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ONLINE BOOK REVIEW

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Does Everyone Want Democracy? Insights From Mongolia
Paula L.W. Sabloff (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2013)

Most discussions about democracy – be they academic, policy oriented or in the media - start from the assumption that democracy is self-evident: it's most important features being competitive elections, individual liberties, universal suffrage and the secret ballot. Recently anthropologists have challenged such normative views. Rather than evaluating democratic performance against a universal liberal yardstick, they have carried out research on how democracy is actually lived and practiced on the ground. Paula Sabloff, a political anthropologist, introduces a new element to this debate by asking whether the desire for democracy – be it liberal or otherwise – is universal. Sabloff employs cognitive perspectives to show how an emphasis on emotions and values can shed light on this desire's universality.

Sabloff's objective is to challenge status quo views about who wants democracy and why. The key questions the book address are: is the desire for democracy universal? Has the concept of democracy changed in Mongolia since the end of socialism in 1989? And, does the concept vary by demographic categories? The author argues that Mongolia is a particularly interesting place to study ideas about democracy because, since WWI, it has experienced three types of governance including feudalism, Soviet–style socialism, and capitalist democracy. To answer her questions Sabloff draws on extensive anthropological fieldwork (carried out between 1996 and 2003), archival research, and over 1200 open-ended interviews, which she has coded and subject to statistical analysis.

The book begins with an historical chapter, which explains the history of governance in Mongolia from Genghis Khan to the present day. Sabloff then traces people's changing attitudes towards human rights, political and economic freedom, and the rights and duties of both citizen and government. Sabloff explains that Mongolians value democracy very highly. She says that the strongly felt desire for democracy can be traced back to Mongolia's nomadic pastoral culture, which prioritizes self-reliance, independence, and dignity. Sabloff's informants tell her that all these values are more easily fulfilled under a democratic – as opposed to totalitarian -government.

However, while Mongolians want democracy, they do not want it in the way that western policy makers might expect. Sabloff explains that Mongolians see voting as a right rather than a duty. In addition, they believe that the government should act as a patron – taking an active role in preparing them for capitalism and entry into the global economy. Sabloff describes how the desire for this form of capitalist democracy – as opposed to liberal democracy – is rooted in Mongolia's specific history including: the socialist experience (which emphasized a passive citizenry and the high regard of leaders), the country's bumpy transition to the free market, and a historic desire for national sovereignty.

Building on the Mongolian case study Sabloff argues that the desire for democracy is universal – and that it stems from deeply held values that can be found in all societies including dignity, justice, hope, and self-determination. She suggests that in turn these values arise from emotions that psychologists have also discovered to be universal – including anger, fear, and pride amongst others. She argues that so many people want democracy because they consider that it brings together government ideology and structure with these deep-seated values and emotions. Thus, according to Sabloff, people see democracy as a "means to an end" (p. 3) – it therefore follows that as peoples' goals shift, the way that they define democracy and prioritize its attributes will also change. In other words, Sabloff is arguing that the desire for democracy is universal – but the kind of democracy that is desired is not.

Does Everyone Want Democracy goes some way to meet the ambitious goals that Sabloff sets out to achieve. The book shows readers that all Mongolians have a desire for democracy but ideas about what that means vary across time and space. However it remains questionable the extent to which the findings can be generalized to argue for the universal appeal of democracy rooted in a standard set of values and emotions. Thus, while this book can be applauded for being ambitious in its intentions, more comparative and cross cultural analysis is needed to validate the claims.

Sabloff writes clearly and her argument is backed up by rigorous interview data and statistical analysis. However, I found the ethnography to be rather thin. I came away with no real understanding about how people relate to one another or engage with the state on a daily basis. Sabloff's attempt to bring cognitive perspectives to the study of political anthropology represents an important step, although more could be done to make the cognitive approach relevant for the non-specialist reader. This is an innovative book that should read by any scholar who is critically engaging with debates on democracy, citizenship, or modern day Mongolia. The book would also be of use to cognitive anthropologists who work on emotion, values, and ideology.