Brown University

From the Selected Works of Dietrich Rueschemeyer

1998

The Self-Organization of Society and Democratic Rule: Specifying the Relationship

Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Brown University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/dietrich_rueschemeyer/36/
One of the oldest claims about the conditions for democratic rule holds that dense intermediary organizations and lively participation in them are of critical importance both for the establishment of democracy and for the quality of democratic governance. In this chapter, I first develop several propositions sustaining this claim, but then explore a number of important qualifications that will specify the relationship more precisely, as well as identify a number of unresolved issues.

I. Seven Basic Propositions

In what ways does dense social participation in intermediary groups, associations, and organizations create conditions favorable for democracy? Several interlocking effects of associational activity have been singled out.

A first proposition goes to the very heart of the idea of democracy, conceived as a constitutional form seeking to approximate equality in political decision making: **collective action and organization empower the many.** Organization is the most important power resource of those who lack disproportionate influence and power based on coercion, economic resources, cultural hegemony, and/or individual or collective prestige.

This is the most fundamental claim about participation and democracy. Democracy is, after all, a matter of power, even if it remains largely formal, even if, that is, the equality it offers does not—as in many cases of “really existing democracies”—go far beyond the equality of voting rights, buttressed by freedom of expression and association. Even a rather formal
democracy is unlikely to be established and meaningfully sustained over time unless the interests of the many find expression in the power balance of society. For this to happen, broad-based collective organization is necessary.2

This first claim has an implication worth underlining: it is the organization of subordinate interests that is most important for the installation and the quality of democracy. The organizational empowerment of those with little leverage based on wealth, means of coercion, cultural tradition, and social prestige is of particular importance for shifting the balance of power in society away from solid domination by a small minority. And therefore it is critical for democracy.

Turning away from the macrolevel of analysis toward that of individuals and groups, a second major claim concerns the difficulties of overcoming the paralysis that often befalls a large number of unconnected individuals when the realization or the defense of common interests is at stake: social participation in the past helps overcome the problems of collective action—on possibly quite different issues—in the future. Widespread participation in a rich set of associations and organizations thus enables people to advance their interests in the political arena.3

The experience—and the collective memory—of successful cooperative action, whether it was concerned with matters of power and politics or not, has this effect for several reasons: (1) it diminishes the sense of futility felt by isolated individuals in the face of problems whose solution requires the cooperation of many; (2) it creates a greater propensity to work for public goods (the socially oriented “habits of the heart” invoked by Tocqueville and again by Bellah et al. [1985]); and, in turn, (3) it disposes people to trust that others will pitch in, too, and not opt to be “free riders.”

A third claim adds that participating in cooperative action equips people with organizational skills, such as public speaking, conducting a meeting, or organizing telephone trees, skills that can be used in a wide variety of undertakings.

While these first three propositions are fairly clear-cut and widely accepted, the next two claims need more explanation and justification: Social participation offers settings in which the interests of people—needs and wants that are often diffuse and latent—are transformed into actually pursued goals. This is true for collective as well as individual interests.

The shared interests of a set of people are not objective givens, existing like Platonic ideas, to be realized or not. Instead, the fourth claim holds, they are defined in the very process of organization, and so is the collectivity whose interests are being pursued. The collective interests actually pursued are historically constructed. This remains true even if we can identify certain fundamental “objective” interest clusters and predict that the actually pursued interests will tend to include them with great probability; for one thing, some interests must be given priority over others.

All associations must solve the task of identifying and rank ordering the interests to be pursued. Thus, unions must decide on priorities among different goals such as higher wages, shorter hours, protection against unemployment, or gains in political power, and they must decide whether they intend to represent the interests of building electricians on a few construction sites, the workforce of an industry, the working class of a country, or even the “workers of the world.”

The very process of organization for the collective pursuit of interests, then, is also the process in which these interests are being defined and given substance. This gives special importance to the inevitably central but varying role of organizational elites, to their possible oligarchic insulation from constituencies, and to relations of cooperation and asymmetric cooptation among different elites. Yet no organization can be viable without being in some way responsive to its constituency. The conditions determining the relative weight of this responsiveness, of oligarchic tendencies, and of elite collaboration are research issues of critical importance for advancing our understanding of civil society.

