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Contention and Democracy

Unlike its 20th-century counterparts, the *Leeds Mercury* for 30 March 1871 devoted its opening pages entirely to classified advertising, official announcements, and market reports. But by page 4, as usual, the newspaper had plunged into the day's urgent political affairs. "The result of the Paris elections," declared the *Mercury*'s editorial writer,

gives such authority to the Commune as may be assumed to flow from an illegal proceeding to condone a revolt. It is simply, however, the authority of usurpation based upon the vote of a minority, the majority abstaining from the exercise of their rights, and so far giving a colourable sanction to acts which they had not the courage to protest against or to oppose. The victory has been won, as such victories too often are won, by the unscrupulous exercise of power in the name of liberty. For the moment, the Party of Disorder, of Anarchy, of Revolution, and of Tyranny have triumphed, and it may be that with the phrases of liberty, equality, and fraternity on their lips, they will for a time hold their own by a Reign of terror which will once more and for another generation make French Republicanism a bye-word and a scorn in the mouths of all men.

The *Mercury*'s editorialist intertwined three themes commonly voiced by 19th- and 20th-century commentators on France, emphatically including British and French antirevolutionaries: comparison of current struggles with the revolution of 1789, association of revolution with terror, and assertion that if a revolution occurred, it could not possibly have represented the majority will.

After much more in the same vein, the editorial pronounced a scathing but ultimately fearful judgment:

At present the Commune has no legal authority. It is neither more nor less than a revolutionary body, and as the authority of the Government has not been overthrown, its assumption cannot be recognised without danger to the lawful Government of

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the country. There may be, and probably is, sufficient ground for demanding a re-form of the municipal system of government in force in Paris, and the large towns of France. Indeed, the necessity of reform has been admitted, and unless the violence of the commune outrages public opinion, such reform must now come speedily; but the right of Paris to an autonomy, independent of the National Government, is a right which cannot be conceded. It is a claim for which there is no justification. There is too much reason to fear that it covers designs which would make property a curse instead of a blessing, by imposing the burthen of taxation upon the rich, and providing work for the poor at the cost of the State. So long as these theories remain theories France can afford to smile at them. They are the dreams of vision-aries. Unfortunately the visionaries are in power in Paris, and in all probability will seek to realise their dreams, pursuing their ends blindly, and at all costs.

The editorial ended with a prediction: that the Commune would leave a legacy of "misery and distress, from which all will suffer, and none more than the poor" (*Leeds Mercury*, 30 March 1871, pp. 4–5). Thus once again, according to the *Mercury*, French people had revealed their propensity for revolutionary adventurism. Violent victories, in a self-righteous British view, could produce only long-term defeats for reason and democratic order.

What had happened? In 1848, French revolutionaries replaced their monarchy with a republic that provided work for its many unemployed and greatly expanded workers' rights, including nearly universal manhood suf-frage. At the end of 1851, elected president Louis Napoleon Bonaparte (nephew of the earlier emperor) swept away the republic with a coup d'état, then created his own empire the following year. Louis Napoleon's coup initiated eighteen years of urbanization, industrialization, political consolidation, and, toward the end, liberalization with increasingly turbu-lent rule. War with Prussia proved his downfall. On 1 September 1870, France's commanding general Macmahon surrendered and Prussian forces took Napoleon III captive at Sedan. Three days later, a relatively peace-ful revolution terminated the empire, established a republic, and formed a government of national defense in Paris. But Prussian armies continued to batter their French foes, as a determined Prussian siege of Paris began on 5 January. German artillery then pounded the city for three weeks.

Ninety thousand National Guards and regular troops under a reluctant General Trochu made a spectacularly unsuccessful attempt to break out and reach Versailles on 19 January. On 28 January, French national authorities signed an armistice turning the forts of Paris over to German occupation. But Parisians, mobilized in political clubs and connected by the National Guard's Central Committee, began to organize the city's resistance and

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self-rule. In Paris and elsewhere, radicals agitated for pursuit of the war against Prussia as well as for more decentralized and democratic forms of government. A new national regime, led by Adolphe Thiers and based in Bordeaux, cut off National Guard stipends. It also passed ineffectual measures calling for Parisians to resume rent payments and other routine obligations.

