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Democracy: A Never-Ending Quest

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Abstract

Most of my work focused on the functioning and the limits of democracy. I place the evolution of our understanding of this bewildering institution in the context of historical events and consider the challenges posed by its current critics. I also reflect on methods, arguing that game theory is the natural language of the social sciences. These ruminations add up to a research agenda.

BACKGROUND

Growing up in communist Poland, I imagined democracy only dimly across a curtain, attracted mostly by the thrill of elections. Parties compete, someone wins, someone loses, and even if their chances are unequal, no one knows how the game will end. It is like football, and I was passionate about football. So I read results of elections in foreign countries in the same way I read scores of foreign soccer games. To increase the emotional stakes, I had my favorites in both: Swedish Social Democrats and Arsenal.

I was first exposed to democracy during the two years I spent in the United States between 1961 and 1963. Although the first textbook I was forced to read as a graduate student at Northwestern University opened with the sentence “The United States has the best system of government in the world,” the experience was not inspiring. Still recovering from McCarthyism, the country was not the bastion of freedom it portrayed itself to be, as evidenced by a personal adventure: A group of graduate students planned to picket a movie theater that would not show a sexually explicit foreign film. To organize the picket, we formed a political group, the Student Association for Liberal Action. Then the leader of the group received a call from the local police chief, who met him at midnight in an underground garage and pointed out that our leader had several unpaid parking tickets and thus was liable to be arrested. That was the end of liberal action. What I found even more dismaying was that both censorship and this Polish-style police repression enjoyed the support of a majority of citizens of the American democracy. Neither would have been true in Poland: Although communist leaders loved to censor everything, they just stuck age limits on movies and let it go at that. And although police were omnipresent, I knew no one in Poland who thought that they were anything but a bunch of thugs. So instead of dutifully following the graduate program, I spent my time avidly swallowing Tocqueville’s warnings about tyranny of the majority and reactions of German refugees from fascism to what they saw as “totalitarian democracy.” I almost flunked out of the program, because some of my teachers thought that my readings were not “political science.” But others defended me, so I made it, and returned to Poland with this image of democracy.

The experience, however, was not completely dissuasive, for I still thought that selecting rulers through elections was a good idea and, indeed, that it would make things better in my native country. And there must have been someone within the communist leadership who thought the same, because in 1965 the Party suddenly decided to grant the people some voice in elections at the village level. Because communists were maniacs about keeping records, detailed results of these elections became available, and together with a colleague, Krzysztof Ostrowski, I analyzed them. We found that the people who were newly elected did not differ by any observable characteristics, party membership included, from those who were eliminated. Hence, we said, “Look, people were allowed to choose representatives they liked and to send away unpopular ones, and nothing else followed, nothing that could be seen as hurting communism or the Party.” The article was published in the theoretical organ of the Polish United Workers (Communist) Party, *Nowe Drogi*. Two weeks later, the Party tsar in charge of ideology called us into his headquarters, a building that now houses the stock exchange. He must have seen through our intentions, for in his rage he called us reformists, revisionists, Trotskyites, Luxemburgists, and I do not remember what else. He also announced “You will see,” which was not a forecast about our eyesight. In the end, the sanction was that I could not travel abroad, but in Poland the repressive system was not very efficient—nothing was—so if you knew somebody who knew somebody, you could get around most political sanctions. The ban lasted about a year.

When I returned to the United States in 1967, it was a different country. A suggestion to picket a movie theater would have been shouted down as “reformist.” The country emanated the

fervor of a revolution—cultural and personal, not just political. It was one of these rare historical moments in which one felt free, perhaps because, as one of John le Carré's characters observes in *A Small Town in Germany*, "Freedom's only real when you're fighting for it." One of the slogans directed against "the system" was "Power to the people," which I found curious because I had been taught that power of the people was the system: This is what "democracy" means. Obviously, electoral power was not the power claimed by this slogan. Elections were about nothing: Democrats, Republicans, what's the difference? The freedom to control one's own life is not the kind of power that results from elections. I intensely shared this quest for freedom. I was also sympathetic to the claim that elections do not offer real choices, that as the Italian political philosopher Norberto Bobbio (1989, p. 157) would later advise, "to pass a judgement today on the development of democracy in a given country the question must be asked, not 'Who votes?' but 'On what issues can one vote?'" I did see the difference between systems in which, again in Bobbio's language, "elites propose themselves and elites impose themselves." But the people have no power in a system ruled by elites. This is what I thought.