The social construction of collective interests has a corollary at the individual level, the fifth proposition to be considered here. Collective organization does not simply lend power to certain individual interests, rather than others. As it involves individuals in relations of affiliation and cooperation, of trust and loyalty, it shapes their own perceived interests, their normative commitments, and the understanding of their situation (especially when the interests, commitments, and understandings go beyond their immediate life world). It shapes their “consciousness.”

In the testing of ideas through exchange and discussion, politically relevant orientations are constituted, discarded, transformed, stabilized, and made reasonable. Without such shaping in social networks, people’s political ideas often remain uncertain, as well as unrealistic. The character of these networks (ranging from grassroots activism to acquiescent affiliation with established organizations) and their relations to other groups and to the dominant political forces determine to a large extent the consciousness of the participants.

It is claimed for both individuals and groups, then, that their interests are shaped and consolidated in the context of participation in formal and informal groups and organizations. Without participation in a rich field of intermediary organizations, interests are likely to remain uncertain and inchoate and—even if they should be clearly crystallized—are unlikely to find powerful expression.
The next—and last—two propositions return to the societal level of analysis. Social participation in a variety of social networks, groups, organizations, and institutions represents a social connectedness that has been conceptualized in Western political philosophy as civil society. Civil society is understood here as the ensemble of social formations—large and small, persistent and ephemeral—that go beyond family and kinship ties, yet are not directly involved in governance or economic production and exchange. A sixth proposition, then, states that a minimal web of such mutual attachments is necessary to give social reality and coherence to the political construct of the body politic that is the subject of democratic sovereignty (Rustow 1970).

Finally, there is the classic claim that strong intermediary groups and institutions are required for a balance of power between state and society. They are necessary for protecting society from being overwhelmed by the institutional strength of the state apparatus and its advantage grounded in organized coercion.

II. Complications and Qualifications

While these propositions support the claim that widespread participation in strong intermediary associations and organizations is conducive to and supportive of democracy, many versions of this claim are too strong and must be qualified. Organizational density of civil society as such does not guarantee favorable conditions for democracy. Not all forms of social participation are equally effective in supporting democracy, and some have directly negative effects. Several interrelated doubts and qualifications must be considered.

First, social participation is likely to be less supportive of democratic politics if it is unpoltical in character. Robert Putnam (1993) did find that membership in quite unpoltical associations was related to other indicators of “civic community” and that an index of “civic community” was in turn associated with the quality of democratic government in the twenty regions of Italy. Yet, while participation in unpoltical organizations may convey some of the benefits of social participation supporting democracy (e.g., improving organizational skills and strengthening commitments to and confidence in cooperative action), it will fall short in other respects that are more directly linked to the conditions of democracy.

Second, the scale of social participation may be too limited to link consciousness formation to politics. If the networks in which people articulate their political interests and opinions are confined to small circles of trust, as is often the case in politically repressed societies, they may immunize them against dominant influence and even support daring action, but they may well not be sufficient to support the wide-ranging meshing of experience and critical assessment required for politically relevant and realistic consciousness formation.

Third, the scale of associations in which people participate may be too limited to affect regional or national political decision making. Thus neighborhood associations may thrive and be effective in advancing their interests locally, but such participation often has little or no political impact at the regional and national levels. In the typical case, these associations do not sufficiently empower the interests of the participants to affect broader politics, even though participation in them may have some of the other beneficial consequences indicated. This argument contradicts the oft-quoted maxim of “Tip” O’Neill, the late Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, “All politics is local.” Problematic as an axiom of political theory in more than one way, this dictum may well indicate one of the flaws in the prevailing Tocquevillian self-concept of the United States.

Fourth, associations and organizations with an internal structure that emphasizes hierarchy and subordination may be inimical to democratic rule. The importance of authority structures throughout society that are compatible with a democratic character of politics has been argued by Harry Eckstein (1966, appendix), and Robert Putnam found that a predominance of hierarchical patron-client relations was at odds with effective democratic rule in the provinces of Italy. Yet, while this claim makes intuitive sense and is supported by some evidence, it likely needs further specification: if organizations with a strong sense of urgency see themselves embattled, they often tend toward oligarchic leadership patterns; but many organizations that fit this description surely have also promoted democratic rule. The most poignant example for this is perhaps the Social Democratic Party of Imperial Germany—the party that moved Robert Michels to formulate his “iron law of oligarchy” (Michels 1915/68), yet also the party that most consistently advanced the case of democracy in Germany.