Seeking to break Parisian resistance, Thiers ordered his forces to seize the National Guard's cannon. The army's effort to do so before dawn on 18 March called Parisians into the streets, incited the killing of two army generals in Montmartre, and precipitated what the *Leeds Mercury* was soon calling another revolution. At that point, the National Guard's Central Committee occupied the Hôtel de Ville, constituting a de facto municipal government. After city-wide elections (Sunday, 26 March) brought revolutionary leaders into office, on 28 March they declared Paris an autonomous Commune. Until government troops invaded the city and took it back street by street two months later, the Commune ruled Paris through a structure built on revolutionary committees and the neighborhood-based National Guard backed by flourishing popular associations (Gaillard 1971; Gould 1995; Greenberg 1971; Gullickson 1996; Johnson 1996; Lafargue 1997; Lissagaray 1969; Rougerie 1964).

Speaking in Free Trade Hall, Manchester, almost exactly a year after the Commune's declaration, British Conservative leader Benjamin Disraeli compared the British Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867:

Lord Grey, in his measure of 1832, which was no doubt a statesmanlike measure, committed a great and for a time it appeared an irretrievable error. By that measure he fortified the legitimate influence of the aristocracy, and accorded to the middle classes great and salutary franchises; but he not only made no provision for the representation of the working classes in the Constitution, but he absolutely abolished those ancient franchises which the working classes had peculiarly enjoyed from time immemorial. Gentlemen, that was the origin of Chartism, and of that electoral uneasiness which existed in this country more or less for 35 years. (*Times* [of London], 4 April 1872, p. 5)

Disraeli had it right. Renewing a long-term campaign in 1830, a vast mobilization of middle-class and working-class activists had created a crisis to which the British government finally responded by passing the Reform Act of 1832. The act not only excluded the great bulk of workers from voting for Parliament while effectively enfranchising many masters and merchants who had previously lacked the vote, but also increased the property requirements for suffrage in a number of boroughs where ordinary

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workers had previously voted in considerable numbers. The worker-based Chartist movement that surged repeatedly between 1838 and 1848 only to collapse in a year of French revolution had indeed represented those excluded by the 1832 settlement. Despite arising in the context of widespread struggles between workers and capitalists, the movement had focused not on workers' rights as such but on democratic reform, including manhood suffrage.

In practice, furthermore, the 1832 Reform Act gave electoral advantages to Liberals over their Conservative rivals. The act created 144 parliamentary seats elected by property-holding county voters, 323 seats elected by property holders in recognized urban boroughs, and four seats elected by university officers. On the whole, Liberals did better in boroughs and in county districts that included many city-based property holders. In that respect the Conservatives of 1867 could reasonably see the 1832 Reform as having underrepresented their likely supporters. If they could push through a new reform that would shift parliamentary seats from boroughs to enlarged county electorates (where landlords had a good chance of swaying votes of their tenants and workers), Conservatives could actually gain electoral power. They also had a mixed interest in the working-class franchise: a modest increase was likely to favor the Liberals by drawing in skilled workers who at that point benefited more directly from Liberal programs, but an increase large enough to enfranchise general laborers could well increase Conservative support through patronage and through divisions within the working class.

Liberals nevertheless had strong incentives to broaden both the urban electorate and its parliamentary representation. County by county and borough by borough, parliamentary representation remained the same from 1832 to 1866. Over the same period, however, rising rural property values and urban capitalization lifted many men above the property thresholds for voting. Economic expansion thus increased the county electorate by 47 percent while increasing the borough electorate by 82 percent, but the numbers of MPs per borough and per county remained unchanged. That meant the number of electors per MP rose more rapidly in the Liberals' preferred territories than in the Conservatives'. A move toward representation proportional to local population and, especially, toward increase in the number of borough seats would therefore benefit Liberals. From 1865 onward, Reform Unions and similar organizations brought middle-class radicals and working-class activists into a nationwide campaign of public meetings and marches on behalf of parliamentary reform. All this served as

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context for intricate parliamentary struggles during which Liberals failed to push through their leaders' reform bill in 1866 but Conservatives managed to get their own much-amended version passed in 1867.

