

**Monitoring Democracy:  
Deepening an Emerging Consensus**

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*Abstract:* This paper considers efforts to monitor democracy and addresses four questions: Why should democracy be monitored? Who are the monitors? What is to be monitored? And, how is monitoring to be conducted? It first highlights and articulates an emerging consensus regarding the monitoring of democracy. Subsequently the discussion turns to a set of new challenges that remain to be resolved. Specifically, the paper focuses on the challenges of balancing multiple political values, bringing politicians and researchers together, integrating monitoring efforts, and resolving measurement problems. Emphasis is placed on the importance of tackling these complex issues and hence on deepening the consensus that has emerged regarding the monitoring of democracy.

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Following the end of the Cold War, the promotion of democracy became a concern of a broad spectrum of actors and, as an inextricable part of many democracy promotion programs, concerted efforts have been made to monitor democracy in countries around the world. The monitoring of democracy initially focused on election observation, an activity that rose to international attention with the work of the United Nations, the Organization of American States and the Carter Center on the Nicaraguan elections of 1990. But rapidly the scope of monitoring activities was expanded well beyond elections and started to include an array of issues, directly or closely related to democracy, such as the sources of funding of political parties, public access to information and media freedom, corruption of public officials, the working of the judiciary, respect for human rights, and the implementation of public policies. By now, a good decade and a half after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the production and dissemination of information about democracy, many times quite broadly conceived, has become a routine affair. And, as a consequence, citizens around the world have ready access to quite comprehensive assessments of the state of democracy in their countries.

This paper, building on my ongoing research,<sup>1</sup> seeks to contribute to this collective effort to monitor democracy in two ways. First, it highlights and articulates an emerging consensus regarding the monitoring of democracy. Specifically, the paper focuses on four questions—Why monitor democracy? Who are the monitors? What is to be monitored? How is monitoring to be conducted?—and seeks to show that a large degree of consensus has developed regarding these questions. Second, it argues that despite important gains, many complex issues still remain to be addressed concerning the questions covered—the why, who, what and how of monitoring—and that it is vital to address these issues. Indeed, to ensure that the momentum that has developed

around the monitoring of democracy over the past years will be sustained, it is necessary to deepen the consensus that has emerged regarding the monitoring of democracy.

## **I. Where Do We Stand? An Emerging Consensus**

### *I. i. Why Monitor Democracy?*

The reason for monitoring democracy is, first of all, the widespread consensus that democracy is a universal value.<sup>2</sup> This view is explicitly proclaimed and widely endorsed in landmark documents, from the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, adopted by the World Conference on Human Rights in 1993, and the United Nations (UN) Millennium Declaration, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2000, to the Treaty of Amsterdam, signed by the European Union (EU) in 1997, and the Inter-American Democratic Charter, adopted by the General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS) in 2001.<sup>3</sup> Yet, absent some mechanism for monitoring the values endorsed in these documents, they run the risk of being seen as empty statements of intent. Monitoring can help to attain values and “instill substance into wondrous phrases,”<sup>4</sup> because monitoring is ultimately about generating measurements, or data, and neither rulers can formulate policies on the basis of solid knowledge nor citizens can hold their rulers accountable without systematic and reliable information about the state of democracy. Indeed, as the saying goes, because “you can only manage what you can measure.” Hence, it is a positive trend that, along with statements reaffirming a commitment to the value of democracy, a plethora of actors have embraced the cause of democracy promotion and given force to such statements by engaging in monitoring exercises.