There is little question that more demanding conceptions of democracy are violated when intermediary organizations are not or are insufficiently democratic in their own internal functioning. What is in dispute is whether less than democratic—“oligarchic”—associations and organizations can further democracy in the broader political arena and even whether politically efficient organizations do not have a tendency—the limits and conditions of which are as yet ill understood—to curtail internal pluralism and equality in decision making.

We encounter here the first of several antinomies inherent in the conditions of democracy to be discussed further. Social participation and internal
democracy in an organization thrive the better the less hierarchic, the less oligarchic, and the smaller the organization. Yet the political representation of the interests of the organization's members can often be accomplished better by larger organizations with more hierarchical and oligarchic forms of organization. This is not an inescapable dilemma. Michels's "iron law of oligarchy" is not at all an iron-clad empirical generalization. We know, for instance from the classic study of Lipset, Trow, and Coleman (1956), that internal democracy in organizations is contingent on variable conditions. But these conditions are not fully understood; and we also know that limitations of internal democracy in the name of political efficiency are not at all rare.

Fifth, and perhaps most important, some interests are at odds with democracy. This is not a rare or peculiar case; in some sense, all dominant groups have an "objective interest" in opposing democratic decision making, though we certainly know of elites that have made their peace with democratic rule. Dominant groups may succeed in repressing or marginalizing democratic aspirations of subordinate groups or they may exert a strong influence on associations and organizations of those strata that do emerge. Such influence frequently finds support in associations related to the church or the military (e.g., in veterans' associations). Where antidemocratic groups gain hegemonic control over the organizational expression of broad-based other interests, the democratizing effect of an organizationally dense civil society is not only neutralized but turned into its opposite. The organizations of these culturally and socially subordinate groups serve then as transmission belts for the antidemocratic ideas and goals of hegemonic groups. This transmission belt effect constitutes an exact analogy to the transmission belt functions of centrally controlled mass organizations in totalitarian and highly authoritarian regimes, though the hegemonic influence of dominant groups is often less coercive and limited to one or several sectors of society.

This consideration raises a number of critical questions: Which interests are likely to be (and which are in fact) pro- and antidemocratic? How strongly organized are the pro-democratic forces? How autonomous are these groups from antidemocratic forces? Finally, and most importantly, what is the balance of power between pro- and antidemocratic forces?

In examining this balance it is important to take into account not only collective organization but also the other major power resources, such as control over property, coercion, communication systems, and cultural symbols. Equally important is the realization that some interests—often precisely those that have little access to such other power resources—have to overcome special obstacles in acquiring "voice" through organization; less skilled workers and women typically face these problems.

Sixth, if we move from the power balance in civil society to the other central question of relative empowerment, the balance of power between state and civil society, we return to established ideas about participation and democracy—to the well known issues of sufficient autonomy of intermediary organizations vis-à-vis the state, of their protection against repression, and of their relative power to exert political influence.

I want to add to these classic issues certain accents and complements that are less widely accepted. There is, first, the claim that a certain form of state autonomy is a requisite of democracy. Democracy cannot function if the state is a pliable instrument in the hands of dominant socioeconomic interests; or, to put it into another theoretical idiom, democracy is inconceivable unless the realms of politics and the state are to some extent differentiated from the overall system of inequality.

Another qualification concerns the autonomy of intermediary groups. The requirement that intermediary organizations be autonomous from the state must not be taken in a simplistic fashion. Thus, much of the Western European experience suggests considering it an open question whether and in which ways this autonomy is compatible with state funding. In view of the dense interpenetrating of state agencies and social organizations characteristic of most developed welfare states, we may even ask whether it is possible to have relatively autonomous enclaves of "civil society" within the state. This question acquires special importance in state socialist societies that sought to control all organized activities but did not always succeed in doing so—either within or outside the state apparatus.

Considerations of this kind have led some to argue that the conceptual pair of state and civil society has its roots in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century experiences and is simply useless for the analysis of twentieth-century welfare states. In all advanced capitalist societies, the state is indeed composed of a much more far-flung and internally variegated set of organizations and agencies than it ever was. And these often cooperate—are in fact closely intertwined—with organizations that have their origin outside the state. These interrelations among private and public agencies have led some analysts to speak of a Verstaatlichung der Gesellschaft, as well as a Vergeellschaftung des Staates (the state penetrating and embracing society and society taking over the state).

