

NOT READY FOR DEMOCRACY? THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL OBJECTIONS TO THE CONCEPT OF PREREQUISITES

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Abstract

Social science and public opinion frequently refer to some countries as not being "ready" for democracy, either in terms of lack of wealth, lack of modern social relations, lack of democratic political culture, or lack of proto-democratic experience. Yet each of these prerequisites faces theoretical objections and counter-examples from the history of European and North American democracies. No country, in short, has ever been truly "ready" for democracy – so lack of readiness should not be used as an excuse for postponing or undermining democratization.

The ideology of democracy aspires to universality. Both the United States Declaration of Independence (1776) and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man (1789), for example, hold that "all men" are endowed with equal rights. However, people who demand democratic rights for themselves are sometimes hesitant to extend these rights to others. The U.S. and France, to continue the example, have systematically violated the universalistic principles of their famous Declarations rights by denying equal rights to women, the poor, slaves, and colonized peoples.

This disjuncture between universalistic ideals and anti-universalistic practice is frequently resolved through the argument that certain people are "not ready" for democracy. This proposition allows democracy to be maintained as a universal good, while justifying the lack of demo-

cratic rights in certain countries, or among certain populations within a partially democratic country. The proposition also meshes nicely with the teleological self-congratulation that allows certain countries to think of their present as a vision of other countries' future.

The trope of "not ready for democracy" emerges quite regularly in the study of new democracies. A telling example comes from early 20th-century Iran, where a U.S. diplomat arrived soon after the implementation of the nation's first constitution, elections, and parliament:

On my arrival at Enzeli [an Iranian port on the Caspian Sea] I was told the following story by the Mchmandar, my official host: A few days before, a man in that city had been called to account by the authorities for insulting a woman in the street, and in defence he had appealed

to the new Constitution. He asked to be informed as to what was meant by "freedom of speech" if he could not tell a person what he thought of him. Many similar stories are current, with or without foundation, and they serve to show how much is understood by the people of the real significance of a Constitution, for which no Persian word existed and one had to be invented. (John B. Jackson to Secretary of State, January 15, 1908, U.S. National Archives and Record Administration, Case 5931).

The story says more about the diplomat's background assumptions than about Iranians' familiarity with constitutionalism. First, the snide comment about the invention of a word for "constitution" in Persian: while it is true that Iranians borrowed an Ottoman term, possibly of Arabicized French derivation (Hairi 1977:182-189), all countries must invent words for new phenomena. The lack of an earlier word or concept of "telegraph" did not obstruct its diffusion; conversely, the long familiarity of the Romanians with the word "constitutue," dating to the 18th century (Vlad 1992), has not made that country's experience with democracy appreciably easier.

Second, note the source of the story: an Iranian official with wealth enough to host visiting diplomats, most likely an aristocratic holdover from the pre-constitutional regime, whose partisans were at the time maneuvering to destroy the new democracy (which they accomplished temporarily by shelling parliament a few months later, in the summer of 1908). Stories about the Iranian people's supposed unfitness for democracy—apparently common, the diplomat reported—formed part of this anti-democratic mobilization. The diplomat's willingness to accept such stories at face value—even stories he suspected were dubious—suggests that they

resonated deeply with his own opinion of Iranians' ignorance of democracy.

Third, in considering the "freedom of speech" defense to be outlandish, the diplomat appears to have forgotten the legal protections afforded to free speech in his own country. As an educated citizen of the United States, he was presumably familiar with the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which bars Congress from "abridging the freedom of speech." While standards for libel had not at that time been codified by the U.S. Supreme Court, it was quite common for newspapers and public orators in the U.S. to "tell a person what he thought of him" in very unflattering terms. As it happens, no such "freedom of speech" was protected in the Iranian equivalent of the U.S. Bill of Rights, the Supplementary Constitutional Laws of October 1907; however, this document did protect publications from censorship (Browne [1910] 1994:375), and there were no laws in force that would have made the expression of opinions illegal.

