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Democratizing Development

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Introduction

Democratization and development are both forward-looking concepts. That is to say, they refer to processes of cumulative social change that can result in future political and economic outcomes that are qualitatively different from (and superior to) present conditions. As such both concepts are necessarily long-term, dynamic, and macro-historical in scope. They also both express a normative standpoint. (It would not make sense to classify as “development” a transformation to a state of affairs that was judged qualitatively inferior to its starting point). Indeed, from a genealogical perspective they are both offshoots of the western/enlightenment ideal of progress. In an earlier phase of social science theorising they were both subsumed under the umbrella discourse of “modernisation”. But as political science and economics subsequently became more professionalised and differentiated democratization and development were isolated in separate analytical compartments, and efforts were made to strip both of them of their historical and subjective connotations. They were both isolated, objectified, dissolved into measurable proxies and separated from their ethical foundations. Such analytical procedures were initially a healthy antidote to the ideological distortions and teleological biases implicit in much classical discussion of “progress” and more recently of “modernization”, but the antidote produced its own harmful “side effects”. Since the end of the Cold War efforts have been made by the UNDP and others to reconcile the requirements of contemporary social science methodology with the holistic characteristics of these concepts, and to bring the discourses of democracy and development back into contact with each other, while restoring their energising value commitments. This chapter is a further effort in that direction. But the key assumption here is that there is no easy reconciliation of theoretically incompatible positions, and that a successful approach involved a return to first principles. So the thrust of this chapter is to “reculer pour mieux sauter”.

At the most abstract level both democracy and development can be conceptualised so broadly that they converge into a single image of the good society. This is the dominant western image of progress in the post-Cold War world, the “true and only heaven” recently dissected by Christopher Lasch.¹ Even after the Soviet collapse it is by no means the only available image of the good society, but it is the only universal image. The remaining alternatives are either theocratic (confined to true believers), or in some way particularist (confined to particular localities, ethnicities, nationalities, or culture groups). Those with the most secure access to this good society seem increasingly preoccupied with its insecurities and insufficiencies, and they have some sound reasons for their concern. But the proportion of total population living in so-called “industrial” countries has fallen from 31% in 1960 to

¹ See Lasch (1991).

22% in 1992, and the proportion living in OECD countries has fallen from 21% to 15% over the same period.² Many OECD citizens (probably an increasing proportion) lack full and secure access to the benefits of the western good society, and the great majority of non-OECD inhabitants have only the most nominal and precarious claims to the socio-political status of modern citizenship.

This paper reflects on the inter-relationships between two key components of the secularised liberal image of the “good society” – political democracy and economic development. These two components can be detached from their theoretical moorings, narrowly defined in order to reduce the overlap between them, and then represented by simplified empirical proxies (electoral competition and alternation, GDP per capita, etc.), which can then be tested for association and co-variance. Recently there has been something of a growth industry in this type of investigation, although the insights generated may seem meagre, considering the efforts expended.³ If we search for patterns of association between democracy and economic development in the post-Cold War World, our samples will be heavily weighted towards a particular *kind* of democracy, and a currently fashionable notion of economic development. It by no means follows that either pre-1989 or 21st century variants of democracy will be associated in the same way with economic development, as understood in earlier (or perhaps in later) periods. Ahistorical “objective” indicators of democracy and development can, of course, be constructed without reference to such contextual meanings. Thus, on standard indicators Chile was as much a democracy in 1940 and in 1970 as in 1990, even though what this signified in terms of social representation and development objectives was radically different in each case. Similarly, over *some* periods and on *some* aggregate indicators Botswana can be bracketed with Singapore (and why not Saudi Arabia?) as exceptionally successful instances of economic development, without regard for the extreme dissimilarities of socio-political structure, and of collective beliefs and aspirations, which separate them. But this chapter seeks to identify lines of interaction between democracy and development rather than to generate purportedly objective correlations. For that purpose it is important to specify the context, meaning, and sub-types of the categories involved. This paper attempts to provide a corrective to the ahistorical and reductionist tendencies in such studies, by re-connecting each of the two key categories within their respective theoretical and historical contexts. The intention is to restore a sense of perspective to our judgements about the immediate present, and to re-establish the reflexivity latent in our notions, both of political democracy and of economic development.

² See UNDP(1994: 201)

³ One recent review surveys 46 studies and rejects the hypothesis that political democracy is negatively associated with economic development. It identified education, investment, and “governance”, as potential bearers of a positive association. See Campos (1994)

Although these two concepts share some common assumptions they have distinctive roots and associations and can be analysed in isolation from each other. However, I will conclude the paper with some suggestions about how they may proceed to converge.

The Long Durée

The idea of political democracy has a history that is long, chequered, and rather precisely known. Indeed several recent scholarly analyses have claimed, without unreasonable distortion, that the 2,500th anniversary of its creation by Cleisthenes fell due in 1993.⁴ During the course of that long period diverse embodiments of the idea have been claimed in a wide range of settings. Thus, political democracy has been thought compatible with a slave-based economy, not only in antiquity but also in the New World (this was the Washington consensus until 1st January 1863). Over the centuries it has been variously identified with urbanism and literacy, with the settlement of new lands (and annual Icelandic parliament was initiated in 930 A.D.); with constitutional monarchy, with republicanism; with some forms of European imperial conquest (e.g. the extension of the “Westminster system”), and with some forms of resistance to imperial rule; with Christianity, and with secular liberalism; and, in our lifetimes, both with the relentless advance of socialism, and equally with the inevitable hegemony of capitalism.