Disraeli, who had led Parliament as it passed the 1867 Act, twitted the Liberals who long talked reform but did nothing about it. The Conservatives, he said, were more decisive:

And, gentlemen, what has been the result? In 1848 there was a French Revolution and a Republic was established. No one can have forgotten what the effect was in this country. I remember the day when not a woman could leave her house in London, and when cannon were placed on Westminster Bridge. A year ago there was another revolution in France, and a Republic was again established of the most menacing character. What happened in this country? You could not get half a dozen men to assemble in a street and grumble. Why? Because the people had got what they wanted. They were content and they were grateful. (*Times*, 4 April 1872, p. 5).

Thus France gave lessons in revolution, while Britain gave lessons in democracy. Or so went a frequent British boast.

To be sure, five years earlier many conservatives – including some full-fledged Conservative party members in Parliament – had looked at the 1867 Reform Bill as a prologue to revolution. Speaking of Disraeli, Lord Carnarvon then thundered, "If you borrow your political ethics from the ethics of the political adventurer, you may depend upon it, the whole of your representative institutions will crumble beneath your feet" (Evans 1983: 351). As enacted, the Reform Bill did almost double the electorate, allowing most male working-class householders to vote for parliamentary candidates and inaugurating a period in which both Liberals and Conservatives had to calculate the effects of their policies on workers' votes. Disraeli's final maneuvers and concessions had produced a more radical bill than even leading Liberals had advocated. In retrospect, nevertheless, the British ruling classes generally congratulated themselves on avoiding revolution by judicious enlargement of the electorate, and thus of political life as a whole. They also frequently pointed across the Channel to the bad example set by the contentious French.

To Explain Contention, Democratization, and Their Connections

However we evaluate the British self-image, comparison of French and British politics in the time of the Paris Commune does reveal impressive national differences in the forms, dynamics, and outcomes of contention. That comparison does raise questions about the foundations of democratic

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politics. Confluence between investigations of national differences in contentious politics and of democracy's diverse origins identifies the river this book navigates. Seen from upstream, *Contention and Democracy in Europe* concerns explanation of the various trajectories followed by contentious politics – politics in which people make concerted claims bearing on each other's interests. Seen from downstream, the same book concerns the diverse origins of democratic institutions. If the book does its work well, it will establish that the two streams, although separable for the sake of argument, eventually join so extensively as to become indistinguishable. To explain the varieties of contentious politics is also to explain a rare, contingent outcome of contentious politics: democracy.

Contrasting French and British experiences between 1825 and 1871 offer a slice of the European world this book seeks to explain. On the French side: movement from revolution to revolution through a brief, turbulent democratic experiment, the return of authoritarian government, a phase of hesitant democratization and expanding contention followed by war, disintegration of the regime, and new attempts at revolution. On the British side: vast mobilizations for religious rights and parliamentary reform capped by modest concessions to previous outsiders and tightened control over Irish dissidents, widespread but ultimately ineffectual campaigns for workers' political rights, formation of a militant nationalist movement in Ireland, and contained struggles yielding some democratization, at least in Great Britain if not in Ireland. In both French and British experiences we witness intimate interaction of popular contention and democracy-affecting changes of regime.