The diplomat's acceptance and use of this story makes sense only in the context of assumptions about certain peoples being "not ready" for democracy. Such sentiments were expressed openly, and disparagingly, in the early 20th century. The Chinese, wrote the U.S. consul in Qingdao in 1912, as China was attempting to set up a democracy, "are not endowed with the intellect to enjoy the blessings of a free government" (Crane & Breslin 1986:81). "This raw people of half-savages without religion, with its small ruling stratum of superficially civilized mestizos," the German ambassador in Mexico wrote in 1912, soon after Mexico regained its democracy, "can live with no regime other than enlightened despotism"—to which Kaiser Wilhelm noted in the margin, "Right!" (Katz 1981:89). A Russian embassy official in

Istanbul emphasized, "One must not lose sight of the extreme ignorance of the great mass of the people, who were devoid of any political or social ideals." (Mandelstam 1917:22) Indeed, imperialism often justified itself as having given colonized peoples, in the words of one British imperialist, "far better government than in the whole history of the world they ever had before" (Said 1979:33). James Bryce, a leading British scholar of democracy in the early 20th century, suggested that the new democracies that emerged after World War I were "as if one should set a child to drive a motor car" (Bryce 1921:501-502).

In the late twentieth century, by contrast, such sentiments cannot be expressed quite so bluntly. However, the trope of "not ready for democracy" is still in evidence, sometimes with the implication that certain countries may never be ready. Jacques Chirac, the future prime minister of France, told African politicians in 1980 that "multi-partyism is a political error, a type of luxury that the developing countries cannot afford" (Hecht & Vey 1995:17). *The New York Times* argued that "Africa cannot just transplant foreign models, like the parliamentary system, and hope it will take root in native soil" (June 21, 1994, p. 8), and quoted the Sultan of Zinder in Niger, Elhadj Aboubacar Sanda Amadou: "People don't understand democracy here. They think it simply means disobedience to the authorities" (April 21, 1998, p. A4). Journalist Robert D. Kaplan agreed with a Greek politician's opinion that the coup d'état of 1967 "simply inflicted a mercy killing" on democracy, as pro-democracy movements invariably led to the violent resurgence of "long-repressed nationalities in the Balkans" (Kaplan 1993:255, 62). More recently, Kaplan has generalized from the Balkans to the entire world:

The lesson to draw is not that dictatorship is good and democracy bad but that democracy emerges successfully only as a capstone to other social and economic achievements....The very fact that we [in the United States] retreat to moral arguments—and often moral arguments only—to justify democracy indicates that for many parts of the world the historical and social arguments supporting democracy are just not there. Realism has come not from us but from, for example, Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni, an enlightened Hobbesian despot whose country has posted impressive annual economic growth rates—10 percent recently—despite tribal struggles in the country's north....In other words, in a society that has not reached the level of development [Alexis de] Tocqueville described, a multi-party system merely hardens and institutionalizes established ethnic and regional divisions. (Kaplan 1997:60).

Others have criticized the "not ready for democracy" literature briefly (Karl 1990; Rustow 1970), but the subject deserves more extended review. This paper examines several ways in which a country may be said to be not ready for democracy: material barriers (lack of wealth), social structural barriers (lack of modern social relations), cultural barriers (lack of democratic ideology), and historical barriers (lack of experience). For each type of barrier, the paper raises theoretical and empirical objections to cast doubt on the general notion that a country has to be "ready" to adopt democracy.

MATERIAL PREREQUISITES

One of social science's most oft-confirmed observations (see Diamond 1992) is that wealthy countries are more likely than poor countries to be democratic.

Seymour Martin Lipset's locus classicus (1981a) presents evidence from Europe, its "English-speaking offspring" (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, U.S.A.), and Latin America. In Europe and the English-speaking settler colonies, Lipset shows that stable democracies have consistently higher levels of per capita income and other measures of wealth than do unstable democracies and dictatorships; in Latin America, the democracies and unstable democracies outpace the stable dictatorships (see also Lipset, Seong & Torres 1993). It is not poverty itself that breeds political extremism, Lipset writes, but relative deprivation: exposure to a better way of life which turns out to be unachievable. The wealthier the society, the less inequality and relative deprivation it suffers.