### *I. ii. Who Are The Monitors?*

Democracy promotion was kicked off largely as an initiative of the United States government and US-based non-governmental organizations during the Reagan years. In 1983, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) was established and, in the same year, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI)—two government funded institutes affiliated with the major US parties—were founded. The Carter Center, created in 1982, and IFES–Democracy at Large (formerly the International Foundation for Election Systems), launched in 1987, were two other important US-based players to get in to the game early on.<sup>5</sup>

Following the end of the Cold War, the promotion of democracy continued to be a central concern of the US government. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Office of Democracy and Governance (initially named the Center for Democracy and Governance) was established in 1994, and the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor was formed, the fruit of a process of reorganization, within the US Department of State in the same year. The US Department of State continued publishing *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*, a series started in 1977, and launched the new *Annual Report on International Religious Freedom* in 1999. Finally, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) was established within the US Department of State to administer the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA) in 2004. But with the beginning of the 1990s, democracy promotion went global.

Regional intergovernmental organizations embraced democracy promotion decidedly. In Europe, the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) set up the Office for Free Elections, which later became the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), in 1990, and the position of Representative on Freedom of the Media in 1997. The

Council of Europe established the European Commission for Democracy through Law—also known as the Venice Commission—in 1990. And the EU’s European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights was created in 1994. In the Americas, the Organization of American States (OAS) established the Unit for the Promotion of Democracy, subsequently renamed as the Office for the Promotion of Democracy, in 1990. And the OAS’s Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, formed much earlier in 1959, regularly published a series of reports and created the Office of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression in 1997.

Global intergovernmental organizations, likewise, became important players in the promotion of democracy in the post-Cold War era. The UN Electoral Assistance Division, initially named the Electoral Assistance Unit, was established in 1991. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), and the post of UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, were created in 1993. And the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), along with its flagship *Human Development Report*, progressively focused more and more on issues of democratic governance in the 1990s.

In sum, a range of different types of actors has actively pursued democracy promotion.<sup>6</sup> To be sure, some duplication of efforts exists, as more and more actors have rushed in to what has been a fashionable field. But this is not necessarily a bad thing: given the current state of knowledge, the benefits from having multiple perspectives most likely outweigh the costs of duplicated resources. Indeed, the number and diversity of actors committed to monitor different aspects of democracy are a sign of the health of, and the legitimate status accorded to, monitoring exercises.

### *I. iii. What Is To Be Monitored?*

The evolving practices of these actors have also helped to clarify what is to be monitored. First, the experience with election observation has cemented the understanding that elections are more than an election-day event. Indeed, more and more, monitoring has addressed an assortment of issues that affect the electoral process, such as the legal barriers to entry into the electoral process, party and campaign financing, the freedom of the media and of expression, and the independence of electoral management bodies. Second, though much of monitoring started with, and continues to be squarely focused on, election observation, it is also broadly accepted now that democracy is about more than elections, as emphasized in the UNDP report on *Democracy in Latin America*.<sup>7</sup> In this regard, democracy monitors routinely address a variety of political and civil rights, and delve into questions such as the channels for citizen participation beyond elections for public officials, the checks and balances across branches of the government, civilian control of the military, corruption of public officials, the administration of justice, the equal treatment of all citizens, the protection of life, the right to private property, and the enforcement of the law. Thus, monitors have gradually gravitated toward a conception of democracy that includes, as an indispensable part, a focus on elections, but that also goes beyond elections. And, to a great degree too, a largely implicit consensus has developed regarding a number of the elements that should be included in a comprehensive assessment of the state of democracy.

### *I. iv. How Is Monitoring To Be Conducted?*

Finally, regarding how monitoring should be conducted, a lot of progress has been made in the last fifteen years. The work of academics, non-governmental organizations, intergovernmental organizations and development agencies has helped to shed light on central

methodological issues such as the choice of indicators, that is, the observables used to operationalize various concepts, and even the identification of thresholds to distinguish various degrees of shortcomings. Taken together, these efforts represent important building blocks in the construction of measuring instruments. Moreover, data have been generated on a range of different aspects of democracy, as well as on issues closely related to democracy, and the debate around these attempts has yielded some valuable lessons concerning how to tackle various measurements problems.<sup>8</sup>

## **II. What Are The Challenges? Deepening The Consensus**

It is important to recognize that even though attempts to monitor democracy are relatively new, a consensus on a number of key issues has emerged. A lot has been accomplished in a short period of time and hence future endeavors have much to build on. Yet it is also crucial to acknowledge that many fundamental challenges remain to be tackled concerning the questions covered—the why, who, what and how of monitoring—and that much hinges on how these challenges are confronted. Indeed, the sustainability of monitoring efforts is likely to depend on the development of some sense of agreement as to how these complex issues should be tackled and hence on a deepening of the consensus that has emerged regarding the monitoring of democracy.

