob rule; although free citizens are given rights to grant or withdraw consent to government, supposedly mandating it to exercise its power in line with their demands, liberal democracy tends to breed unrestrained individualism, at the cost of the social fabric.

This is because liberal democracy is tantamount to "the utopian idea of total depoliticization" (Schmitt 1996, p.54), according to Carl Schmitt who was critical of the Weimer Republic (1919-33) remodelling of Germany on liberal-democratic lines. Liberal democracy is founded on the fallacy that a rational compromise can be reached when citizens and their representatives engage in deliberations with a disposition to listen to others and treat others with respect. However, at the heart of real politik is "the political" (Schmitt, 1996, p.40), which denotes the centrality of the friend/enemy distinction; it is implausible to reduce politics to peaceful conciliation of plurality and difference of its members; a political community is bound to be formed by demarcating the outside from the inside, and also to discipline those insiders who behave in an anti-social fashion.

There has been a recent rebirth of academic interest in Schmitt's assertion to restore "the political", that is, to render politics to demarcate "those who are with you and those against whom you struggle" (Strong, 1996, p. xv). It is imperative, with recourse to the friend/enemy distinction, to counter the preponderance of liberal democracy that is liable to bring about "the abandonment of the state to private interests" (Strong, 1996, p. xv).The friend/enemy distinction calls for value judgments as to what a democracy "should" be, while dispensing with pseudo-scientific determinism of what "is" democracy. The latter prevails in today's political analysis in the heyday of scientific universalism.

How could the friend/enemy distinction be made, without lapsing into a paternalistic society in which the definition of a "good society" is controlled by elite decision-makers? In this respect, it is useful to turn to F.A. Hayek (1982), who problematizes constructivist rationalism regarding all social institutions as being amenable to deliberate design. Constructivist rationalism came to hold sway, as explained above, with the advent of scientific universalism and the attendant flourishing of political science focusing on empirical studies of "universal" laws of democracy to be applied to all humanity.[10]

On the other hand, political philosophy has been relegated to a "second-order discipline" engaging in normative inquiries into political ideals. Consequently, "the very sense in which many of the key words describing political ideals are used has so changed meaning that one must today hesitate to use even words like 'liberty', 'justice', 'democracy' or 'law', because they no longer convey the meaning they once did" (Hayek, 1982, p.469).

In this respect, "the worst sufferer in this process of the emptying of the meaning of words has in recent times been the word 'democracy' itself" (Hayek, 1982, p.471); the term has recently been taken more as a procedural matter of forging equilibrium among free individuals, than as a substantial system in which citizens mandate government to exercise its power in line with their aspirations (Heywood, 2004, pp.42-43).This has added to the innate liability of

[10] Constructivist rationalism also came into being out of the need that had arisen within Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, to construct a peaceful, just world after the breakout of religious wars. "Following the hopeless theological disputes and struggles ..., Europeans sought to construct a neutral domain, in which there would be no conflict and they could reach common agreement through the debates and exchanges of opinion" (Schmit, 1996,p.89). The conception of constructivist rationalism, asserting the plausibility of devising political institutions at will, was to set up "a neutral domain" for peace-building.

liberal democracy to spawn unrestrained individualism and to cause political power to concentrate in the hands of the privileged few. As a result, in many of "advanced" liberal democracies, the word "democracy" has become even synonymous with authoritarianism or totalitarianism (Wolin, 2004).

Hayek proposes to counter "the emptying of the meaning" of democracy, by promulgating an alternative, more spontaneous system of the separation of power, under which every act of government is subjected to "rules of just conduct" thriving on customs, habits, or practices, or time-honoured, common conceptions of what is just. This unconventional notion of the separation of power is intended to allow long-standing patterns of social interactions, or what people think is reasonable and acceptable, to serve as a firm foundation for the running of government.[11]

In this way, those in power would be better restrained from insulating themselves from popular pressure and acting in their own interests, on the pretext that they have been given mandates through the ballot. Politicians would otherwise remain liable to canvass their constituencies for votes at will,

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[11] Hayek's approach holds a pitfall in its implicit assumption that any unplanned social order essentially prohibits unbridled individualism. As pointed out by John Gray (1989, pp.89-102), such an order does not necessarily exist in every society. It is therefore imperative to specify the types of justice, rights, or liberties are required of a society qualified as being endowed with "rules of just conduct". However, Hayek fails to put forth "a substantive view of justice and rights which his conflation of liberty with the rule of law disqualifies him from advancing"(Gray, 1989, p.97). In Bhutan, the notion of *tsawa sum*, referred to at the beginning of this article, has served as a foundation of such "rules of just conduct"; according to it, the nation, the people or the King must seek the affection and cooperation of the other entities in that neither can fulfil its, their, or his aspirations without depending on the others. This then causes the democratic ethos of harmony and tolerance to spread to every realm of society, while the government becomes as an entity subordinated to society.

by returning special benefits to particular groups with money, power, and influence, even after acquiring the right to rule through competitive elections.

A key device to bring the renewed notion of separation of power into effect will be constitutions. For this purpose, constitutions must be reinterpreted as “a superstructure erected to secure the maintenance of the law (‘rules of just conduct’), rather than, as they have usually been represented, as the source of all other law” (Hayek, 1982, p.127, parenthesis added); they should be positioned, not as the supreme law standing above statute laws enacted by the legislature, but as vernacular rules ensuring that governments remain checked by “rules of just conduct”, and thus operate in a context of established rules and rules and practices existent in society.

“Very few countries in the world are in the fortunate position of possessing a strong constitutional tradition” (Hayek, 1982, p.443). Bhutan is among the “very few” in that “[r]eligion and culture play a vital role” in its Constitution, as stated by Chief Justice Sonam Tobgye (2012). Its monarchy and Buddhism constitute “universal rules of just conduct”; the Constitution stipulates that the King be “the upholder of *Chhoe-sid*”, and aspires to shape a “compassionate society rooted in the Buddhist ethos”.