The 19th-century histories of France and Great Britain hardly exhaust the ranges of contentious politics and democracy. In the perspective of a 21st-century world where South Africa, Slovenia, Costa Rica, India, Canada, and Portugal all count as democracies of sorts, the experiences of France and Britain display strong resemblances and connections: similar and interacting patterns in legalization for organized workers, in policing of public order, in expansion of the franchise, in formation of popularly responsible governments, in creation of political parties, and much more. Political leaders and activists in the two countries communicated with each other repeatedly, sometimes borrowed each other's political solutions to shared problems, and even more often reacted by differentiating themselves from their cross-channel neighbors. Still, France and Britain arrived at relatively vigorous, viable democratic polities by different but continuously contentious paths, provided models of political organization

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that significantly influenced other countries, and accumulated histories of contention – democratic and otherwise – that have challenged generations of analysts.

To explain similarities and differences in French and British experience since 1650 constitutes a reasonable start toward more general explanations of variation within Europe as a whole. Since European polities and their immediate transplants originated most of the contemporary institutions we recognize as democratic, furthermore, any explanation that gets right the last few centuries of European involvement in contention and democracy offers some promise of helping to identify likely origins of democracy elsewhere. This book uses sustained comparison of French and British histories since 1650 or so as a springboard for more general comparisons within Europe. From there it leaps to ideas concerning the rest of the world.

Stated without definition of terms and in stark preliminary form, here are the book's guiding arguments:

1. Differing combinations of coercion, capital, and commitment in various regions promote the formation of significantly different kinds of regimes, and different directions of regime change, within those regions.
2. Trajectories of regimes within a two-dimensional space defined by (a) degree of governmental capacity and (b) extent of protected consultation significantly affect both their prospects for democracy and the character of their democracy if it arrives.
3. In the long run, increases in governmental capacity and protected consultation reinforce each other, as state expansion generates resistance, bargaining, and provisional settlements, on one side, while on the other side protected consultation encourages demands for expansion of state intervention, which in turn promote increases in capacity.
4. At the extremes, where capacity develops farther and faster than consultation, the path to democracy (if any) passes through authoritarianism; if protected consultation develops farther and faster than capacity and the regime survives, the path then passes through a risky zone of capacity building.
5. Although the organizational forms – elections, terms of office, areal representation, deliberative assemblies, and so on – adopted by democratizing regimes often emulate or adapt institutions that have strong precedents in villages, cities, regional jurisdictions, or

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adjacent national regimes, they almost never evolve directly from
those institutions.

6. Creation of citizenship – rights and obligations linking whole cate-
gories of a regime's subject population to governmental agents – is
a necessary but not sufficient condition of democratization.

7. In high-capacity regimes, nondemocratic citizenship sometimes
forms, and with extensive integration of citizens into regimes even
reduces or inhibits democracy.

8. Nevertheless, the prior presence of citizenship, other things equal,
generally facilitates democratization.

9. Both creation of citizenship and democratization depend on changes
in three arenas – categorical inequality, trust networks, and public
politics – as well as on interactions among those changes.

10. Regularities in democratization consist not of standard general
sequences or sufficient conditions but of recurrent causal mecha-
nisms that in varying combinations and sequences produce changes
in categorical inequality, networks of trust, and public politics.

11. Under specifiable circumstances, revolution, conquest, confronta-
tion, and colonization accelerate and concentrate some of those cru-
cial causal mechanisms.

12. Almost all of the crucial democracy-promoting causal mechanisms
involve popular contention – politically constituted actors' mak-
ing of public, collective claims on other actors, including agents of
government – as correlates, causes, and effects.

13. In the course of democratization, repertoires of political con-
tention (arrays of widely available claim-making performances) shift
from predominantly parochial, particular, and bifurcated interac-
tions based largely on embedded identities to predominantly cos-
mopolitan, modular, and autonomous interactions based largely on
detached identities.

The book's point is to pursue this line of argument by means of broad
but careful historical comparisons among European national experiences
between 1650 and 2000.