Power did fall into the hands of the people in a country where I arrived in 1970, Chile. And they chanted euphorically that *El pueblo unido jamas sera vencido*, "the people united will never be defeated." But either this inductive generalization is false or the people was far from united. President Allende was elected by a tiny plurality as the candidate of a coalition of divergent and quarrelsome forces. Stabbed in the back by a party that portrayed itself as centrist, Christian Democrats, Allende soon lost control over his own coalition, parts of which hallucinated about "socialist revolution." Henry Kissinger proclaimed that Allende was elected "due to the irresponsibility of the Chilean people"—such was his understanding of democracy—and the US government decided to restore responsibility by force. When the force was unleashed, on September 11, 1973, it was ferocious.

The Chilean debacle transformed the Left. Until the 1973 coup, many people on the Left were wavering between the quest for their goals and their respect for democracy. I believe, by the way, that Allende himself was a committed democrat, whose vision of "the road to socialism" was one of gradual steps, only as large as would be supported by the popular will expressed at the polls. He was prepared to see socialist reforms defeated in elections, and he never entertained the possibility of holding power against their result. In any case, the Chilean tragedy forced a choice, reminiscent of that faced by social democrats in the interwar period: socialism or democracy first? The clearest response emerged from the debates within the Italian Communist Party, and it was resolutely in favor of democracy. This response may have been originally motivated by strategic lessons from the Chilean experience: Pushing the socialist program too vigorously, without sufficient popular support, would lead to tragedies. But soon the unconditional embrace of democracy found philosophical, normative roots. Despite all its deficiencies, democracy is the only mechanism by which the people can implement their power and the only form of political freedom feasible in our world. By the time I attended a rally celebrating the victory of François Mitterand in May 1981, the electoral program of the Socialist Party was promising to "change lives" without changing much else while the Communist Party was content with a minor participation in the government.

All these reflections were taking place in a world in which barbarism was widespread. In the 1970s and early 1980s brutal military governments ruled Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Greece, and Uruguay; authoritarian regimes were still killing people in Portugal and Spain; communists had done their killing earlier, so intimidation was sufficient to maintain their oppressive rule. These were not the times to engage in critical reflection about democracy; democracy was what was missing, an absence. So when a group of scholars, many of them prodemocracy activists in their countries, gathered at the Wilson Center in Washington in 1979 to analyze and strategize how this barbarism could be stopped, we thought in terms of "transition from," from authoritarianism, not "to" anything. Democracy was just what we did not like about authoritarianism. Hence, we

studied transitions to democracy without asking questions about democracy. And we were not the first to do so: Shapiro (1999, p. 2) observes that “John Dewey’s comment on older democratic revolutions rings equally true of our own: they aimed less to implement an abstract democratic ideal than ‘to remedy evils experienced in consequence of prior political institutions’.”

DEMOCRACY NOW

As instructive as the past may be, the future is more interesting. What is the current state of democracy, and what are its prospects?

We are going through times when the value, the feasibility, and the prospects of democracy are under scrutiny in different parts of the world. Several aspects of the functioning of democracies are currently a source of intense discontent among their citizens. There is widespread dissatisfaction that democracy has been unable to generate socioeconomic equality, to make people feel that their political participation is effective, to ensure that governments do what they are supposed to do and not what they have no mandate to do, and to balance public order with noninterference in private lives. Indeed, O’Donnell (1993) colored the democratic grass from green all the way to brown: Democracy turned out to be compatible with inequality, irrationality, injustice, particularistic enforcement of laws, lies and obfuscation, a technocratic policy style, and even a fair dose of arbitrary violence. The everyday life of democratic politics is not a spectacle that inspires awe: an endless squabble among petty ambitions, rhetoric designed to hide and mislead, shady connections between power and money, laws that make no pretense of justice, policies that reinforce privilege.