Yet the fundamental questions about the interaction, autonomy, and dependence among different groups and institutions remain the same and are still valid. They are not tied to the broad conceptual opposition of state and society, but can equally well be asked (1) of the relations among organized social and economic interests, as I just did when inquiring about hegemonic relations among organized groups; (2) of relations between them and agen-
cies directly associated with coercive capacity of the state, the classic concern of these ideas; and (3) of relations within the sphere of the state broadly conceived, as we routinely do when inquiring about the autonomy of the judicial courts, of the central bank of a country, of the British Broadcasting Corporation, or of the Church of England. In this third area, it is useful to distinguish the agencies directly concerned with coercive action and the institutions involved in political decision making from other agencies, such as those engaged in economic production or the delivery of services. This distinction separates "the state" in a narrow sense from the many service and production activities of agencies financed and controlled by public institutions (the state in a broader definition).

III. Antinomies in the Participation-Democracy Nexus

In the course of qualifying the initial set of propositions linking social participation and democracy, we encountered above a first case of an antinomy that seems inherent in the participation-democracy nexus: meaningful participation and internal democracy within associations may be—and often are—at odds with the organizational requirements of forceful interest representation. Yet both effective interest representation and active participation are conditions favorable for democracy. The tension between nonhierarchical participation and the effective pursuit of collective interests is not, however, a static given; it will vary with different conditions. Less antagonistic relations among contending interests within a polity are likely to allow more democratic relations within groups.

I wish to consider here briefly three other potential antinomies inherent in the conditions of democracy. One derives from the conjunction of two of the initial propositions about participation and democracy. If an organizationally dense civil society creates the mutual connectedness and coherence of society that is a requisite of democracy, it follows that associations and institutions that bridge potentially deep cleavages in society are particularly valuable in furthering and maintaining democratic governance. The cleavages to be bridged may run along regional, ethnic, religious, or class lines. Such bridging, however, may be at odds with the claim that it is above all the autonomous organization of subordinate groups that is required for democratization and the maintenance of democratic rule. If there are deep divisions separating dominant and subordinate interests, these two conditions of democracy do indeed stand in tension with each other. Under more moderate conditions, the autonomy of subordinate groups and associations is probably more important than the "bridging" that can be accomplished by hegemonic influence.

Another antinomy has been discussed under the heading of "ungovernability." The mobilization of demands in a democracy can easily, this view holds, exceed the capacity of the state (and the economy) to satisfy them. Limiting or more radically rolling back democracy may be the only way out. Empirically, there are reasons to treat this claim with some skepticism. In fact, a democratic government, especially one that has strong organizational roots in society, may be better able to make choices under conditions of even severe scarcity than an authoritarian regime because it can count on support grounded in legitimacy, rather than solely on the conditional support that vanishes when "the goods" are not delivered. Furthermore, the formulation of the problem seems slanted: it implies that there is an objectively correct way to run the economy and social and economic policy. If we do not make this assumption, the problem either turns into the question whether democratic rule can realistically deal with choice under scarcity—to which the answer seems in principle yes—or it becomes an issue of protecting privileged interests. One of the more depressing findings of recent research on the conditions of democracy is indeed that dominant economic and social groups will turn against democracy unless their interests are protected by large conservative or clientelistic parties or secure pacts with other political forces (Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992).

A last potential antinomy is of a related kind. The claim that democracy thrives with a strong organizational articulation of social and economic interests stands in tension with neo-utilitarian arguments that such interest coalitions are harmful to economic growth (Olson 1982). Yet economic growth is one of the major conditions that render the relations between different interests more peaceful and amenable to compromise; it thus favors democratic decision making in the overall polity as well as in the associations and parties within it.

It is true that—contrary to popular notions of an inherent harmony between democratization and marketization—policies that rigorously seek to establish competitive markets as the primary regulatives of economic life tend to have atomizing consequences that undercut vigorous social participation and the collective organization of interests. Furthermore, encouraged by the neo-utilitarian arguments, states that actively pursue these policies also often try to undercut intentionally the self-organization of society. But the comparative empirical evidence for the argument that strong interest representation leads to economic stagnation is far from conclusive, not to say weak. If it were valid, it would identify an important antinomy in the conditions conducive to democracy.
III. Civil Society

At several points, I have casually introduced the term "civil society." The concept has acquired a new currency. For many, it represents political hope—for social and political civility, for democratic renewal, on occasion also for a libertarian reconstruction of welfare states—and only secondarily the prospect for new and better theoretical understanding. Others respond with a good deal of skepticism, partly grounded in the very fusion of political visions and analytic ideas often associated with the concept.