Having already promised – or threatened! – too much, let me retrench
immediately. At best, this book does no more than make understandable
and plausible the approach just sketched. It tells defensible stories about
European political histories, pointing out parallels between those stories
and the arguments. It neither lays out systematic evidence for the thirteen

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assertions in my list nor provides decisive refutations of competing expla-
nations. It merely illustrates the sorts of causal mechanisms a more detailed
set of explanations would require – showing, for example, that tactical al-
liances between dissident power holders and political outsiders promoted
democratization under some circumstances despite the absence of explic-
itly democratic programs on either side of the alliance. For the most part
it settles for demonstrating that democratization commonly occurred as a
result of struggles during which (as in 19th-century Britain and France) few
if any of the participants were self-consciously trying to create democratic
institutions.

Such an approach involves high-risk wagers in theory and method. It
rests on the assumption that democracy emerges contingently from politi-
cal struggle in the medium run rather than being a product either of age-old
character traits or of short-term constitutional innovations. Partisans of po-
litical culture, on one side, and of democratization as legal reform, on the
other, have often bet against that assumption. My inquiry guesses, further-
more, that the social world's order does not reside in general laws, repeated
large-scale sequences, or regular relationships among variables. We should
not search for a single set of circumstances or a repeated series of events
that everywhere produces democracy. Nor should we look for actors having
democratic intentions, seeking to discover how and when they get chances
to realize those intentions. We should look instead for robust, recurrent
causal mechanisms that combine differently, with different aggregate out-
comes, in different settings. (More on mechanisms in a moment.)

As a consequence, we should expect that prevailing circumstances for de-
mocratization vary significantly from era to era and region to region as func-
tions of previous histories, international environments, available models
of political organization, and predominant patterns of social relations. We
should also expect to discover not one but multiple paths to democracy. If
all these assumptions hold, then close comparison of historical experiences
with an eye to recurrent causal mechanisms and their combinations offers
the greatest promise of advancing explanations of democratization. If the
assumptions are wrong, the book's review of European experiences with
democratization will still provide grindable grist for other analysts' mills.

Previous analyses of democratization provide inspiration and context for
this book. Since Aristotle, western thinkers have repeatedly addressed two
fundamental questions. First, what connections exist between democrati-
zation and human well-being? Second, under what conditions and by what
means do durable democratic regimes come into existence? In recent years,

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western political analysts have searched for general answers to these two questions that would simultaneously fit the experiences of long-established democracies, account for the tumultuous histories of democratization and de-democratization across the globe since World War II, and provide guidance for the promotion of durable democracy in the contemporary world. On the count of well-being, for example, students of democracy have explored the hopeful possibility that democratic regimes make war against each other less frequently than other pairs of regimes, hence that over the long run world democratization would reduce the prevalence of war across the globe (Gowa 1999). Yet most theorists rest with the assumption that democracy constitutes a good in itself, and therefore enhances human well-being simply by taking shape.

When it comes to the origins of durable democratic regimes, disagreements flourish, but an implicit agreement has emerged on the nature of the explanatory problem. On the whole, recent theorists have rejected conceptions of democratization as a gradual deposit from long-term social processes or as a set of political changes that might occur piecemeal, in different orders, through different paths. They have preferred the idea that under specifiable conditions some fairly regular and rapid process transports regimes from undemocratic into democratic territory. Most analysts have tried to specify those conditions and to identify the crucial process. As a consequence, empirical studies of democratization have alternated between cross-sectional comparisons of democratic and undemocratic regimes (asking, e.g., whether some critical level of prosperity separates the one from the other) and close examination of circumstances prevailing just before or during transitions from undemocratic to democratic regimes (asking, e.g., whether failures of military rulers to manage national crises regularly precipitate democratization).

What sorts of *explanations* do such efforts involve? We can distinguish roughly among four styles of argument in recent attempts to explain democratization and de-democratization: necessary conditions, variables, sequences, and clusters. *Necessary condition* arguments sometimes spill over into specification of *sufficient* conditions for democratization – identification of the circumstances under which a regime always democratizes. If successful, such an effort would not only establish a general law, but also indicate what conditions one would have to discover or promote on the way to producing new democratic regimes. The justly renowned synthesis of Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens (1992: 75–78), for example, makes allowance for variation among regions and periods, but still comes

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