The argument is probabilistic, not deterministic, and Lipset makes a point of mentioning exceptions to the correlation. In a wealthy country such as Germany, "a series of adverse historical events prevented democracy from securing legitimacy and thus weakened its ability to withstand crisis." Poor countries, on the other hand, may maintain "premature" democracies through the promotion of social development such as literacy or civil society – but they face "constant pressure from the inherent conflicts in the developmental process," namely popular demands for consumption and social services that divert resources away from investment and industrialization (Lipset 1981a:28-29). Not only are there few poor democracies, therefore, but poor countries would do well to avoid democracy if they wish to escape poverty. The impressive economic growth of the East Asian NIC's (newly industrialized countries) provides prima facie corroboration: material progress under non-democratic regimes, then social pressure for democratization.

Theoretical Objection. The oft-observed correlation between wealth and democracy does not tell us which came first. We might as easily argue that democracy generates wealth as that wealth supports democracy. Few studies have examined the directionality of the relationship (Burkhart & Lewis-Beck 1994; Cutright & Wiley 1969), and the data are less than reliable (Kurzman, Werum & Burkhart 1998).

Historical Objections. Lipset's argument runs as follows: 1) Poverty is associated with inequality. 2) Inequality generates relative deprivation among the poor. 3) Relative deprivation leads the poor to participate in anti-democratic movements. 4) These anti-democratic movements undermine democracy. Each step of this argument is vulnerable to empirical objections.

First, the countries with the greatest inequality are not the poorest countries. As numerous scholars have noted, including Lipset (1994:2), inequality appears to be highest in countries around the median level of economic development (Kuznets 1955; Randolph & Lott 1993). If the rest of Lipset's argument is correct, therefore, we would expect to see more democracy in the poorest countries than in somewhat wealthier countries. But as Lipset himself has shown, this is not the case: there is a dip in the level of democracy in middling-wealth countries, but not so low that it dips below the level of democracy for the poorest countries (Lipset, Seong & Torres 1993:163-64).

Second, inequality does not automatically generate relative deprivation. As Barrington Moore (1978) and others have pointed out and attempted to explain, numerous inequalities have lasted for long periods of time without generating resentment among the have-nots. In addition, evidence of relative deprivation

may be biased, since situations of extreme inequality may be precisely the most hostile to open expressions of popular discontent (Scott 1990).

Third, even if we agree that inequality generates relative deprivation, inequality is not correlated with political conflict (Lichbach 1989). Moreover, it is not the poorest members of society who generally rebel, but rather people with resources to draw upon. The truly poor are too busy struggling to survive to risk what little they have (Rudé 1959:186ff; Mason & Murtagh 1985).

Fourth, democracies are rarely undermined by poor people. The uneducated may be less tolerant than the better educated, as Lipset documents in another essay (Lipset 1981d), but there are few instances in which the lower classes of a country outright reject democracy, and numerous cases of working-class support for democratization (Rueschemeyer, Stephens & Stephens 1992). By contrast, the "middle classes," Lipset notes in yet another study (Lipset 1981b), have supported numerous fascist subversions of democracy. By this logic, economic growth may lead to right-wing coups, which, according to Guillermo O'Donnell (1979), is what occurred in the dependent economies of Latin America.

SOCIAL-STRUCTURAL PREREQUISITES

In Barrington Moore's famous comparative-historical study, *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1966), a bourgeois revolution is necessary for a country to make a democratic transition to modernity. If the bourgeoisie is not strong enough to re-shape society along capitalist lines, landed oligarchs will control the transition, with disastrous results: either an ultimately fascist revolution from above, as in Prussia

and Japan, or an ultimately communist revolution from below, as in Russia and China. More recent theorizing has called into question some of Moore's conclusions. The bourgeoisie, for instance, may turn to authoritarianism itself at certain points in the transition, as Guillermo O'Donnell (1979) has noted; Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens (1992) have shown that the working classes, as much if not more often than the bourgeoisie, have played central roles in the democratization process.