I use the concept here in a quite specific sense. Considered reductive by many, this version seeks to avoid direct political/evaluative implications. Civil society means here the ensemble of organized social activities, formal and informal, that are not directly grounded in family and kinship, economic production and exchange, or the state but are politically relevant. This ensemble of associations, organizations, and institutions constitutes a pattern of unequal power relations as well as a complex network of communication through which situations are defined, interest claims are articulated, normative expectations are expressed, and hegemonic influence is exerted. Civil society in this sense is indeed of critical importance for the chances of democracy, but as we have seen it does not necessarily offer strong support, it may also undercut the chances of democracy.

So far I have considered participation in different associations and organizations, rather than the overall character of the civil society. Yet the character of the social and political community as a whole may also have critical consequences for the prospects of democracy. As touched on earlier, a minimally solidary community—emphatically to be distinguished from a comprehensive value consensus—is a prerequisite of democracy; without it, the "we" that lays claim to self-determination remains socially undefined.

The constitution of such a political community corresponds to a closely related second precondition for democracy, the consolidation of the state's authority to make binding collective decisions and its monopoly of legitimate coercion: a minimally coherent society as a counterpart to the minimally effective authority of the state. Yet the particular character of a political community may or may not support the chances of democracy.

States, whether democratic or not, have regularly sought to create some sense of common social belonging in the population that they control, building on or fighting against preexisting communal identities. The social-political communities corresponding to the reach of the state's writ are not primordial given but are historically constructed. This is, of course, not to say that all such communities are products of state action. Older communal solidarities—themselves the product of historical construction as well (though not necessarily of intentional design)—preceded the rise of the modern state; and others arose in response to the expansion of the state's reach. These had to be accommodated or transformed, or they remained at odds with the attempts to create a wider political community. Furthermore, it was the very coexistence of a broader and older religious community and less comprehensive political units in Europe that nourished the idea—and the reality—of a civil society autonomous from the emerging states (see Taylor 1990).

But the generalization holds that states are invariably concerned with the social identity and attachments of the people that they govern and (perhaps) serve. This proposition parallels Max Weber's assertion that all states will seek to nourish and create legitimacy beliefs. It is a Durkheimian corollary, stressing mutual attachment and solidarity in contrast (and in addition) to normative justification.

National political communities, then, are often created from the top down, by the state and dominant groups associated with it. This is not necessarily the case, but if "fraternal" association and autocratic imposition are two polar extremes—neither of them likely to be realized in pure form—approximations to the latter are certainly more frequent in historical reality than their egalitarian counterparts. The mode of creation is likely to influence the character of national political communities profoundly. It can inscribe them with social attachments and cultural symbolizations that stand against democracy, support privilege, favor coalitions among dominant interests, and appeal to subordinate groups in ways that marginalize their separate interests. A hierarchically structured political community and hierarchically oriented collective identifications require difficult transformations before they can fully be consonant with the move toward equalization of political power that is at the heart of democratization.

Here is also the place where ethnic and national identifications must be considered. The effects of strong ethnic and national identifications on the chances of democracy are complex. Cross-national studies have found "ethno-linguistic fragmentation" to be negatively related to democracy. At the same time, there are many and well-known cases—the oldest democracy, Switzerland, as well as Belgium, Canada, and the United States among them—where strong ethnic identifications may have created problems for democracy but proved ultimately compatible with it.

Strong ethnic or national identifications may help the creation of a national community, yet competing identities may be obstacles to it. Probably more important is that ethnic fragmentation divides the forces that otherwise could coalesce in support of democracy. And overriding ethnic and national identifications are likely to buttress within each eth-
nic or national community the hegemony of dominant classes in ways that hinder democratization.

A developed civil society, then, is not as such conducive to democracy. Instead, both its overall character, the character of the political community that constitutes the "we" claiming sovereignty in democratic rule, and the interrelations of different organized interests may be such as to undermine and even destroy democracy. The very structure and character of civil society may poison the prospects of democracy. Pre-Nazi Germany was certainly a society rich in organized social activity. Yet both the constitution of the national community and especially the relations of influence and hegemony between different organized interests were major factors in the collapse of the Weimar democracy. It seems worthwhile to consider similar questions in the study of many countries struggling today toward democracy.