To understand the present situation, it is instructive to go back again. The big puzzle during the past two centuries has been the compatibility of democracy with private property and with social and economic inequality. Beginning with the speech of Henry Ireton in the franchise debate at Putney in 1647, thinkers across the political spectrum, from Karl Marx to Thomas Macaulay, believed that if the poor were to gain the right of suffrage, they would use this right to confiscate property. (This belief continues today, as witnessed by the median voter model, that workhorse of political economists, which predicts that, short of dead-weight losses of taxation, the electoral mechanism should result in complete equality of post-tax and transfer incomes.) Capitalism and democracy, therefore, could not coexist. As Marx had it, either the poor would proceed from political to social emancipation or the rich would meet the economic threat with political restoration.

Yet they have coexisted, uneasily in some countries at some times, but quite peacefully and smoothly in many places. Somehow poor people continued to vote while private property and the economic inequality that goes with it persisted. Moreover, in some countries workers were organized in powerful unions and yet did not push their wage demands to the point that would undermine the viability of privately owned capital. Unions and left-wing parties were willing to moderate their wage demands and to obey verdicts of the polls. Moreover, when they reached office in capitalist societies, social democratic parties defended democracy even when this defense entailed economic sacrifices and electoral defeats.

These observations were the point of departure of much of my work, part of it with the late Michael Wallerstein. The explanations of this behavior that prevailed in the 1980s among leftist critics of social democracy claimed either that workers were ideologically dominated by the bourgeoisie that controlled the means of mass communication or that they were repeatedly betrayed by their co-opted leaders. In short, workers were either dupes or suckers, neither of which seemed plausible. Hence, the question we posed was whether this strategy of working-class movements could be understood in terms of their interests, whether it was economically

rational. We studied a simple model of bilateral monopoly, in which one encompassing, centralized union chooses the labor share and identical competitive firms decide how much to invest. In the equilibrium of this model, the union exercises considerable wage restraint. The reason is obvious: If a higher labor share causes firms to invest less, workers are trading off current for future consumption. We concluded, therefore, that the moderate strategy was rational. In turn, facing moderate demands, the bourgeoisie not only invests but also can live with democracy. As a result, a “democratic class compromise” naturally emerges, at least if everyone is sufficiently patient and if investment is sufficiently productive (Przeworski & Wallerstein 1982a).

The second puzzle concerned the procapital bias of democratic governments. These were the heady times of the Milliband–Poulantzas debate. Miliband (1970), presenting an impressive amount of evidence that capitalist state institutions tend to be staffed and directed by members of economic elites, claimed that this is why these institutions favor capital over labor. But he could not solve the puzzle offered by left-wing governments: Why would they, too, favor capital? The answer given by Poulantzas (1973), as well as Lindblom (1977), was that this dependence of the state on capital was inevitable because capitalists controlled investment and the state, as everyone else depended on investment decisions. Our contribution to this debate was to rewrite the class-conflict model assuming that the state can tax revenues of capital and transfer the income to workers (Przeworski & Wallerstein 1988). The result, as may have been expected, was that the state would choose exactly the same workers’ consumption share as would a centralized union. Because the government had to anticipate investment decisions of firms, it had to stop well short of significant redistribution. The dependence of workers and of governments that represented them was thus “structural”: the effect of the property structure of a capitalist society.

The central conclusion of these analyses was that private ownership of productive resources limits the range of outcomes that can ensue from the democratic process. Governments, regardless of who occupies their heights, who elected them and with what intentions, are constrained in any capitalist economy by the fact that crucial economic decisions, those affecting employment and investment, are a private prerogative.¹ Compromise is a dominant strategy for workers’ parties and unions both economically and politically: economically because as long as revolution was not feasible, maximizing future flow of consumption and employment entails wage restraint, and politically (see Przeworski & Sprague 1986) because workers could not win the electoral majority alone and had to seek allies across class lines.

Yet these structural constraints are insufficient to explain the coexistence of democracy and inequality. There is room within the structural constraints. Income distributions vary significantly across countries and periods even among stable democracies, with reasonable equality in Scandinavian countries and glaring inequality in some Latin American ones. Moreover, as Piketty (2014) demonstrates, several long-lasting democracies experienced sharp swings of inequality over time, most notably with the Anglo-Saxon countries witnessing a sharp rise during the past 30 years.

To understand these variations, we need to invoke another mechanism. Democracy is a universalistic system, a game with abstract, universalistic rules. But the resources different groups bring into this game are unequal. Now, imagine a basketball game played between people who are seven feet tall and people who are short like me. The outcome is clear. When groups compete for political influence, when money enters politics, economic power gets transformed into political power, and political power in turn becomes instrumental to economic power (Przeworski 2015b).

