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Book Review

David Stasavage, *The Decline and Rise of Democracy: A Global History from Antiquity to Today*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. Pp. xii+406. $28.95 (hardcover).

The Decline and Rise of Democracy has as its thesis the lack of European or even American exceptionalism when it comes to democracy—early democracy, that is. In a related fashion, there are four key premises which underlay this book. These are that democracy is a natural development in many communities throughout the world and did not originate in ancient Greece; early democracies are formed in part through consensus between the governed and those doing the governing; democracies tend to form in areas where centers of power are weak; and autocracies rule with strong bureaucracies and are most easily formed by coopting pre-existing bureaucracies and/or power structures. In presenting the decline of early and rise of modern democracy, this book leaves us with an age-old question: is democracy the best form of government for all societies and states?

The initial argument for this book is that democracy comes naturally to humans. This is not the form of democracy we have today, referred to as modern democracy, nor is it inevitable. There are two key identifying features of early democracy; first, those who rule must do so at the behest of the people, usually through a form of mandate or consensus. The second is that those who ruled over early democratic societies generally did so based on merit rather than inheritance. Stasavage notes these forms of governance tend to thrive better in small-scale settings, such as Athens, the Hurons of North America, or Tlaxcala of Mesoamerica. Early democracy also tended to thrive where rulers lacked coercive capabilities that frequently came from strong bureaucracies and where the economic production and movement of populations are both difficult to regulate and control.

One side note of this book involves the development and importance of technology. This is well developed throughout, though especially in Chapter 4. The argument is that technology tends to undermine early forms of democracy. Writing, for example, when monopolized by a few, can lead to control over the many, such as the example of Ur's Third Dynasty in Mesopotamia, or with the bureaucratic structure of

China. In the latter case, the standardization of script in the third century BCE led to a strengthening of the bureaucracy and ability to communicate over large areas. Similarly, knowledge of soil quality and intensive agriculture in Shang China far surpassed the extensive-based system of Europe, which had failed to effectively adopt the Three Field Rotational system until the 11th century CE, almost 1,500 years later. In simple terms, then, the backward nature of Europe compared to the more advanced structures of China led to the continuation of early democracy in the west and increasing bureaucratization elsewhere.

The second key premise of this book is that what truly differentiates early forms of democracy from modern democracy is the consensus of the people. If a society, for example, has a weak ruler, this person must enlist the aid of an assembly or council to rule. A quick review of seventeenth century England demonstrates how political agitations led to the Glorious Revolution and modern parliamentarian system. This form of "direct representation" can be seen through the formation of the give-and-take system in which the ruler and/or the assembly or council rules by directly responding to the mandates given to them from the people. Stasavage uses the example of Roderigo de Tordesillas from Segovia, in which the town gave this person the mandate not to raise taxes. Tordesillas failed to adhere to this mandate, allowed taxes to be raised, and as a result was murdered by the townspeople. This here is a form of early democracy.

The third premise of this book is that democracy tends to form where centers of power are weak. Stasavage's argument is that the British colonies in North America developed with a weaker central power due to the limited British bureaucracy in America. In modern democracy, the people participate in the selection of their representatives through periodic intervals but do not issue specific mandates. For example, in the first (modern) democratic assembly in America at Jamestown in 1619, a governor, a Virginia Company council, and two representatives from each of the eleven settlements assembled. Though very little resulted, this reveals the beginning of modern democracy. American democracy proved to be unique. In this sense, Frederick Jackson Turner may have approved of the argument that the high ratio of land-to-labor not only led to the adoption of slavery, but also led to stronger local control at the expense of the central government. In other words, the formation of modern democracy.

The final argument of this book involves either failed democracies or successful autocracies, depending on one's views. Why do some areas fail to adopt democracies? Examples abound. The Umayyad dynasty led to nearly 1,400 years of autocracy and the Shang nearly 3,000 years. One dynasty would take over another but leave the existing structure in place. Consider the Spanish in New Spain as well following initial conquest; superimposing the crown representatives over the indigenous bureaucracy proved an effective way to govern. The examples of the Umayyad, Shang, and Spanish demonstrate continuation of bureaucracy. Both Russia and China, however, had movements that could loosely (if vaguely) be called democratic. They both had traditions of autocracy

and thus failed to make the transition. In comparison, India did not have a tradition of strong bureaucracies and therefore became the world's largest democratic country.

Is modern democracy the ideal form of government? Although for Stasavage it is, he notes that not all would or should agree. After all, modern democracy has left the American public very critical and distrustful of government. And would autocracy be better? As one finishes this book, a feeling of great thoroughness will undoubtedly rest upon the reader. A great overview of world history even more broad than those of the late Eric Hobsbawn has been delivered yet, simultaneously, one more attuned to the nuances of exceptions which play out in every attempt to make broad, historical statements. And one wonders whether this overview is not a bit binary. Could there not be more? What about early forms of autocracy, similar to the argument for early democracy? What about varying complexities of both democracy as well as autocracy? Can a modern democracy exist with a strong bureaucracy? And what would happen were a modern democracy to lose its local powers to that of the central government?

This book is a must-read for all interested in politics, the role of history in shaping current events, those that fear the left of the political spectrum, and those that fear the right. It is, indeed, highly readable for all (a rarity in many of the monographs emerging from academic presses today). Graduates and undergraduates, professionals and amateurs will have much to contemplate upon reading this book.

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