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Conclusion

> Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under
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> circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and
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> transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the
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> brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionising themselves and things, in
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> creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis
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> they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names,
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> battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured
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> disguise and this borrowed language. (Marx 1963 [1869]: 15)

Salvaging Democracy from Discourse

As the curtains part on the 2007 high-grossing action blockbuster *300*, the audience is immediately greeted with a sense of foreboding. The story's narrator, Dilios, recounts for us the intense military training that Spartan men had to endure from childhood in order to protect the people from their dark enemies, enemies who wish to destroy the city-state and remove its virtues from the annals of history. This destruction has never been more imminent, it seems, than with the recent encroachment of Persian forces into Greece and the beginning of the Greco-Persian Wars of 480-479 BCE. 'A beast approaches' says Dilios,

> patient and confident, savouring the meal to come. But this beast is made of men and horses,
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> swords and spears. An army of slaves vast beyond imagining, ready to devour Greece, ready to
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> snuff out the world's one hope for reason and justice. A beast approaches. (Snyder, Johnstad, &
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> Gordon 2007)

To combat this beast the Spartan king, Leonidas, assembles 300 of his finest warriors who are later joined by other soldiers from the various city-states of Greece. Together these men head towards Thermopylae where Leonidas believes the narrow gorge and steep sea

cliffs will make the vast numbers of the Persian army count for nothing. It is here that the Greeks, and especially the 300 Spartans, confront the Persians, enduring wave after of wave of attack until their ultimate defeat which, in turn, inspires the armies of Greece to repel the Persians the following year.

At the time of its release *300* sparked a wave of controversy as a plethora of blogs, film reviews, news reports and short academic papers sought to point out the film's historical inaccuracies, one-dimensional characters and overly simplistic plot (Cartledge 2007, Lytle 2007, Vergano 2007). Inside Iran, the film was greeted with outrage and indignation with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad accusing the film of being part of an elaborate US psychological warfare program against his country (Jaafar 2007, Moaveni 2007). Overall, however, much of the criticism of the film focused on the racialist and pejorative nature of the text which relied heavily on its negative and stereotypical portrayal of Iran/Persia and the broader Middle East (Farrokh 2007, Scott 2007, K. Smith 2007).

It would be easy to demonstrate how this film represents the epitome of what Edward Said was referring to in his work on *Orientalism*. Throughout the film, the Persians are constructed as the other of Greece. Their army is made up of ghouls, freaks, ogres, unworldly beasts and immortals, who are mostly dressed in black and repeatedly described in terms such as 'beasts from the blackness', 'hunters of men's souls' and 'motherless dogs' (Snyder, et al. 2007). The Spartans, on the other hand, are the model of Greco-Roman hyper-masculinity, dressed in red capes and leather briefs, they possess 'superior fighting skills' and 'march for honour's sake, for duty's sake, for glory's sake' (Snyder, et al. 2007). This is not at all inconsistent with the findings of a number of other studies which have sought to investigate the portrayal of Middle Eastern people in Hollywood blockbusters (M. Bernstein & Studlar 1997, Khatib 2006, Semmerling 2006). Perhaps foremost among these is Jack Shaheen's *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* in which he analyses more than 900 Hollywood

films from 1896 to 2001[1]. 'Seen through Hollywood's distorted lens,' writes Shaheen in his Introduction, the people of the Middle East 'look different and threatening … brutal, heartless, uncivilized religious fanatics and money-mad cultural "others" bent on terrorizing civilized Westerners' (Shaheen 2001: 2).

What is even more interesting here is that, within this Orientalist framework, *300* also makes clear the distinction between the discourses of Western democracy and Oriental despotism. Consider for example the actions of King Leonidas versus those of the Persian king, Xerxes. Leonidas is not only depicted as strong, virtuous and brave, he is also seen to have great respect for the rule of law, for individual freedoms and for the democratic mechanisms of ancient Sparta – virtues he is prepared to die for. Despite his recalcitrant and bellicose nature, Leonidas consults with the religious clergy of Sparta, the Ephors, and heeds the advice of the Oracle. Similarly, he respects the jurisdiction of the Spartan council and is careful not to offend them or to contravene Spartan law. Here, the power of King Leonidas is tempered by the machinations of the state and, despite his obvious desire to summon the entire Spartan army, he instead leads his personal bodyguard, a small battalion of 300 'free' men, to their certain death. Xerxes on the other hand wishes to control all that he sees, demanding absolute submission from his people and complete obedience to his every whim. He considers himself a 'god-king', indulges his every fantasy and is in command of a vast army of 'slaves'. There is no consultation with religious or political bodies, no legal system with which to contend and no personal freedom for his subjects. There is only the arbitrary despotism of his absolute power.