¹The same result holds in median voter models in which voters anticipate the effect of taxes on growth (see Bertola 1993) as well as in models in which the government uses some of its revenue to finance private consumption (see Barro 1990).

Something is wrong when a plurality of citizens in a democracy, asked which institutions have most power in their country, answer “banks.”² Access of money to politics is the scourge of democracy.

Class compromise worked successfully during the three decades following the end of World War II. Increases of wage rates followed increases of productivity almost perfectly 1:1, and the functional distribution of income remained stable. But then came something that, I think, no one anticipated:³ a massive assault by the Right on public ownership, regulation, and the institution that sustained the class compromise, the unions. With the elections of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 and Ronald Reagan in 1980, and the subsequent spread of “neo-liberalism” around the world—enforced by the US Treasury Department and the international financial institutions, and promoted by a propaganda offensive by right-wing think tanks—any notion of compromise broke down. Yet what was originally dubbed “supply-side economics” has not been an economic success: Rates of growth slowed down markedly after 1978 and were punctuated by the crisis of 2008, while income inequality rose in most countries, dramatically in the countries where this capitalist autocoup originated. As a result, for the first time in perhaps two centuries, we live in a situation in which many young people in democracies do not believe that they will enjoy better lives than their parents.

Having lost the presidential election in Mexico in 2006, Manuel Lopez Obrador exclaimed in a postelection rally, “*Al diablo con vuestras instituciones*” (“To hell with your institutions”). He was a bad loser and the democratic norms are sufficiently well entrenched in Mexico for this outburst to be politically costly to him. But considering his point seriously is frightening: What did the liberal democratic institutions do for the Mexican poor? I do believe they did achieve something specific, which I discuss below, but the question is not easy to answer. There are good, as well as bad, reasons (Przeworski 2011) many people around the world are deeply dissatisfied with the functioning of democracies in their countries.

THE AUTHORITARIAN CHALLENGE

Governments and their ideologues in many nondemocratic countries claim that although democracy is a universal value, it does not have to assume the same form as democracies in the West. Various projects of “non-Western democracy” claim that the “essence” of democracy is “the unity of the government and the governed,” a phrase coined by Schmitt (1993, p. 372). and that the existence of political opposition and the institution of choosing governments through elections are not necessary for democracy. Thus, a Russian exponent of “sovereign democracy,” Mikhail Leontiev (in an interview with a Polish newspaper, *Dziennik*, of January 19, 2008), insists that “the Russian political system—in its essence although not in form—does not differ in anything from real, serious Western democracies.”

This stance is epitomized by Sukarno, the first president of Indonesia, who thought that parliamentary democracy was a foreign import that “incorporates the concept of an active opposition, and it is precisely the addition of this concept that has given rise to the difficulties we have experienced in the last eleven years” (quoted in Cheng Teik 1972, p. 231). The Indonesian political tradition, Sukarno maintained, was to reach collective decisions by consensus. Democracy had to be “guided,” based on mutual cooperation rather than on partisan conflicts. This claim, and the argument behind it, is canonical, even if it comes in variants. The point of departure is that the

²See Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (2010). The question was *De las siguientes instituciones o colectivos, cuales cree Ud. que tienen mas poder en Espana?* (“Of the following institutions or bodies, which do you believe have more power in Spain?”) Banks were mentioned as most powerful by 31.6% of respondents, the government by 26.4%, large firms by 15.1%.

³Wallerstein and I did see the elections of Thatcher and Reagan as a watershed (see Przeworski & Wallerstein 1982b).

society is naturally harmonious—the people are united as one body—or at least that the goal of politics should be to maintain harmony and cooperation. Political divisions are artificial, spuriously generated by selfish and quarrelsome politicians. If they were allowed to be organized, most importantly through political parties, conflicts would become dangerous. They are unstoppable and lead to a breakdown of order, even to civil wars. Moreover—here we get invocations of what Schmitter & Karl (1991) dubbed “the bias of electoralism”—purely procedural rules need not generate wise or virtuous outcomes. As Lagerspetz (2010, p. 30) observed, “there is something deeply disturbing in the idea that a purely mechanical, content-free procedure could determine what we should do.” Finally, nationalistic appeals never hurt: Consensual decision making is deeply rooted in the national tradition, whereas “formal democracy” is a foreign, Western import. In the words of Vladimir Putin, “[T]he Russian democratic model . . . will not be either American nor British, it will be typically Russian or will not be” (quoted in Eltchaninoff 2015, p. 165). The unity of the leader and the led is the “essence” of democracy whereas particular institutions, including elections, are just “forms.”