IV. Historical Continuities

Historical continuities are of considerable importance in studying democracy, as they are in the analysis of all complex and large institutions. It is not an accident that one of the most popular (if not the most sophisticated) theories of democracy sees stable democracy in analogy to a good English lawn: it must be seeded and then cut and rolled for a couple of centuries.

Recognizing the importance of the persistence of social patterns keeps us from ahistorical "presentist" explanations, and it sensitizes us to the importance of sequence in social change. Before we can use historical continuity as an effective explanatory tool, however, we must understand better what the mechanisms are that reproduce a given phenomenon. Discontinuities are too often neglected in arguments insisting on the importance of historical continuity. Only if we begin to grasp why and how discontinuities occur and what consequences they have will we be able to make full use of Schumpeter's insight that social structures, types, and attitudes are coins that do not readily melt. Once they are formed, they persist, possibly for centuries, and since different structures and types display different degrees of ability to survive, we almost always find that actual group and national behavior more or less departs from what we should expect it to be if we tried to infer it from the dominant forms of the productive process. (Schumpeter 1947)

Historical continuities are not only to be expected in large-scale and complexly interrelated institutions. We have touched on a number of reasons why patterns of participation are likely to exhibit such historical persistence. There is, first, the claim that in an elementary sense participation begets participation and its absence makes the spontaneous occurrence of civic engagement far more difficult. Second, the claim that both individual and collective interests are socially constructed and that this construction takes place in the process of organization entails that a close mutual engagement of individual action and collective organization will stabilize both attitudes and patterns of participation, while radical disruptions are likely to be followed by slow reorientations of participation (Rueschemeyer 1996). Third, the associations and institutions themselves, as well as their interrelations and the character of the civil society and political community as a whole, are likely to exhibit strong historical persistencies and patterns of disruption and change that are as yet not at all well understood.

Even in the absence of more complete knowledge, however, promising questions suggest themselves if we are sensitive to the issues related to historical continuities and discontinuities. To illustrate with a few questions about Central and Eastern European countries in the 1990s: Which earlier patterns did communism disrupt—democratic traditions? antidemocratic hierarchies? How did these disruptions occur? And how do they compare with patterns of continuity that were not disrupted by the communist experience? What are, in turn, some of the continuities that were initiated by communism? And how do they relate to the chances of democracy?

V. Open Questions

These reflections on the self-organization of society and its relations to the prospects of democracy leave many questions open. There are not only the lacunae in our analytic knowledge that were occasionally indicated but also whole problem areas that were left untouched.

Focusing on the consequences of different patterns of participation in intermediary organizations, I touched only marginally on the causal conditions that give rise to these patterns. Furthermore, the chances of democracy depend on other conditions as well. Even if I had fully explored the factors determining the balance of power within civil society and the balance of power between civil society and the state, which I did not by any means, there would be at least two other clusters of power relations that are of critical importance—the character and the structure of the state and international power relations. These are of critical importance not only because of their direct impact on the chances of democracy but also because they shape the self-organization of society as well as state-society relations.

Yet a fresh look at the relationship of participation in intermediary organizations to democratic governance may be useful for the undertaking of this volume—a comparative exploration of social and political participation...
in central and eastern Europe, western European welfare states, and in the United States of America.

Acknowledgments

This paper has benefited from discussions with the contributors to this volume, with colleagues and graduate students in a workshop on democratization in the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown University, and with colleagues at a session of the 1997 meetings of the American Political Science Association. I am also grateful for early comments of Evelyne Huber and John D. Stephens. Last but not least, I wish to thank the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin for a month of uninterrupted study.

Notes

1. This view goes back at least to Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* and has become firmly associated with his name. It has been revived in current discussions of civil society, though that concept is being used in many different meanings that often confound normative and analytic claims.

2. This is one of the core findings of recent research on the conditions of democratization in which I participated (Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992). This chapter builds on that work in more than one way.

   The distinction between formal and substantive democracy is found in different traditions of critical thought about democracy. Thus, Robert Dahl (1971) created the concept of polyarchy to distinguish systems of governance conventionally called democratic from what he considered full democracy.