For most of this long period educated opinion has been hostile to, or fearful of, political democracy (often equated with mob-rule, or the triumph of mediocrity. After the (mostly failed) democratic revolutions of 1848, however a new synthesis of political, constitutionalism combined with economic liberalism began to pave the way towards a more conservative variant of “democracy”. The concept has been associated with a variety of different social experiments across time and space, each of which needs to be duly contextualised. For example, a good case can be made that for about half a century after 1870 across South America a certain (“oligarchical”) variant of civilian constitutional rule was quite strongly associated with a model of export-oriented development based on the exchange of various primary products for imported capital goods (notably railways, ports, telegraphs, etc.). This was not “democracy” in the abstract (indeed it contained quite a few features that would seem distinctly undemocratic to the modern eye), and the associated model of development was neither of universal validity nor of permanent duration (it entered into crisis as the internal combustion engine displaced the train, and Britain lost her ascendancy). So we

⁴ The chequered legacy of the Greek tradition is emphasised in Orlando Patterson (1991), which stresses the paradoxical role of slavery. For the evolution of democracy as a political ideal, which originated from a practical expedient, see John Dunn (1992). For the state of contemporary classical scholarship see Osborne (1994). For the history of anti-democratic sentiment in western civilization, see Tolbert Roberts (1994).

must be attentive to the boundary conditions limiting the co-existence of this particular type of democracy and this distinctive process of development. Nevertheless within such spatial and temporal limits we can pursue some quite significant hypotheses concerning, if not causation in the strong sense, then at least recurrent patterns of connectedness and elective affinity. My impression is that foreign bankers, merchants and investors consistently demanded sanctity of contract and predictability of government. Both civilian constitutionalism and export-oriented growth were organised largely in response to that functional requirement. Assuming this interpretation can withstand scrutiny, we would have identified one important type of linkage between a particular variant of political order, and a specific episode in history of economic development. This would be a useful story to bear in mind when investigating the association between other variants of “democracy” and alternative development strategies in different periods of time or in other parts of the world. But any attempt to turn it into a general law, or to bracket this type of experience with say, that of the peasant-based electoral regimes of interwar Europe, and their strategies of economic nationalism, would be misconceived in principle and disinformative in practice. At least from the late nineteenth century onwards the notion of democracy has been appropriated by western establishments and largely deradicalised, a process which reached its culmination during the Cold War, when efforts were made to assimilate nearly all the broad spectrum of anti-communist regimes into the “democratic” camp, to the exclusion of more “neutral”, or unreliable, regimes (even those displaying considerably greater degrees of political openness). Now, in the absence of a Soviet alternative, which could try to rival western pretensions to universalism and modernity, the ideal of political democracy can claim the nominal allegiance of all the West, and perhaps much of the rest as well.⁵ But if its chequered and subversive history is forgotten it becomes a deracinated ideal, a procedural formality, even an irrelevance to those still in search of that elusive goal of the good society.

The idea of economic development is more recent, and its history is less well studied. Of course the reality of economic development can be traced back far before classical Greece, but the idea could not be elaborated until pre-market beliefs about such matters as the fixity of wants and the existence of a “just price” had been superseded. In the European tradition the idea that wants were in principle unlimited, and the related idea that relative prices should reflect relative scarcities (in relation to unlimited wants) seem not to have displaced pre-market beliefs until well after the Reformation. Before that the Catholic monopoly on higher

⁵ Allegiance to an ideal can be called nominal when it is only honoured at no cost. Even in the post-Cold War world those favouring political democracy could face some quite demanding tests of their allegiance, however – in Algeria, for example; or in Chechnya; Israel or even in advanced democracies caught up in panics about terrorism and insecurity.

learning and morality blacked the emergence of modern economic reasoning⁶ (and pre-Christian classical teachings also rested on the same pre-market assumptions, so that in place of the modern idea of economic development the Greeks and Romans though in terms of historical cycles of growth and decay). It is probably anglocentric of me to date comparative and reflexive thinking about economic development to the Scottish enlightenment, and to take Hume, Ferguson and, above all, Smith as the founding authors in this tradition, but even if we shifted to their counterparts in continental Europe (Cantillon, Quesnay, Turgot, etc.) we would still start somewhere in the Enlightenment Age since it was only then that economics and the economy became established as a distinct and separate subject and system.⁷ Compared to the 2,500 year debate on democracy, our ideas about economic development stretch back no more than one tenth as long.

The two central assertions about economic development in the Wealth of Nations are that “the division of labour is the great cause of the increase of public opulence”, and that the prime component of this division is commercial exchange between town and country (“the exchange of rude for manufactured produce”), which produces gains that are “mutual and reciprocal”. Savings are required to accumulate the capital needed to finance such transactions. Although these twin contentions yielded powerful insights into processes of economic differentiation which were already perceptible in Europe, and which could be extended across the globe, they fell far short of a comprehensive or universally applicable account of economic development. Indeed, Smith still retained the notion that there must eventually be some upper limit to “the degree of opulence” attainable by any particular country – a limit set by its factor endowments, and by the prospect that rising prosperity would stimulate population growth until income per capita stabilized. He also regarded agricultural improvement as in some sense the bedrock of economic prosperity (indeed he almost followed Quesnay in the view that real – i.e. durable – wealth is in land) and he was not as alert as he might have been at the first stirrings of technological revolution in British industry (notably in cotton).⁸

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