Put yourself in the place of someone who believes that peaceful political order cannot be maintained unless it is regulated by an authoritarian state, that democracy must be “guided,” “tutored,” or “led,” and examine from his point of view the experience of the country that heralds itself as the cradle and the prototype of modern democracy.⁴ You will see a society in which almost half of citizens do not vote even in presidential elections, in which money unabashedly permeates politics. You will see a society that has the highest income inequality in the developed world and the largest prison population in the entire world.⁵ This picture is self-serving, but it cannot be easily dismissed. Most people around the world evaluate democracy not only by political criteria but also by material welfare and socioeconomic equality. To put forth a case for democracy, one must confront the experience of democracies as they are, “really existing democracies.” It is not enough to urge, “Do as we say, not as we do.”

The challenge of China, which most recently has abandoned even the very language of “democracy,”⁶ is particularly profound. The Chinese claim that their system is in several aspects superior to democracy: It generates superior economic growth, in fact the fastest in history; it meritocratically selects better political leaders (Bell 2015), who are accountable for their performance to higher levels through yardstick competition (Gang 2007, Xu 2011); it chooses better policies by local experimentation (Wang 2009); it is responsive to local conditions by allowing expressions of decentralized protest (Cai 2008, Lorentzen 2013); and it maintains moral order, which has collapsed in the West, as well as “social harmony.” Moreover, although widespread corruption and increasing inequality are selectively admitted, the Chinese leaders insist that their system is being continually perfected whereas democracies are institutionally stagnant. Except for growth, none of these claims is uncontroversial, but some are supported by empirical research (Luo & Przeworski 2015). This challenge is not just political but intellectual.⁷ It poses an entire research agenda.

⁴A competent and devastating image of this kind is offered by the Report of the Institute for Democracy and Cooperation (2012), a Russian semiofficial outfit in New York City, charged by Putin with monitoring US politics.

⁵Strikingly, both the Chinese and the Russian ideologues accept the United States’ claim to be the model democracy. I have participated in debates with such people, and invariably the very first mention of the word democracy was immediately followed by an attack on the United States, as if it were the only democracy in the world.

⁶The self-denomination of the Chinese system by President Xi is not any kind of democracy, not even “People’s” democracy, but just “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” I find this shift ominous. For an authoritative statement of current Chinese view of democracy, see Yang (2013).

⁷Thus China is distinct from Russia or Venezuela, both of which claim to have developed an alternative form of democracy. Putinism has no appeal outside Russia other than in its social conservatism. “Bolivarian Democracy” found some strange echoes in the Podemos party in Spain. But both Russia and Venezuela are basket cases. On Russia, see Holmes (2015).

Democracies are not all the same. Indeed, as they emerged under exotic conditions, our complacency about institutional blueprints was shaken. Even the most parochial area students—Americanists—ventured into a world outside the US Congress, only to discover what a unique institution it is. Although the first attempts to look beyond were terribly naive, some just mindlessly arrogant, it quickly became apparent that democracy can come in many variations and gradations.

“Democracy” cannot mean resemblance to the United States, “the best system of government in the world,” as all kinds of rating agencies would have it. According to the Freedom House, for example, citizens of the United States are free. They are free to vote, to express their views in public, to form associations and political parties. But almost half do not vote even in presidential elections, public speech is not free but sponsored by private interests, and they never form new parties. Are they free? To paraphrase Rosa Luxemburg, is one free or can one only act freely? Developing this theme would take us too far away from the topic of these ruminations, but here is one point I want to emphasize. Democracy is a system of positive rights, but it does not automatically generate the conditions necessary for exercising these rights (Holmes & Sunstein 1999). As J.S. Mill (1977 [1859], p. 99) observed, “High wages and universal reading are the two elements of democracy; where they co-exist, all government, except the government of public opinion, is impossible.” Yet there is nothing about democracy per se that guarantees that wages would be high and reading universal. The nineteenth-century solution to this problem was to restrict citizenship to those who were in condition to use it. Today citizenship is nominally universal, although many people do not enjoy the conditions necessary to exercise it.