   Democracy in the limited but commonly used meaning can be defined by (1) free and fair elections in which all adults can participate, (2) accountability of the state apparatus to the elected representatives, and (3) guarantees of the freedoms of expression and association. For a discussion of conditions pertaining to a deepening democracy—of making it more participatory, of equalizing the chance of participation across class and other forms of inequality, and of policy outcomes reducing inequality in society, see Huber, Rueschemeyer, and Stephens (1997).

   3. This proposition might be seen as circular reasoning; it is not in the sense that would invalidate the argument. It does in fact claim that participation encourages participation; but the arena as well as the scope of this participation may change over time. That participation begets participation, while its absence makes collective action harder, is one reason why change in social and civic engagement tends to come slowly, why, in other words, patterns of social participation have a built-in tendency to persist. I return later to these issues of persistence and change.

   4. Both scale arguments must not be misunderstood as denying any relevance of small and localized civic participation at the national level. Local associations were quite important in recent democratization processes in Latin America (as Evelyne Huber insisted in oral communication); however, this may be far more significant in phases of political upheaval and mobilization, and even then it requires at least some linkage to national organizations and movements.

   5. See, for example, Nybom (1993) in his excellent essay on the Swedish welfare state. The clear-cut distinction between society and the state was always a radical simplification, even in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Thus, Hegel’s conception of civil society included as crucial components state-sponsored corporations or inclusive associations. The mutually exclusive concepts of state and society always corresponded better to the goals of early liberals and later libertarians than to the institutional reality they faced.

   6. Such distinctions become critical if one wants to apply concepts developed for the analysis of advanced capitalist societies (such as the concept of state autonomy) to a state socialist political economy such as the Chinese. This became very clear in discussions with Corinna Barbara Francis of dissertation research by Lee, Jung-Hee, on the different roles played by the central state apparatus, unions, managers of state-owned enterprises, and local authorities in the process of labor market reforms.

   7. See Linz and Stepan (1989). That authoritarian regimes with weak organizational support in society are more vulnerable than democracies I argued with particular respect to Latin America in Rueschemeyer (1980).

   8. This tension has also been noted and disputed by Robert Putnam (1993); see also Rueschemeyer (1992/1996).

   9. Approximations of egalitarian political community may be found in the historical background of such agrarian democracies as Switzerland, Norway, and the North and West of the United States.

   10. Sweden represents a remarkable case of a successful transformation of this kind that did not involve radical ruptures of historical continuity.

   A hierarchically constituted political community is not conceptually identical with the hegemonic influence of non- and antidemocratic dominant groups discussed earlier. What is at stake here is the overall character of the civil society and its common collective identifications and cultural symbols. A hierarchically structured political community does offer, of course, particularly favorable conditions for hegemonic influence of dominant groups.

   11. The questions of ethnic and national aspirations and conflicts had received recent, even before the developments in the aftermath of 1989, renewed and very fruitful attention. See, for example, the books by Anderson (1983), Gellner (1983), and Hobbsawm (1990). The transitions in Eastern Europe immediately gave a further and strong impetus; see, for instance, the special issue of *Theory and Society*, introduced by Charles Tilly (1991); see also Olte (1992).

   Though by now we are inured to the self-critical claims of both liberal and Marxist social theory that they have failed to appreciate the power of ethnicity and nationality as principles of solidarity, it is important not simply to acknowledge this power and leave its bases unexplained. We must seek identify its different sources and explain its component features. The goal is to identify mechanisms that in principle can also account for the different degrees of mobilizability of other collectivities, such as women, farmers, or workers.

   12. This is even true of Robert Putnam’s in many ways very suggestive discussion of historical roots of contrasting patterns of civic community in the provinces of Italy. Putnam does speak of the “collapse of communal republicanism” in central and northern Italy after the sixteenth century, but he insists on a deeper and unspecified continuity nevertheless: “... something of the glorious experience of the communes, and of the intense economic activity that civic engagement had generated, survived ... so that these regions would be more receptive to the first breezes of renewed progress” (Putnam 1993, 138).

   13. Reinhard Bendix has made this idea a central axiom of his work (Bendix 1964, 8–9).
14. We may recall that Ralf Dahrendorf has argued that National Socialism had fought and destroyed, or at least limited, the role of institutions and power centers in (the status order as well as in military and religious institutions of) German society that not only stood against Nazi rule but also were obstacles in the path of democratization (Dahrendorf 1967).

Bibliography