### *II. i. Why? Balancing Multiple Political Values*

A first challenge concerns the balancing of multiple political values. As mentioned above, the promotion, and monitoring, of democracy is justified by the status of democracy as a universal value. Yet democracy is certainly not the only value worth upholding,<sup>9</sup> and hence an emphasis on democracy must take into consideration, and be balanced against, other values.

This, of course, opens the door to arguments that seek to weaken the case for democracy. Indeed, a potential stumbling block facing all international work on democracy is the principle of non-intervention in the affairs of sovereign countries. And the view that democracy should take a back seat to concerns such as development recurs frequently in political discussions, even among those who claim to stand for democracy. But confronting these arguments is a healthy exercise.

Many of the criticisms of democracy can be answered in ways that clarify the rationale for democracy promotion. With regards to non-intervention, evolving practices show that sovereignty is not an absolute principle. This is very clearly so in extreme cases of humanitarian crises, and failed or failing states.<sup>10</sup> But it is also the case of routine and ordinary activities such as election monitoring.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, in the last years we have witnessed a growing number of precedents for both consensual and coercive intervention in the name of democracy. In turn, with regards to development, recent academic research has shown that the argument that authoritarian regimes have a superior economic performance lacks empirical support.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, some of the points expressed by critics or skeptics hold some truth and should not be fully dismissed. It is not unwise to question the resort to forceful intervention and to require that those who propose to abridge a country's sovereignty in the name of democracy assume the burden of proof and show that intervention is not largely, or even partially, a façade for advancing interests of some other country and that it is likely to bring about the sought results. And it is not far-fetched to argue that multiple values cannot be attained simultaneously and therefore that serious thinking is required about how values might be prioritized and what political implications follow from such a weighting of values.

Thus, democracy promoters must do more to address questions about the value of democracy relative to other political values. Much like sovereignty, democracy is not an absolute

value. And accepting this point does not mean that democracy will be devalued. Rather, the case for democracy will be strengthened inasmuch as it is based on more precise and well-founded arguments, and the future of democracy will be better secured inasmuch as democracy is not advanced in ways that disregard other values.

### *II. ii. Who? Bringing Politicians and Researchers Together*

A second challenge concerns the task of bringing politicians and researchers together. As discussed, an array of organizations are active in the field of democracy promotion. And these organizations are populated by a diverse personnel with different backgrounds, orientations and aptitudes, such as government officials and representatives, party leaders and activists, national and international civil servants, political advisors and consultants, and social activists. Thus, inasmuch as these organizations are involved in monitoring exercises, and they seek to both enhance the quality of the information they generate and the political usefulness of this information, they need to devise ways to coordinate their political and research activities or, to put it differently, to link together the work of their personnel with political and research profiles.

Bringing rigorous, credible information to bear on politics, the key novelty associated with efforts to monitor democracy, demands different things from politicians and researchers. From the perspective of politicians, it calls for a pre-commitment both not to interfere in, and to accept the results of, monitoring exercises. Indeed, the whole point of monitoring is lost either if the integrity of the research is tainted or if monitoring does not matter politically and hence is a “mere academic exercise.” Such a pre-commitment would not belittle the role of politics. Values and standards would still be set through an essentially political process. Moreover, responses to the results of monitoring exercises are, at their core, a matter of political judgment. Yet, once

monitoring exercises are endorsed, they do constitute constraints on politicians. Therein lies the greatest potential obstacle to the political viability of proposals to monitor democracy.