But the central thrust of Moore's argument continues to be prominent: pre-modern social relations are incompatible with democratic political forms. Guillermo O'Donnell (1993) has recently written a fascinating analysis of the latest wave of democratizations, in which he discusses the poor chances of democratic consolidation. The problem, as O'Donnell sees it, is that many Third World states do not enjoy a monopoly on authority. State authority does not extend throughout the territory, or throughout the sectors of society. Beyond the reach of the state, law and citizenship do not exist: gangster capitalism flourishes in the new democracies, as do protection rackets and self-help societies in the absence of regular law enforcement – a reliance, in sum, on pre-modern modes of authority. One expression of this combination of state authority and pre-modern non-state authority is the tradition in many Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking countries of cacique bosses delivering election-day votes: the representative institutions intended to operate on a democratic logic are subverted by social relations operating on a non-democratic logic.

Theoretical Objections. Modernity must have lost all self-confidence. Less than a century ago, Max Weber theorized just such a mixture of modes of author-

ity, the modern bureaucratic-rational co-existing with the traditional. The modern authority was so much more efficient, Weber felt, that it would surely win out.

The decisive reason for the advance of bureaucratic organization has always been its purely technical superiority over any other form of organization. The fully developed bureaucratic mechanism compares with other organizations exactly as does the machine with the non-mechanical modes of production. (Weber 1946:214).

This optimism, like many assumptions of modernism, has all but disappeared. The resiliency of pre-modern social structures has led many theorists to the conclusion that force is required to make the break to modernity: Samuel Huntington (1968), for instance, focuses on Leninist cadres and modernizing monarchs; Joel Migdal (1988) focuses on colonial power's ability to buttress or challenge traditional power centers.

But if we can no longer assume that modernity will prevail over pre-modern social structures, we needn't assume the opposite either. There are cases in which the right to vote, for instance, has undermined traditional relations of power—the states of West Bengal and Kerala in India, for instance—have seen popular communist movements use the vote to institutionalize the bureaucratic-rational state and reduce the power of traditional elites (Heller 1994; Kohli 1987). This mechanism of transition may prove to be both more humane and more efficient than the use of force.

Historical Objections. Must democracy wait until social relations have become modernized? The U.S.A. and Italy provide counter-examples. In both countries, political democracy pre-dated the democratization of significant portions of

society. In the 1770s and 1860s, respectively, national independence and unification incorporated southern regions with labor-repressive agricultural social structures, slavery in the one case and latifundia in the other. Both countries emerged from an alliance between northern commercial elites and southern landowning elites, in which the southerners were granted considerable regional autonomy to maintain their labor-repressive methods. Indeed, the national state buttressed the southern system for decades with force, symbolized by the forcible return of run-away slaves in non-slave states and the Italian military's routine intervention to quell peasant disturbances.

Despite vastly different national histories, both countries undertook in their ninth decade to reform southern social structure. The U.S. Civil War of the 1860s was not initially a conflict over slavery, at least not directly, but grew to include it. The emancipation of the slaves represented a victory, though only a partial victory, of the national state over non-democratic social structure. In Italy, which regained democracy in the mid-1940s after two decades of fascism, the land reform of the 1950s expropriated some of the largest landholders in the south. While its success is subject to debate, land reform undeniably extended the authority of the national state into areas which had previously been under the exclusive control of local landowners.

In Italy, democracy battered non-democratic social structures not just through the power of the national state, but also from below. In the mid to late 1940s, universal suffrage allowed peasants and landless laborers to vote against the landlords; political parties were forced to consider peasant voters in their platforms; civil liberties protected activists partially from landlord coercion and retribution (Tarrow 1967). In sum, it may be easier

for anti-oligarchic social movements to emerge and prosper under democratic than non-democratic regimes.

CULTURAL PREREQUISITES

Lucian Pye's *Asian Power and Politics* (1985) is the most cogent and extended recent examination of cultural barriers to democracy. His argument is limited to selected countries of Asia, yet it raises issues which apply throughout the world: attitudes towards power, the political effect of family power relations, and the social-psychological underpinnings of democracy.

According to Pye, many Asian cultures share certain characteristics which are quite conducive to economic growth but unconducive to democratic politics. These characteristics, though they vary somewhat from country to country, revolve around the concept of paternalism, which Pye defines as a political culture markedly distinct from the individualism of the West. From childhood, Asians imbibe the paternalistic image of power: personalized in the form of a benevolent father-like leader, gladly obeyed by dependents who expect to be taken care of in return. Even in fairly long-standing Asian democracies—India, Japan, and Malaysia—power operates on personal lines somewhat independently of institutions and laws.