Statistical results show that we should not expect total national income to grow faster on average in democracies than in nondemocracies. Per capita income may be growing somewhat faster, but that is because population grows more slowly. Moreover, economic growth under democracy exhibits much lower variance than under nondemocracy—an important virtue because it enables people to better plan their lives (Przeworski et al. 2000). Regimes can be evaluated by several criteria, however, not just average material progress. Should we expect democracies to generate more equality in economic and social realms? Here again data seem to indicate that at least average income inequality does not differ across regimes. Should we expect that decisions will be more rational in a democracy? Should we expect competitive elections to generate better-quality leaders than other means of selection? Should we expect elected leaders to be more motivated by the welfare of their constituents than appointed ones? All these questions must be answered if we are to meet the authoritarian challenge.

There is one answer about which I feel quite confident, an answer that goes back to Popper (1962) and Bobbio (1987), namely that democracy is the only system that allows people to live in freedom and peace. Democracy is a system in which whatever conflicts emerge in a society are processed by periodic elections. Between elections, the losers wait to get their chance the next time around, or the one after that. Elections induce peace because they enable intertemporal horizons. Even if one thinks that people care about outcomes rather than procedures, the prospect that parties sympathetic to their interests may gain the reins of government generates hope and induces patience. For many, the American election of 2000 was a disaster, but we knew that there would be another one in 2004. When the 2004 election ended up even worse, we still hoped for 2008. And, as unbelievable as it still appears, the country that elected and re-elected Bush and Cheney voted for Obama. Elections are the Sirens of democracy. They incessantly rekindle our hopes. We are repeatedly eager to be lured by promises, to put our stakes on electoral bets. Hence, we obey and wait.⁸

⁸On the logic of this mechanism, see Przeworski (1991, 2005), Benhabib & Przeworski (2006), and Przeworski et al. (2015).

This mechanism does not work under all conditions. Most striking is the effect of income. Coups and civil wars are much less frequent—indeed, absent—in societies that reach a certain level of income (Przeworski & Limongi 1997). Independently, however, the experience of just one partisan alternation in office has a dramatic effect on the survival of democracy regardless of the level of per capita income (Przeworski 2015a,b).

Conflict, liberty, and peace do not coexist easily. When one looks at world history in the perspective of centuries, democracy appears as no more than a speck. Throughout most of history, civil peace could be maintained only by force, by repression. In the end, the miracle of democracy is that conflicting political forces obey the results of voting. People who have guns obey those without them. Incumbents risk their control of governmental offices by holding elections. Losers wait for their chance to win office. Conflicts are regulated, processed according to rules, and thus limited. This is not consensus, yet not mayhem either, but limited conflict: conflict without killing. Ballots are “paper stones.”

METHODS

Gabriel Almond once published an article in *PS* in which he distinguished good from bad political scientists (Almond 1988). This classification generated a two-by-two table in which I was the occupant of the “bad-bad” cell: left-wing and formal. Having already established my credentials on the political dimension, let me now turn to the methodological one.

Game theory is the natural language of social science because it enables us to analyze micro mechanisms that generate the observed macro patterns. I am not persuaded by studies that remain at the macro level. As Roemer (1986) observed, someone must be doing something to bring the macro state about. The macro comparative method fails to provide such causal mechanisms. I do believe that one must know what one explains; substantive knowledge is a prerequisite of any kind of research. I remember once reading a paper by two prominent economists about presidential systems “like the US.” There are no presidential systems like the US, where the president does not have formal power of legislative initiative. Local knowledge is a test of any theory; models must live in examples or “analytic narratives” (Bates et al. 1998). Moreover, because concepts are often muddy or ideologically loaded,⁹ sometimes their deconstruction is required. To this extent, as I once confessed, I am a methodological opportunist. But just writing some words and then “H1, H2” does not work for me. I once reviewed a paper by a prominent political scientist, which claimed that we should observe something that, having written the model based on the author’s assumptions, I concluded could not have been an equilibrium.