Something quite different is required from researchers. Generating rigorous, credible information about politics calls for an adherence to strict methodological criteria and hence an openness to discovering things that go against one's views. But if researchers are going to do their part in the monitoring of democracy, they need to combine a proclivity for following ideas regardless of consequences with a reckoning of the consequences of their research. That is, researchers need to combine what Max Weber referred to as an "ethics of conviction" with an "ethics of responsibility,"<sup>13</sup> to think as social scientists and as citizens. Therein lies the greatest hurdle for researchers who rightly worry about the impact of political involvements on scientific standards.

The institutionalization of a partnership between politicians and researchers is a tricky matter. Indeed, rather than working closely together, listening to and educating each other, politicians and researchers frequently work at counter-purpose and more often simply ignore each other. Hence the establishment of norms that both ensure the autonomy of the research component of monitoring exercises and spell out the intended uses of the information generated through this research is one of the central challenges that remains to be addressed.

### *II. iii. What? Integrating Monitoring Efforts*

A third challenge concerns the integration of monitoring efforts. The reason for pursuing this goal is that many monitoring initiatives focus on delimited aspects of democracy and hence expose themselves to the criticism that they draw attention to certain issues and implicitly exclude others from consideration in a biased way. Indeed, the way a country is assessed may

depend largely on what specific information is highlighted, a possibility that casts a cloud over the entire enterprise of monitoring.

The solution to this problem is to adopt a holistic approach and to simultaneously measure all the dimensions of the question under consideration. This implies, in one sense, an effort to integrate the partial efforts to monitor democracy. Moreover, inasmuch as democracy may be considered as only one of multiple political values, as suggested above, even monitoring of democracy broadly conceived might be too narrow and seen as excluding questions about the rule of law, human rights, development, security and so on. Hence, the magnitude of the task at hand is quite daunting. But it is doable.

Indeed, the adoption of a holistic approach actually helps to solve one of the most intractable conceptual problems confronted by monitors, the seemingly irresolvable definitional disputes in both the scholarly literature and political discussions. How concepts are defined is an important matter, among other things because such definitions provide a requisite starting point for attempts at measurement. At the same time, disputes over the concept of democracy have turned into largely unproductive terminological debates about what is the correct definition of democracy that invite endless quibbling and get in the way of the important task, which is to move ahead with the work of measurement and to arrive at substantive conclusions through empirical analysis. A key challenge in monitoring exercises is thus to integrate efforts at monitoring that have been undertaken in a piecemeal fashion, something that can be done by using a broad sense of the values that should be addressed and by identifying a logically rigorous list of dimensions that are to be measured.

#### *II. iv. How? Resolving Measurement Problems*

Finally, a fourth challenge concerns the resolution of measurement problems. Much has been learned, as stated above, regarding how to measure democracy and other closely related concepts. Nonetheless, some important issues remain to be tackled satisfactorily. The thresholds used in scales need to be better calibrated so as to correspond to accepted standards, and coding decisions must be made in a more consistent yet flexibility manner, ensuring both that standards are applied universally while remaining open to the possibility that similar problems are manifested differently across countries and over time. In addition, the procedures used to aggregate measures of different dimensions of democracy deserve further discussion. For example, though it has become customary to make a distinction between being elected democratically and governing democratically, little attention has been given to the relative weight of each of these dimensions in an overall assessment of democracy. Finally, discrepant evaluations grounded in different data sources need to be reconciled or at the very least explained. In short, further methodological reflection is needed to ensure the production of high quality data that can be responsibly used in the political process.

### **III. Conclusion**

The monitoring of democracy is both desirable and doable. Yet, as proposals to monitor democracy have gained prominence and as the political stakes of such exercises have become more evident, criticisms of attempts to monitor democracy have also been voiced. Some of the critics simply seek to oppose the whole enterprise of monitoring and probably there is little that can be done to satisfy their demands, short of giving up on the attempt to monitor democracy. But other critics raise legitimate points, which deserve to be seriously addressed. And yet other

weaknesses in past monitoring exercises can be pointed out. Hence, to forestall the potential growth of opposition to monitoring exercises, it is necessary to face up to some fundamental challenges regarding the why, who, what and how of monitoring.

