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## **Defining Democracy: A Review of Sen, Amartya Kumar (1999) *Democracy As A Universal Value*. Journal of Democracy, (3), 3-17. Article Review**

*By: Henry Kinyanjui\**

### **Summary of Article**

The main argument in the article is that the rise of democracy is the most important thing that occurred in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Page 1). This goes beyond the fall of fascism and Nazism, radical transformation of China and shift from economic dominance of the West. The article traces the concept of democracy from Greece to the several revolutions in Northern America and Europe. The author insists that it was wrong for 19<sup>th</sup> century theorist to argue whether one country was “fit for democracy” or not. Instead, he insists as the central thesis that democracy is a universal value (page 2).

The article uses several lenses to underscore the point that democracy is a universal value. Firstly, the Indian experience brings to the fore why no one questions the role of democracy in United States or Britain but is eager to do the same for third world countries or poor economies. Here the author argues that condemnation of sectarian violence in third world countries is a form of democracy. Secondly, the author locates the ‘Lee hypotheses’ from the experience in Singapore. The argument made here is that disciplinarian states have had faster economic growth. He questions the methodologies of those who seem to suggest the converse. He places premium on the need to consider the origin of policies in those Countries by comparing responses to famine.

Thirdly, the article posits that democracy function as universal value since it concerns itself with the political freedom as part of natural freedom. Also, democracy gives people right to express themselves during political contestations. People are able to participate in sharing their diversity of needs

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with one another. This means they learn from one another and inform universality of values. The fourth idea that flows from the universality of values is the constructive role of democracy to the formation of values. Here the author contends with objections to the universality of culture. The argument here is that universality implies the consent of everyone.

Fifthly, the author argues that difference in culture or class does not mean that democracy is not a universal value. Instead, the role of democracy is protective of the poor. That there is very little evidence that poor people would not choose democracy. The article takes the debate further by suggesting that different cultures have similar expression of democracy. Here he locates the Lee Kwan Yew hypothesis as originating from Singapore and is similar to the Confucius ideology that rejects blind allegiance to the State. Instead, loyalty to values is a pillar for any culture.

Last but not least, the author situates the debate to three aspects. First, the value of democracy is found in its intrinsic importance in human life. Secondly it plays a critical role in generating political incentives such as participation. Thirdly, it has a function in constructive formation of values. The author admits that there are challenges in arguing the democracy is a universal value but insists that a choice has to be made on where democracy belongs. This is more so since the contemporary world depends on the functioning of democracy. He concludes by arguing that the force of the claim the democracy is a universal value depends on the strength of this claim.

### **Critical Appraisal**

This is a very interesting read on democracy as a concept that has worldwide worth. The author does a good job of attempting to refute some of the claims that contend against the idea of generality of democracy. The article seems to suggest that democracy as a value has risen to a place of what in international law is referred to as a dogmatic standard (*Jus cogens*). The article raises a quintessential issue of why scholars place layers on different States based on either their history or economic position. The response suggested in my view is critical. He suggests that it is important to

deconstruct the claim dictatorial regimes are more developed by considering the methodology used.

One of the ontological perspectives used in the article is that culture is constructed, and it should be considered beyond idealist lenses. Under ontological materialism, culture operates broadly beyond what is observable. The author displays ontological idealism as superior to materialism since he argues that democracy is what controls the environment under which people in poor States react to democracy. This is a utopian approach that when placed under the prism of the Maslow's pecking order of human needs. Human needs drive the view of concepts such as democracy. In my view the author's paradigm is greatly influenced by the growth of India as a democracy. He may be criticized as being an apologist for the west.

Democracy as a universal value is waiting to be discovered irrespective of the context of culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The epistemology behind this thinking is that democracy exist irrespective of the cultural, economic, or political dynamics. The article suggests that a quantitative approach to democracy may not yield accurate results. However, asking the right question in a quantitative study, regardless the context, is likely to yield a response that supports one of the three functions of democracy. The author's axiology is influenced by the view of India as being democratic. His argument is utilitarian in approaching democracy from his values. For instance, when he argues that democracy is not an amenity that should pause waiting for the arrival of prosperity.

One of the things that is clear is that universality is very controversial. Sidney Verba in political culture demonstrate the approaches that can be used to understand how people relate to the governments including parochial, subject, and responsive attitude that informs behavior of citizens<sup>1</sup>. It would appear that the article projects a westernized as opposed to a universal view of democracy without considering the attitudes and context of each

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<sup>1</sup>Verba, Almond G and Sidney. 1963. *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press .

individual. The idea of constructing a universal value for democracy will always be problematic. If democracy is to be defined merely on the progressive policies formulated as suggested by the author, there must be a deeper understanding of creating of policy including context and culture before arriving at a universality. Adopting what Dahl Roberts argues on who governs, epistemic communities are a key player in determining the values way beyond their universality<sup>2</sup>.