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[1] It should be noted here that Shaheen's study focuses on the construction of Arab peoples in Hollywood films, while *300* is about Persians. Arabs and Persians are, of course, distinct ethnically, culturally and linguistically. However, the fact that there are remarkably similar portrayals of Arabs and Persians in Western motion pictures indicates the homogenising force of Orientalism where the complex differences of the Orient are reduced to negative portrayals and stereotypes (Said 1981: 80-3, Shaheen 2001: 29).

This juxtaposition of Leonidas and Xerxes, and of the civilizations and political systems they represent, is particularly evident when they meet at the end of the first day of fighting at Thermopylae. Here, Xerxes, sitting atop a massive and overly ornate throne carried by his dutiful slaves, demands Leonidas's submission and threatens him with complete annihilation. When this fails to intimidate Leonidas, the Persian king attempts a bribe, offering to make him 'warlord of all Greece' (Snyder, et al. 2007). Leonidas refuses to be seduced by this offer, however, and an enraged Xerxes promises to 'erase even the memory of Sparta from the histories … the world will never know you existed at all' (Snyder, et al. 2007). To this Leonidas retorts 'The world will know that free men stood against a tyrant. That few stood against many' (Snyder, et al. 2007).

This kind of juxtaposition continues throughout the film where the plot moves the viewer several times back and forth between the sophisticated politics of the Spartan court and that of the depraved and imperious Persian Empire. In the court of King Xerxes for example, musicians play exotic instruments as semi-naked and disfigured women writhe and dance and seduce. Ram-headed men look on as bejewelled freaks appear to smoke opium and engage in acts of moral decadence and sexual depravity. The camera pans through this seamy interior as it follows the deformed Spartan outcast, Ephialtes, and his betrayal of King Leonidas. His reward, according to Xerxes, will be 'Everything you could ever desire. Every happiness you can imagine. Every pleasure your fellow Greeks and your false gods have denied you, I will grant you … Embrace me as your king and as your god' (Snyder, et al. 2007).

The Persian court is then sharply contrasted against the image of the Spartan council, where wise bearded men in white robes are seen deliberating and debating over the key issues of the state. It is here that Leonidas' wife, Queen Gorgo, gives an impassioned and skilled oration, imploring the council to send the entire Spartan army to Thermopylae. 'Send the

army for the preservation of liberty' argues the Queen, 'Send it for justice. Send it for law and order. Send it for reason. But most importantly, send our army for hope' (Snyder, et al. 2007). Sadly, Gorgo's address comes too late as the 300 Spartans are finally overcome by the might of the nefarious Persian hordes. Fortunately, before he dies, Leonidas sends Dilios back to Sparta and asks him to spread the story of the brave 300 and warn Greece about the likely Persian invasion. Dilios succeeds in his mission and, as the movie draws to a close, he is seen walking amongst the vast Greek army, rallying them to battle with the words

> from free Greek to free Greek, the word was spread that bold Leonidas and his 300, so far from home, lay down their lives, not just for Sparta, but for all Greece and the promise this country holds. Now, here on this rugged patch of earth called Plataea, Xerxes hordes face obliteration! Just there, the barbarians huddle, sheer terror gripping tight their hearts with icy fingers … This day we rescue a world from mysticism and tyranny, and usher in a future brighter than anything we can imagine. Give thanks, men, to Leonidas and the brave 300! To victory! (Snyder, et al. 2007)

The story of the 300 Spartans and their final stand against all odds at Thermopylae has been a consistent motif in popular Western culture. The 2007 film was based on the earlier graphic novel of the same name by Frank Miller (Miller 1998), itself inspired by the 1962 film *The 300 Spartans* (St.George, Callegari, DelGrosso, d'Eramo, & Liberatore 1962). More broadly, the story of the 300 Spartans has been recounted by novelists, film-makers and artists, from Jacques-Louis David's 1814 *Portrait of Leonidas* (David 1814) to Steven Pressfield's novel *Gates of Fire* (Pressfield 1998). In turn, each of these texts has taken their inspiration from what is arguably the best account of the Greco-Persian Wars: Herodotus' *Histories* (Herodotus 1996 [460 BCE]).

What is particularly problematic about this is not only that Herodotus, as demonstrated in Chapter 1, used typically Orientalist language to explain away the non-

Western world, but he was also among the first to argue that the West was inherently democratic while the East was prone to despotism and tyranny. As demonstrated, the distinction between Western democracy and Oriental despotism has a long history that can be traced right through the canon of Western scholarship. This reveals the Eurocentric nature of the historical narrative that accompanies and underscores democracy itself. It is widely seen as a form of government forged and designed by the great nations of the rational and free West, a form of government whose actions, practices and movements have an exclusively Occidental heritage. This has left us with a false dualism between the virtues of the West and the backward, savage, cruel and inherently despotic people of the Orient.

