State Repression and the Domestic Democratic Peace

Does democracy decrease state repression in line with the expectations of governments, international organizations, nongovernmental organizations, social movements, scholars, and ordinary citizens around the world? At present, most believe that a domestic democratic peace exists, rivaling that found in the realm of interstate conflict. Based on an investigation of 137 countries from 1976 to 1996, this book seeks to shed light on this question. Specifically, three results emerge. First, even though different aspects of democracy decrease repressive behavior, not all do so to the same degree. Human rights violations are especially responsive to electoral participation and competition. Second, although different types of repression are reduced, not all are limited at comparable levels. Personal integrity violations are decreased more than civil liberties restrictions. Third, the domestic democratic peace is not bulletproof; the negative influence of democracy on repression can be overwhelmed by political conflict. This research alters our conception of repression, its analysis, and its resolution.

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The problem of taming (coercive) power is a very ancient one. . . . To anyone who studies history or human nature it must be evident that democracy, while not a complete solution, is an essential part of the solution.

Bertrand Russell (1938)
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Preface

For about thirteen years, I have been trying to understand why governments use political repression. By this, I am referring to very specific types of government activity: restricting civil liberties (for example, political bans and instances of censorship) and violating personal integrity rights (for example, torture, disappearances, and mass killings). Along this quest, I was initially influenced by literature on authoritarianism, but later I became interested in the connection between democracy and state-sponsored coercive behavior. The reason for my transition was clear. Increasingly over the past few decades, the world has become enamored with democratic political institutions. Within academic literature, social movements, human rights organizations, think tanks, governments, and even pop culture, it is clear that democracy is heralded as a solution to many problems confronting human beings, including state repression. Given the varied quality of this discussion and the importance of the subject matter, I decided to explore the topic more rigorously.

Although my initial investigations into the subject were somewhat more narrowly defined (focusing on the influence of national elections, constitutions, and diverse cumulative indices), as my awareness of existing scholarship increased, several weaknesses were revealed. In this context, the scope of the work enlarged. My interest was further piqued, once I realized that some of the most influential thinkers in the social sciences had similarly grappled with the subject (e.g., Hobbes, Madison, Montesquieu, and Dahl). Given the normal marginalization of human rights and state repression within mainstream political science, such an acknowledgment was particularly important, not just intellectually and professionally but personally as well. I am generally of the opinion that although political scientists profess an interest in power, the form that power takes is severely circumscribed.
When one considers the history of political thought more seriously, however, it is clear that this is simply not the case.

As with any scholarly effort, I have accumulated many debts along the way. I owe thanks to a large number of people, who have served as advisers, counselors, sounding boards, devil's advocates, fans, inspirations, trainers, and critics. But always (always) they have served as friends and colleagues: Mark Lichbach, Charles Tilly, Will Moore, Ron Francisco, Matthew Krain, Steve Poe, Claudia Dahlerus, Jillian Schwedler, Mike Ward, Robert Goldstein, Eduard Ziegenhagen, Manus Midlarsky, Kenneth Bollen, Zehra Arat, David Cingranelli, and David Richards. I wish to acknowledge the assistance of my graduate student and friend, David Armstrong, whose statistical capabilities were extremely helpful. Ilene Cohen proved to be a marvelous copy editor and Margaret Levi's support and insight were invaluable. Repeatedly I was guided by Lew Bateman in a positive direction. I also thank Steely Dan, Public Enemy, and Pink Floyd for sporadic moments of calm and motivation. Lastly, I want to thank my family – the inner sanctum of sanity, serenity, and hot tea: Nejla Yasemin Yatkin, Juliet ("Ndidi") Seignious, Rodney and Barbara Williams, John Sparagana, Katie Kahn, Marina (formerly "Lil M") Sparagana, Hannah Sparagana, Darren Davis, James Gibson, Ray Duch, Wycie Bauknight and Gloria Marcus, Quinn and Sylvia Rhone, Kysha Harris, Amilcar and Demetria Shabazz, Tunda and Ado, Assata Richards, as well as Michael and Lisa Lane. As you have all taught me, it takes a village to raise a child, but it takes a major metropolitan city to raise a professor, a fine piece of scholarship, and a decent human being. Peace to all of you. Standard with all such exercises, I alone take all responsibility for brilliant insights and unforgivable errors.

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