A second theme of Asian political culture, according to Pye, is the emphasis on communal well-being, as opposed to individual well-being. The notion of individual rights is not highly developed, and many Asian cultures, though not all, treat open conflict as unseemly. In this milieu, Asians prefer to sacrifice personal advancement than to disrupt social harmony.

The implication is that Asian countries cannot be expected to follow the

Western path of political development. Asian democracy, where it has been adopted, is not the guarantor of rights and imposer of laws, as in the West. Rather, it is a means of mediating among paternalistic leaders, and of binding the populace more closely to the state. "[T]he prospects for democracy, as understood in the West, are not good.... At best [Asian democracy] is likely to be a form of democracy which is blended with much that Westerners might regard as authoritarian" (Pye 1985:339, 341).

Theoretical Objections. Why should rampant individualism be a prerequisite for democracy? Many of the earliest proponents of modern democracy—even the founding figures of the United States who helped to popularize the concept of individual rights—saw the pursuit of self-interest as inimical to the civic spirit that would support representative government. Only citizens with the cultured ability to transcend personal advancement were entitled to participate fully in the polity (Pocock 1976; Sinopoli 1992).

Paternalistic cultures, Pye might object, do not generate civic virtue. They generate instead local allegiances—to a particular patron, a family group, locality, or ethnicity, what Edward Banfield (1958) has called "amoral familism"—not national allegiances. The founding figures of the U.S. worried about this as well. "Factions," which meant everything from political parties to personal followings, were considered extremely dangerous to democracy. But the existence of factions was inevitable, in their view: "The inference to which we are brought is, that the causes of faction cannot be removed, and that relief is only to be sought in the means of controlling its effects" (Madison [1787] 1961:60). Indeed, federalism and checks and balances were designed in large part to mitigate the effects of fac-

tionalism (Hofstadter 1969). The United States were –they remained plural for decades, in keeping with the sub-national identities of their citizens– not founded on the assumption that Americans' primary loyalty was to the nation-state.

Historical Objection. By the early 1800s, England had enjoyed limited democracy for more than a century; its constitutional traditions arguably dated back six centuries to the Magna Carta. Yet English political culture was still highly paternalistic. This is not to say that England, circa 1800, is *just like* Asia, circa 2000; rather, the comparison suggests that English culture was not so clearly amenable to democratic politics as it sometimes appears in hindsight. If democratic institutions sprouted and took root in this inhospitable soil, then they may as well elsewhere today.

One recent study emphasizing the pre-modern underpinnings of British politics notes that regular elections were held, but elections with limited suffrage and results fixed by notables, to the extent that one politician bragged of a victory which “cost nothing but a good dinner to friends.”

The Whig and Tory ‘parties’ consisted, at the parliamentary level, of loosely cast confederations of family groups and personal loyalties with an admixture of ‘crotchets’ and temperamental affinities....The politician met the people, after all, at a point where the political structure dovetailed into a tangled local hierarchy of social relations.... (Bentley 1984:26, 28).

This system is properly called paternalistic: patrons influenced dependents through the smooth operation of favor and deference, and only through naked coercion when the system broke down. There was always talk about the right of

free Englishmen, but this was not liberty in the abstract sense. This was the right to exchange one's vote for the patron's support. Voters were quite specific about these exchanges. For instance:

Wee whose names are here under subscribed are *all voters* in Minthead and all cordwainers, Humbly desire that W. Napcott might not have the shop of T. Baker, for wee are all determined that he shant come into the town as there is not work enough to keep us employed. We most gratefully acknowledge your response at the forthcoming election. (O’Gorman 1989:249).

O’Gorman notes that the ideology of electoral independence –“unawed by rank and power, and uninfluenced by hope of reward, or fear of injury” (O’Gorman 1989:277)– and, later, electoral radicalism, challenged the politics of patronage (O’Gorman 1989:Chap. 5). But even after the reforms of 1832, non-secret voting ensured that casting a ballot would continue to be a display of deference to one notable or another, and popular election handbooks openly instructed campaigners to examine each voter's “employer, sect, landlord, customer or creditor” in order to apply pressure (Moore 1976).

