

# Book review: *The Despot's Accomplice: How the West is Aiding and Abetting the Decline of Democracy* by Brian Klaas

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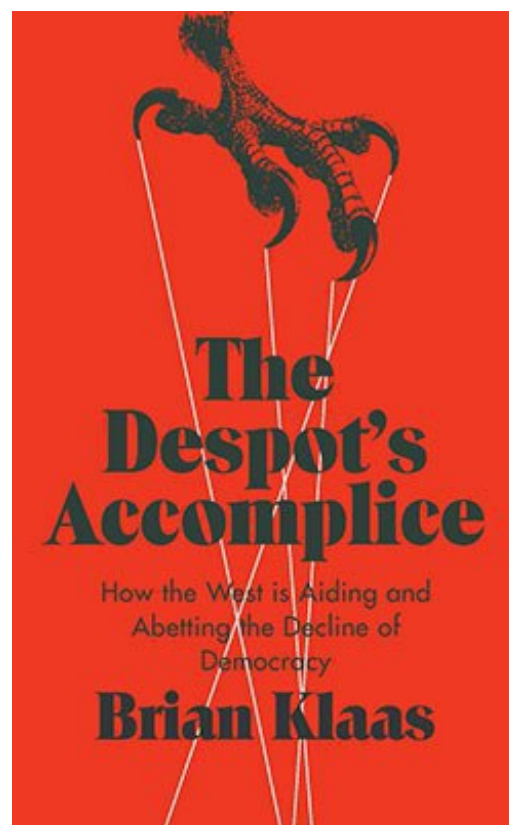
*Jason Sumich describes *The Despot's Accomplice: How the West is Aiding and Abetting the Decline of Democracy* by Brian Klaas as a well-written and engaging volume around the author's vision of democracy although it would have benefitted from a serious engagement with differing opinions.*

It has become increasingly common to speak of liberal democracy as a system in crisis whose future may be in jeopardy. However, Dr Brian Klaas, a fellow of comparative politics at LSE, has no such doubts. Instead, *The Despot's Accomplice: How the West is Aiding and Abetting the Decline of Democracy* is an impassioned defence of Klaas' depiction of liberal democracy, while also taking the 'West' to task for aiding despots and authoritarian regimes throughout the world. The author, who has a background working in democracy promotion argues that Western elites are true believers who overwhelmingly want democracy (page 2), but whose occasionally short-sighted policy decisions and over-valuation of stability in the immediate term are weakening their mission and enhancing the strength of foreign despots.

Throughout this well-written, engaging book that will appeal to members of the general public and policy makers, Klaas offers numerous examples of where the West went wrong and discusses the growth of 'counter-democratic' models such as China and Russia. He also provides a variety of suggestions to overcome such mistakes. Some appear eminently sensible, such as to stop using war as a means of promoting democratisation, or to abandon direct intervention in the elections of other countries (although it is not clear how much indirect intervention is acceptable). Others may be more controversial, such as offering former dictators a golden parachute to leave power, or creating a world-spanning free trade zone which is only open to consolidated democracies.

This book is global in scope, drawing on interviews depicting struggles from Eastern Europe to Africa, Asia and the Middle East. In the face of such seeming multiplicity, Klaas argues that democracy is not necessarily a 'one-size-fits-all' model. Throughout the book though, democracy is portrayed as something that is sufficiently generic across time and space, that can be statistically compared, evaluated and ranked. Efforts to provide a quantitative underpinning to an abstract noun are however undermined by the ways in which the author privileges intention. It is his belief that 'Western' elites (the West being a monolithic entity in his portrayal) are fundamentally committed to the principle and spread of liberal democracy, although it not clear how one would know this. His arguments tend to rest on personal beliefs and a light patina of rational choice theory. Instead of a serious engagement with those whose opinions may differ, Klaas imagines what possible objections to his arguments may be (in extremely simplistic forms) and then deftly bats them down. The moral authority of the author's vision of democracy is buttressed by harrowing descriptions of torture to which dissidents in non-democratic regimes are routinely subjected.

Although the book discusses examples of the West's own misdeeds, to which countless more could be added (from the ways in which liberal democracies kept order in their colonial territories and Obama's drone-powered kill lists), these are usually presented as examples of "near-sighted pragmatism"(page 2). Other scholars would probably question how external such abuses are to liberal democracy. Timothy Mitchell demonstrates the ways



in which the adoption of oil as the basis of the global financial system does not simply prop up dictators in the Middle East, but also systematically empowers elites while disempowering the majority in liberal democratic heartlands. Chantal Mouffe argues that inequality and exclusion are not a blot on liberal democracy, but intrinsic to the system that derives its meaning, despite universalistic claims, from the strict division between insider and outsider. Klaas would likely disagree with much of these accounts, but his arguments would require an analysis beyond personal beliefs to refute them.



While this book focuses on the ways in which the ‘West’ has aided the decline of democracy, many of the economic underpinnings of contemporary crises are only lightly touched upon. Although the author claims that democracies have higher economic growth on average, this says very little about soaring rates of inequality. It is such inequality that is probably the most potent threat to liberal democracy as currently conceived, as opposed to the alternative models offered by China and Russia, which are covered extensively.

In chapter 10 the author speaks approvingly of the economic carrots offered by the European Union to encourage the adoption of democratic practices in Eastern Europe during the 1990s. The benefits and limitations of transnational governance and many critiques made by those on the left and the right about the lack of accountability of EU power structures or the ways in which economic policy towards southern Europe is largely immune to the democratic will of affected countries are not dealt with. Klaas does indirectly speak about the concentration of power in the hands of the rich and corporations in a spirited and, in my opinion, completely warranted attack on [Citizens United](#), the US legal ruling that allows unlimited donations to political candidates (chapter 10). However, in the same chapter the author argues for a free trade zone comprising all established liberal democracies, a ‘league of democracies’. Considering the controversy free trade deals have caused, the practice of secret negotiations and the strong possibility of the enhancement of unaccountable corporate power, it is not entirely clear whether such an organisation would bolster or undermine the practice of democracy.

For those with a similar line of thinking, this book offers a well written and exciting confirmation of their beliefs. Although several issues mentioned in the book will cause concern towards the well-being of liberal democracy, the overall message is that these are unfortunate missteps that are not inherent to the system itself and the author provides suggestions as to how to overcome the present impasse. For those looking for a deeper exploration of the crises of democracy and a better understanding of the system and its limitations, this is probably not the book for them.

**[The Despot’s Accomplice: How the West is Aiding and Abetting the Decline of Democracy.](#) Brian Klaas. Hurst Publishers. 2016.**

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**The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.**