These challenges involve complex issues: balancing multiple political values, bringing politicians and researchers together, integrating monitoring efforts, and resolving measurement problems. Hence, a deepening of the consensus that has emerged regarding the monitoring of democracy through the incorporation of adequate responses to these challenges is going to require large doses of political will and much new thinking on the part of democracy promoters. Yet much hinges on a sustained collective effort to tackle these challenges. Indeed, how these challenges are tackled will likely affect whether the remarkable momentum that has developed around the monitoring of democracy over the past years will be sustained or begin to falter.

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<sup>1</sup> My assessments of the state of the art of research on the measurement of democracy and related concepts, along with various proposals to improve on the state of the art, include Gerardo L. Munck and Jay Verkuilen, "Conceptualizing and Measuring Democracy: Evaluating Alternative Indices," *Comparative Political Studies* Vol. 35, N° 1 (2002): 5-34; Munck, "Measuring Democratic Governance: Central Tasks and Basic Problems," pp. 427-59, in Deepa Narayan, ed., *Measuring Empowerment: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2005); and Munck, "Drawing Boundaries: How to Craft Intermediate Regime Categories," in Andreas Schedler, ed., *Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition* (Boulder, Col.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006). My effort to construct a new Electoral Democracy Index for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is presented in the report *Democracy in Latin America. Toward a Citizens' Democracy* (New York: UNDP, 2005), pp. 21-33 of the statistical compendium.

<sup>2</sup> On the universality of the value of democracy, see Amartya Sen, "Democracy as a Universal Value," *Journal of Democracy* Vol. 10, N° 3 (July 1999): 3-17. For an expansive view of the virtues of democracy, see Robert Dahl, *On Democracy* (New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press, 1998), Ch. 5; for a more modest defense of democracy, see Adam Przeworski. "Minimalist Conception of Democracy: A Defense," pp. 23-55, in Ian Shapiro and Casiano Hacker-Cordón, eds., *Democracy's Value* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> United Nations General Assembly, *Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action*, A/CONF.157/23, 12 July 1993, Articles 1 and 8; United Nations General Assembly, *United Nations Millennium Declaration*, A/RES/55/2, 18 September 2000, Section V; European Union, "Treaty of Amsterdam amending the Treaty on European Union, the Treaties establishing the European Communities and certain related acts," *Official Journal of the European Union* C 340, 10 November 1997, Article 6; Organization of American States, *The Inter-American Democratic Charter* (Washington, D.C.: OAS, 2001), Article 1. On the increased salience of democracy in international law and the spread of "democracy clauses," see Roland Rich, "Bringing Democracy into International Law," *Journal of Democracy* Vol. 12, N° 3 (July 2001): 20-34; and Theodore J. Piccone. "International Mechanisms for Protecting Democracy," pp. 101-26, in Morton H. Halperin and Mirna Galic, eds., *Protecting Democracy: International Responses* (Lanham, MD.: Lexington Books, 2005).

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<sup>4</sup> This phrase is adapted from the title of an article by Robert A. Pastor, “A Community of Democracies in the Americas: Instilling Substance into a Wondrous Phrase,” *Canadian Foreign Policy* Vol. 10, N° 3 (Spring 2003): 15-29.

<sup>5</sup> Various precedents of the interest in monitoring democracy that flourished during the Reagan years deserve mention. Human rights organizations, such as London-based Amnesty International, founded in 1961, and US-based Human Rights Watch, founded in 1978, played a pioneering role in drawing attention to violations of rights associated with core political values. Moreover, there have been many initiatives to generate data on politics and democracy at US university since the 1960s, including the work by Arthur Banks, who started publishing the widely used and regularly updated Cross-National Time-Series Data Archive in 1968, and Ted Robert Gurr, the original designer of the Polity data series, first released in 1978. Relatedly, the US non-profit organization Freedom House, founded in 1941, started publishing annual assessments of the state of freedom throughout the world in 1972. For an overview of the broader data movement, see Erwin K. Scheuch, “History and Visions in the Development of Data Services for the Social Sciences,” *International Social Science Journal* Vol. 55, N° 3 (September 2003): 385-99.