Modern political attitudes –party affiliation, ideological national identities, and so on– did not evolve out of English political culture, but against it. One 19th-century pro-democracy figure, for example, challenged opponents to provide “some definition of the ‘old English principles and notions of representation’ which deserve to be called good” (Roper 1989:151). Radicals urged voters to use their ballots for different purposes than previously, and through mobilization and struggle they succeeded. In other words, the ballots came first; democratic mecha-

nisms predated a democratic political culture.

HISTORICAL PREREQUISITES

Another recurrent theme of “not ready for democracy” is an outgrowth of the Whig theory of history. This theory, developed in the 19th century as a justification for cautious political reform, held that gradualism was the key to England's democratic stability. The Whig theory smoothed centuries of invasion, dynastic change, regicide, and restoration into a grand, though largely fictional, progression towards parliamentary rule and civil liberties (Burrow 1981).

Others have made similar claims for all of Europe, where democracy was said to have emerged from the feudal estates system (Bendix 1978; Hintze 1975), and for the U.S.A., where democracy emerged from the *lack* of feudal estates (Tocqueville 1969:39-40). Analogous arguments have been made for former British colonies, where the creation of proto-democratic colonial institutions helped prepare the way for democracy after independence (Bollen & Jackman 1985). These various approaches share the essential argument that full-fledged democracy must develop out of proto-democratic political experiences.

Theoretical Objections. Whig theories of history downplay the conflict and strife associated with the transition from proto-democracy to more inclusive forms of democracy. Typically, the transition occurs against the wishes of the privileged classes, who invariably call for further preparatory groundwork and postponement. Demands for democratization were met with such opposition even in the paradigmatic cases of Britain (Thompson 1966) and the U.S.A. (Miller 1991). Therefore we have strong grounds for suspecting

experiential prerequisites to be an excuse for delay.

Another question surrounds the transmission of proto-democratic experience from limited sectors of society to the full society. Proto-democratic experience takes two forms: suffrage limited to “responsible” portions of the population, or democratic institutions limited to less-important portions of the state. But what good does limited suffrage do for those who are denied the right to vote? It is hard to imagine, for example, that Jim Crow voter-registration laws in the U.S. South taught disenfranchised African-Americans how to conduct a democracy. As for limiting democracy to portions of the state –say, allowing local governments to be democratically elected while authoritarians maintain control of the national state– what is to keep the democratic portion from perishing in the inevitable conflict with the undemocratic portion? Rather than form the basis for future democracy, obstreperous local governments may provide excuses for clampdowns. Great Britain was attempting to execute just such a clampdown in the years prior to and during the U.S. War of Independence. Indeed, the new country was fortunate that its congresses and assemblies survived the confrontation; with modern military machines in the hands of the national state, this may not always be the result.

Historical Objection. The upheavals of 1848-1849, which led to democratization in many parts of Europe, allow for a neatly experimental comparison (Sperber 1994). Many of the new democracies were suppressed by foreign intervention. Of the rest, five died on their own within three years (Austria, Croatia, France, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, and Tuscany). Four others brought about lasting democratic reform (Denmark, the Netherlands, Piedmont, and Prussia). Of the five which

died on their own, three had had tutelary institutions: constitutional monarchy in France and feudal diets in Austria and Croatia. Of the four which survived, two had had tutelary institutions: constitutional monarchy in the Netherlands, feudal diets in Prussia. Proto-democratic experience does not appear, then, to have made much difference in the survival of the new democracies of 1848.¹ By extension, the lack of proto-democratic institutions today should not be considered a barrier to democratization.

CONCLUSION

To be sure, it would be nice to be "ready" for democracy, to be free from material, social-structural, cultural, and historical barriers. But Westerners misremember their own national histories if they imagine that democracy must wait for these preconditions to be fulfilled. Few if any new democracies have ever been truly "ready."

Notes:

1. Prussia is an unclear case: the democratic regime was suppressed within a year, but a new constitution was promulgated in 1850. If Prussia is included on the failure side of the ledger, then three of six failures had tutelary experiences, and one of three successes.

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