Given that this false dualism can be traced throughout history from Herodotus to Hollywood, it is not surprising that the idea has been frequently invoked in academic, bureaucratic and popular media discourses on Iraq. By moving beyond the simplistic textbook analysis of Iraq's political history as one of despotism and violence and uncovering instead a more nuanced and complex picture, it is possible to find an alternative vision of Iraq that emphasizes those instances of egalitarianism, collective governance and democratic reform. The foremost contribution of this study has been to problematize the dialectic between Western democracy and Oriental despotism via an analysis of five key phases of Iraq's political history.

The first phase included the participatory institutions, practices and discourses of ancient Mesopotamia. Chapter 2 revealed that from among the early myths and epics recounted by the Sumerians to the grand empires of the Babylonians and Assyrians, can be found very sophisticated and inclusive forms of governance. Along similar lines, Chapter 3 demonstrated that the democratic ethos was at work from the very earliest days of Islam up until the fall of the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century. Far from Oriental despotism, ancient and Islamic Iraq reveal a complex political landscape where, at

particular times and locations, the broader polity was encouraged to participate in the machinations of the state. This is particularly significant because this is the first known study to examine the origins of ancient or Islamic democracy and discuss them in relation to contemporary political events such as the democratisation of Iraq. It is also the first to argue that such democracies raise pertinent questions about the history of Western democracy and point to important flaws in the notion that the Orient has always been prone to despotism.

This book then examined the public sphere during three phases of Iraq's more recent history. Chapter 4 looked at the Colonial period of Iraq (1921-58), which began with the arrival of the British at the close of the First World War and ended with the Revolution of 1958. In Chapter 5 the Post-Colonial era of Iraq's history (1958-2003) was examined by focusing on the series of autocratic regimes which governed Iraq from 1958 until the US invasion of 2003. Finally, Chapter 6 focuses on Re-Colonial Iraq (2003-11), the period of US occupation and forced democratisation amid horrific violence. What these three chapters have in common is that, despite Western interference, oppressive tyrants and seemingly inhospitable conditions, Iraq is home to a lively, if sometimes clandestine or partisan, public sphere. This inverts the traditional dualism between the discourses of democracy: it highlights the contradictory nature of the West which advocates democratic practices while interfering in Iraqi politics; it demonstrates that even domestic attempts to manipulate the discourses of democracy met with a virulent culture of resistance; and it highlights that, through it all, the myriad Iraqi people's movements, political parties and newspapers criticised their elites and overlords and agitated for a more democratic order.

The point here is not whether or not Iraq will become a democracy or how such a goal might be achieved, but that Iraq has a complex history of participatory politics and a rich civic culture that is rarely acknowledged. Iraq may never become a truly robust democracy. The increasingly authoritarian tendencies emerging among elements of Iraq's political elite,

especially in the wake of the extended political stalemate of 2010, has left an Iraqi populace that is increasingly disillusioned about the efficacy of democracy and its ability to meet their many urgent needs. Recent escalations in violence following the withdrawal of all US troops at the end of 2011 mean that the future of Iraq's security and stability remain uncertain at best. Given these circumstances, it is possible that whatever exists of Iraq's complex public sphere today may erode within a year or two and any dream of a democratic and egalitarian Iraq may become a nightmare. While these possibilities must be understood and dealt with realistically, the alternative must also be acknowledged. As this study has shown, there is nothing in Iraqi history, culture or society that is absolutely antithetical to democratic forms of governance and no implicit reason why Iraq should become a failed state under the auspices of a despotic government. Contrary to the pervading assumptions about Iraq's political history, a more thorough analysis of the nation's past has revealed a sophisticated and diverse political landscape that has long fought against tyranny and oppression, that has asserted alternative visions of a more inclusive political order and is demonstrative of the Iraqi people's will toward democracy.

In a sense then, while this study does not contain any step-by-step guide to building democracy in Iraq, it does suggest that further analyses of Iraq's political history, such as that conducted here, may go some way towards bolstering and legitimating democratic movements within Iraq today. If Iraq is ever to emerge successfully from foreign occupation to form a robust and egalitarian democracy then an open and frank assessment of the nation's past will be necessary. However, as demonstrated, most Iraqis have learned about the past through a Baathist lens: a tyrannical kaleidoscope of state propaganda, a history re-written to both justify oppression and coerce people into patriotism. This was underpinned by a very complex cultural-discursive campaign in which the history of Iraq was commandeered by the state and embedded with Baathist ideology.