The author discerns that simply taking a quantitative approach to the study of democracy may not be effective in producing reliable data. More particularly, quantitative research may not correctly respond to several variables that might be anticipated within different cultures. Also, as a value system and culture specific matter, democracy cannot be fully understood only by qualitative methodology. The qualitative methods also have some weakness since there are several values that are attached to different cultures and induction would not produce appropriate knowledge for democracy. As radically suggested by the intellectual troublemaker Paul Feyerabend in ‘Against Methods’, there are many routes for attaining knowledge including but not limited to quantitative and qualitative methods<sup>3</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

Since there are many important things that have happened in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, it is important to therefore applaud the author for attempting to show that democracy is the most important thing that happened. The claim that democracy is a universal value is equally bold as well as thought provoking and as such it should be applauded. The challenges that would be encountered in supporting the claim for democracy as a universal value are acknowledged in the article. The article is a good read which introduces good information for debate on the reality of democracy. The ontological paradigm of the article is that democracy is an imperative for both

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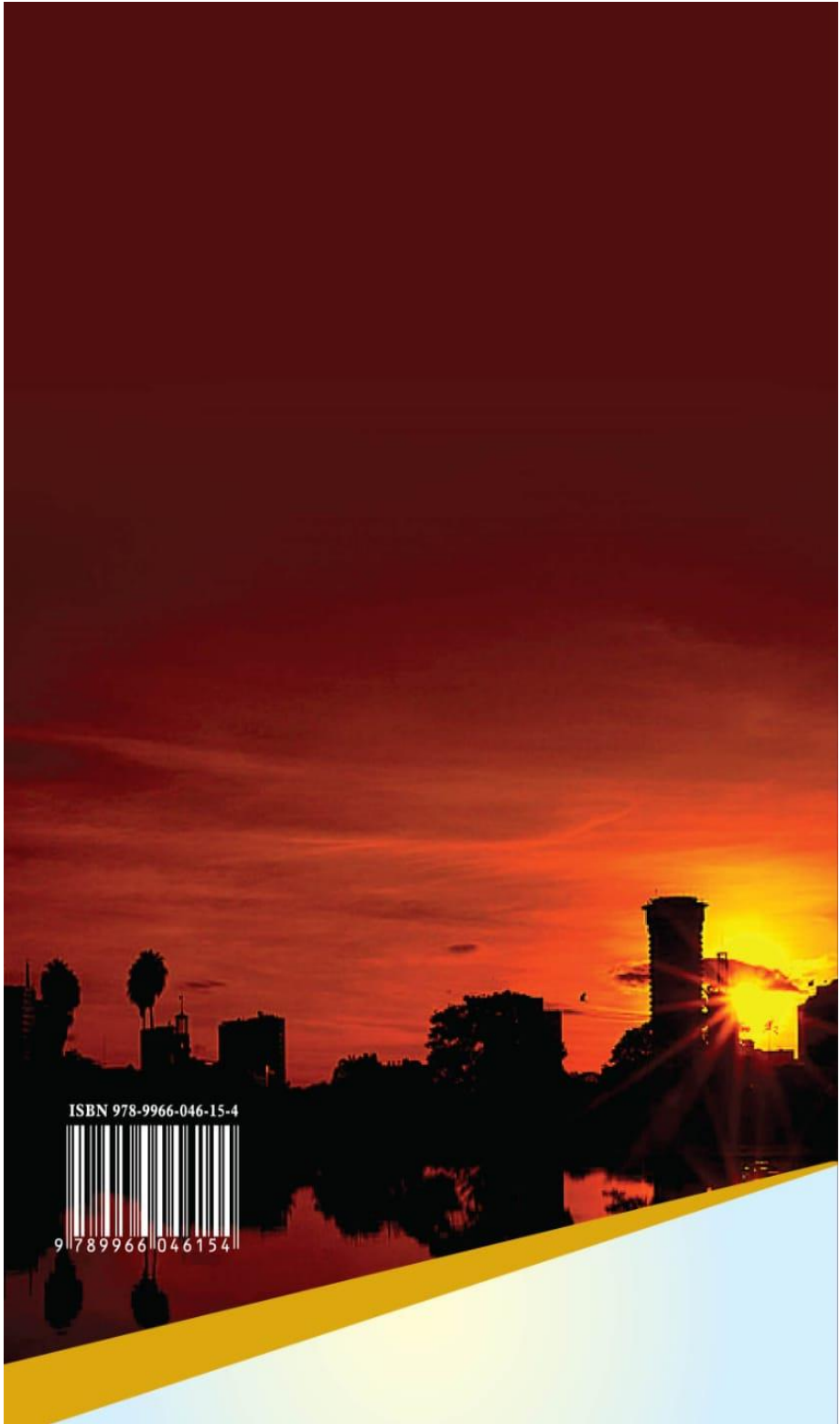
<sup>2</sup> Dahl, Robert A. 1964. *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

<sup>3</sup>Feyerabend, Paul. 1993. *Against Method ; Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge*. Minneapolis. University of Minnesota Press.

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progressive and developed countries. The author's epistemology is that values are universal. Though they change in different context they remain deeply similar in posture and tenor. Participation is one of the foundational aspects of democracy which is shared as a universal value.



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