<sup>6</sup> The list of actors mentioned here is not a comprehensive one. In particular, the number of NGOs involved in democracy promotion is extremely large. For a fuller listing and discussion of relevant actors, see Eric C. Bjornlund. *Beyond Free and Fair: Monitoring Elections and Building Democracy* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), Chs. 2 and 4; Kim Campbell and Sean C. Carroll, “Sustaining Democracy’s Last Wave,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* Vol. 6, N° 2 (Summer/Fall 2005): 45-52; and Thomas O. Melia, “The Democracy Bureaucracy: The Infrastructure of American Democracy Promotion,” a discussion paper prepared for the Princeton Project on National Security Working Group on Global Institutions and Foreign Policy Infrastructure, 2005. Accessed at: [www.wps.princeton.edu/ppns/papers/democracy\\_bureaucracy.pdf](http://www.wps.princeton.edu/ppns/papers/democracy_bureaucracy.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Democracy in Latin America. Toward a Citizens’ Democracy* (New York: UNDP, 2005), Section I.

<sup>8</sup> On the monitoring of electoral processes, see Larry Garber, *Guidelines for International Election Observing* (Washington, D.C.: International Human Rights Law Group, 1984); Eric C. Bjornlund. *Beyond Free and Fair: Monitoring Elections and Building Democracy* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), Chs. 6 and 7; Jørgen Elklit and Andrew Reynolds, “A Framework for the Systematic Study of Election Quality,” *Democratization* Vol. 12, N° 2 (2005): 147-62; and the many available handbooks on electoral observation. For a comprehensive framework to assess democracy that exceeds the electoral process, see United States Agency for International Development (USAID), *Handbook of Democracy and Governance Program Indicators* (Washington, DC: USAID Center for Democracy and Governance, Technical Publication Series PN-ACC-390, 1998); USAID, *Conducting a DG Assessment: A Framework for Strategy Development* (Washington, DC: USAID Center for Democracy and Governance, Technical Publication Series PN-ACH-305, 2000); and David Beetham, Sarah Bracking, Iain Kearton and Stuart Weir, eds., *International IDEA Handbook on Democracy Assessment* (The Hague: Kluge Academic Publishers, 2001) For a valuable survey of available measures, see Todd Landman and Julia Häusermann, *Map-Making and Analysis of the Main International Initiatives on Developing Indicators on Democracy and Good Governance*, a report for the European Communities Statistical Office (EUROSTAT), June 2003.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, the UN Secretary General’s report to the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, *In Larger Freedom: Toward Development, Security and Human Rights for All. Report of the Secretary-General*, A/59/2005, 21 March 2005.

<sup>10</sup> International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, *The Responsibility to Protect* (Ottawa, Canada: International Development Research Center, 2001); Stephen Krasner, “Shared Sovereignty: New Institutions for Collapsed and Failing States,” *International Security* Vol. 29, N° 2 (Fall 2004): 85-120.

<sup>11</sup> Robert A. Pastor, “A Community of Democracies in the Americas: Instilling Substance into a Wondrous Phrase,” *Canadian Foreign Policy* Vol. 10, N° 3 (Spring 2003): 15-29, pp. 16-18; Michael McFaul, “Democracy Promotion as a World Value,” *The Washington Quarterly* Vol. 28, N° 1 (2004): 147-63, pp. 153-55.

<sup>12</sup> Adam Przeworski, Michael E. Alvarez, José Antonio Cheibub and Fernando Limongi, *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950-1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Human Development Report 2002. Deepening Democracy in a Fragmented World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), Ch. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 77-156.