Bhutan can thus serve as a source of inspiration for our endeavour to overcome the predicament of today’s democracy, which is liable to lapse into a form of mob rule. The Proposition “Bhutan is a democracy”, thriving on “rules of just conduct” that are founded on the monarchical authority and Buddhism, can illuminate how the popular wisdom of democracy is a cultural artefact. By divulging the constricted nature the monarchy/democracy, and religion/politics dichotomies permeating ongoing political analysis, the case of Bhutan can facilitate truly open, thorough deliberations. It could, moreover, propel a move to ameliorate the wider contexts, in which scientific universalism and the Cave

structure have brought about the circumscribed notion of liberal democracy, ranking various societies on a linear scale of "progress" with pseudo-scientific determinism.

Towards Open Deliberations about "Democracy"

One distinct feature of the overall historical trend of Western political thought is that the idea of "goodness" has been superseded by the idea of "rightness" (Murdoch, 1970)."There is a risk that, in the pursuit of equality, good things which there is difficulty in distributing evenly may not be admitted to be good", as pointed out by Bertrand Russell (1949, p.51), an influential political philosopher in the West in the early twentieth century. Russell thus warns of the risk of various abstract, high-sounding systems of thoughts, including that of liberal democracy, lapsing into dogmatic creeds that provide ambitious, over-optimistic pictures of what works and how, along the lines of constructive rationalism.

Those "good things which there is difficulty in distributing evenly" include traditional values that are often tied up with hereditary, hierarchical systems of authority and privilege; they can be drawn on as the ethico-political principles for a healthy and smooth functioning of democracy ("goodness").It is not only Russell but numerous other political philosophers in the West, such as Carl Schmitt and F.A. Hayek, taken up in the preceding section, who have defended the idea of "goodness" against the onslaught of constructive rationalism privileging the idea of "rightness".

This carries two implications for those of us studying Bhutan's democracy, or those seeking to ameliorate the popular, circumscribed notion of democracy. First, we can gain inspirations from the accumulated wisdom of Western political philosophy, when seeking to allay doubts (such as "whether Bhutan is a democracy is doubtful") held by political analysts bogged down by the constricted view of democracy. Some of the central concepts of political philosophy can help to illuminate a way to rectify our orthodox understanding of current political experience.

For example, John Dunn's book entitled *The History of Political Theory* (1996), revives some master works of John Locke (1632-1704) and Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679)[12]. Locke and Hobbes upheld religious and political obligation respectively, as the foundation of associative bonds in society. The notions of religious and political obligation run parallel to, and shed light on the strengths of Bhutan's "natural democracy" founded on the monarchical authority and Buddhism. In this way, key figures in Western political philosophy can be drawn on, to counter the tendency of today's democracy to lapse into a form of mob rule that causes "the abandonment of the state to private interests".

Second, at the same time, Bhutan's "natural democracy" can bring new cultural sensibilities to bear upon the heritage of Western political philosophy. As admitted by Dunn (1996, p.14), "we are far from enjoying such a cosmopolitan vision" as to "allot no arbitrary and inadvertent privilege to the experience of the west". This is in line with the need of a larger project of "Provincializing Europe", in order not to rank human societies in a linear trajectory placing European historical experiences at the pinnacle of "progress".

Accordingly, while the Hobbesian and Lockean notions of religious and political obligation, shares an affinity with

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[12] Locke argued for the primacy of people's freedom to opt for their own religious needs and duties, over their terrestrial rights to freedom of thought and expression (Chapter 6). "It is to God that human beings owe their primary obedience, and only secondarily and derivatively to the laws of the political community to which they happen at the time to belong" (p.105). It is this sense of religious obligation, not secular responsibility, that nurtures a cohesive society bound by mutual toleration. Hobbes cautioned that revolt against political authority would cause the instability and the collapse of the social order (Chapter 4). This Hobbesian notion of political obligation is marginalized in today's political analysis that centres round individual autonomy and choice. Political analysts should equally respect individuals' obligation to obey a benign political authority, an intrinsic feature of the social stability in many places of the globe.

Bhutan's "natural democracy", they are founded on what Marshal Sahlins (2008) terms "the Western illusion of human nature"; human beings are egoistic, independent, self-reliant, and are prone to place their own interests before those of fellow human beings. This atomistic view of human nature, emanating from Europe's grim experience of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century religious warfare and persecution, has historically been sustained in Western political thought, including its Hobbesian and Lockean schools of thought.

The case of Bhutan can potentially help political philosophers to become sensitized to an alternative to the one-dimensional caricature of human's innate wickedness. Underlying the notion of *tsawa sum* ("three foundations"), referred to at the beginning of this article, is the notion of human nature as being gregarious, and ready to concern oneself with the good of other beings. The egoistical urges of human beings do not necessarily prevail over their sociability, in the context of Bhutan. "[T]here is no such thing as human nature independent of culture" (Sahlins, 1996, p.110). Human beings do not share a universal character, but are constituted within respective cultures they live in.

When problematizing the dominance of Western-derived liberal democracy, we must refrain from simplistically regarding the imperial West taking over the Rest. On the contrary, modernity is far from being the prerogative of the West, but is embedded in Bhutan, where the monarchy and Buddhism have served to propel the move toward a "direct-access society". We must not lapse into the West-Rest dichotomy, inadvertently distinguishing Bhutan's "natural democracy" from Western thoughts and practices. By acknowledging multiple forms of modernity in this way, while avoiding counterposing the single "global" modernity with "local" cultures alien to it, we will be able to start conceptualizing a multipolar world.

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