Here is some evidence of failures of macro thinking. About three days into the 1979 Washington meeting on transitions to democracy, it struck me that no one had mentioned either Barrington Moore or Seymour Martin Lipset, although of the 40 people in the room perhaps 30 taught Moore and Lipset in their courses. Their theories were just too deterministic. We were trying to strategize, which meant that we thought some courses of action could be successful under particular conditions and others would not be. The ideas that the prospects for democracy were determined by what happened to agrarian class structure two centuries ago or secreted by the level of economic development were of no use for people who were asking “how to.”

At another time, I attended a conference in which Fernando Henrique Cardoso presented one of his dependency theory themes, what was then called the “historical-structural approach.” There

⁹“Corruption” immediately comes to my mind. Many political practices in the United States would constitute corruption in other countries. When the Brazilian Workers’ Party (PT) steals money from the state enterprise it manages, that is corruption, but when right-wing parties get campaign contributions from private banks it is not.

were “interests,” interests organized into classes and fractions, classes and fractions made alliances, and so on. I asked him, “How do you know that out of these classes and fractions, you’re going to get these alliances?,” to which his reply was “Oh, Adam, you are asking for empty formalisms.” Well, these formalisms are not empty, because the way alliances emerge from a structure of interests is not obvious. It could be that only one alliance is feasible, that several are feasible, or that none is feasible. We need some tools to find out what alliances are possible. Game theory is a tool that allows us to determine what kind of outcomes we should expect under particular conditions, under particular structures of interests.

True, some people are geniuses: You give them assumptions and they tell you the correct conclusions. I’ve known people like this, but that sort of informal deduction is beyond my capacity. Verbal deductive arguments fail too often. Mathematics, somebody once wrote, is a tool for the stupid. So just in case, one needs to “write it down.” I am currently working on the mechanisms by which economic inequality generates political inequality, about which I had very strong intuitions only to discover that the issues are much more complex than I imagined. And it is not the first time.

I am a scientist; that is, I adhere to criteria of inference and evidence. Unfortunately, as the late Kenneth Boulding once remarked, “Science is when young people make fools of old people.” And I am old, which is why I was invited to write this essay. What I have found most painful throughout my academic life has been the repeated urgency to catch up with students. All these kids know things I do not. And, as years go by, one is never certain whether one will be still able to learn new things or if the limit has been reached. Fortunately, I have been lucky to be taught by my students: elementary economics by Michael Wallerstein, basic computer operations by Jeong-Hwa Lee, and more recently some game theory by Gonzalo Rivero and Tianyang Xi, as I am now being taught global games by Zhaotian Luo. I have also learned from some friends, notably Jess Benhabib, Fernando Cortes, and John Sprague. The rest required spending hours on my behind.

I intend this last reflection as advice. Most important in one’s early career is learning how to learn. Fortunately, I studied two years of formal logic, which taught me that I can open any book with weird symbols and learn the rules to transform one line to the next one. To my regret, I never studied mathematics—not to speak of game theory, which almost did not exist when I was a student. So my advice to young people is to study the basics, and basics for me are mathematics, philosophy, and history. Political science can wait.

CONCLUSION

The progress, in both quality and quantity, of research during the past half century has been phenomenal. But there are so many things we still do not know or understand. The issue of central political importance—the ways in which money infiltrates politics, the mechanisms and the effects of competition by interest groups for political influence—is still just one big puzzle, with little systematic evidence outside the United States, analytical models that skirt the glaring fact of resource inequality, and difficulties in causal identification. Another urgent political issue concerns nonelectoral mechanisms of political participation. Citizens in democracies have no way to control public bureaucracies that are supposed to serve them, and attempts at “participatory democracy” are just a cemetery of failures. The entire field of political economy of development has hurled itself against a brick wall: cross-country regressions, of which I have done thousands, fail to reject almost any of the many brilliant theories, while micro studies, including field experiments, always raise questions of external validity. I am still obsessed by the question of why people with guns obey people without them, but as military dictatorships have become less common, research

on the military has unduly dwindled. In particular, I think we still do not understand coups. Because we have a new technology to study mass uprisings—global games—this is what everyone studies, oblivious to the fact that many more regimes fall by divisions within the elite than by mass actions. I am still fascinated by the question of why China succeeded where the Soviet Union failed, or perhaps why the Soviet Union failed where China succeeded. I am bewildered by the grip of ideologies, of political myths, in the United States as much as in China, and I do not understand why so many governments revert to repression, overt and covert, even when they are not threatened.

With all these questions to study, I'd better stop these reflections and go to work.

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