Nonetheless, many Iraqis have maintained an intimate and acute relationship with their own political history. No matter what their religious or political persuasion, or their ethnic or cultural identity, for most Iraqis the past is not a distant or irrelevant discourse, it is a tangible force that informs the present. They feel a deep sense of pride in the achievements of ancient Mesopotamia and regularly acknowledge Iraq as the birthplace of human civilization and of the written word. Likewise, not only are most Iraqis deeply religious, the religion of Islam and the legacy of Islamic Baghdad continues to inform everything from the poetry recited in cafes to the affairs of the state. Certain events of the Colonial period, such as the Great Iraqi Revolution and the Wathba, are also enshrined in popular memory and remain symbols of defiance and solidarity in the face of foreign interference. More problematic are the painful memories of the Post-Colonial period, which brought suppression and violence, but also planted the seeds of opposition and made Iraqis cynically aware of the manipulation of discourse for political purposes. Finally, all Iraqis have witnessed first-hand both the tragedies and the advances of Re-Colonial Iraq. In terms of their experiences with democracy: they have felt the excitement of voting in free and fair elections for the first time; read long editorials or watched extended TV programs about key policies and parties; and they have taken to the streets alongside their fellow Iraqis to hold the government to account or to advocate change. What is evident here is that Iraq is a complex ideological landscape in which political history plays a central role in the day-to-day lives of ordinary citizens.

The task here is to make sure that this political history is not commandeered by those who would mimic the Baath and others by turning it into a tool of oppression and coercion. Instead, the former occupying forces, the Iraqi government and the nation's intellectuals, writers, journalists and teachers – both at home and in Diaspora - have a responsibility to make sure that the 'historical memories' of democratic Iraq are discussed and debated in the contemporary public sphere. Such an open and critical engagement with Iraq's democratic

history will not only create avenues of intercommunity dialogue and help placate ethno-religious violence and sectarianism, it may also facilitate the establishment of an inclusive political order – giving the Iraqi people a sense of 'ownership' over democracy rather than viewing it as a foreign and largely Western imposition irrelevant to their own cultural heritage.

This has been one of the central arguments of a number of recent studies on Iraq's political history which have asserted that the nation's democratic past could become a powerful political and discursive tool, used to engender wider support and participation in contemporary political developments (Al-Musawi 2006, Bashkin 2009, Davis 2005b, Dawisha 2005a, 2009). Amongst these, Eric Davis has been the most adamant arguing that while 'historical memory will not provide a panacea for Iraq's political problems' the nation's democratic past 'can help to inspire Iraqis to regain a sense of civic pride and trust in their ability to forge ahead with democratisation' and to 'deprive those who seek to return Iraq to an authoritarian past' (Davis 2005a: 244).

If such a project is to be successful in Iraq and further abroad, however, we must move beyond the age-old and deep-seated framework provided for us by the false dichotomy between Western democracy and Oriental despotism. To some extent this means re-examining and re-writing the history of democracy itself. It means expanding the Eurocentric narrative that underpins democracy to one that is more inclusive of those democratic practices, movements and histories that fall outside this limited rubric. This does not mean that important moments such as the rise of the *polis* in ancient Athens or the French Revolution should be discarded, nor should the iconic works of writers such as Aristotle, Montesquieu or Weber, but rather that they should be incorporated into a much broader narrative. In the case of Iraq, this broader narrative would necessarily include pre-Athenian democratic developments such as those of ancient Mesopotamia, it would also incorporate

Islamic elements as well as the various political movements that have played such an important role in Iraq throughout the Colonial, Post-Colonial and Re-Colonial periods.

To paraphrase Marx, overcoming the ideologies inherited from the past is no easy feat. As has been demonstrated, the discourses of democracy studied here are so deeply enmeshed into the Western scholarly and literary canon that they surface in everything from major works on history, philosophy and politics through to recent art, literature and major motion pictures, achieving a weight and a common sense value via repetition. Democracy, however, is worth salvaging from the series of overlapping and interconnected discourses which have constructed it. It contains, as Derrida has pointed out, an 'emancipatory promise' towards which society must strive (Derrida 2006 [1993]: 74). Hidden beneath the layers of Eurocentric history and racialist ideology, 'rule by the people' carries with it a quintessentially human notion that is at once both pragmatic and utopian, something that must be fought for and defended daily and is also always yet 'to come' (Derrida 2005 [2003]: 78-94, 2006 [1993]: 108, 212). Thus, any advancement in Iraq's long and multifarious move towards collective governance is not only a step in the direction of a more egalitarian and inclusive Iraq, but another affront to the discourses of democracy that have for so long clouded our ability to see beyond their simple dualism to the broader story of humankind's collective struggle towards democracy.