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## Origins of Democratic Rule

WE ARE TAUGHT that Europeans invented democracy. We learn that it was invented by the Greeks, who gave us the word itself, and we hear also that democracy in Greece died out after about as much time as the American Republic has existed. Democracy then gradually reemerged in Europe during a long evolution beginning with events like Magna Carta and the rise of Italian city republics. It culminated in the establishment of political systems based on competitive elections and universal suffrage. The practice of democracy eventually spread to other continents.

One problem with this story is that when Europeans began conquering peoples on other continents, they sometimes found that local people had political institutions that were more democratic than what they knew in their home countries. In North America, as French Jesuit missionaries entered the territory of the people they called the Huron, they discovered a political system based on both central and local councils with broad participation—including for women. In the year 1636 one missionary commented that the Huron central council was like the “Estates General” of the country.<sup>1</sup> His home country of France also had an Estates General, but it had not met for over twenty years, and it would not meet again until 1789. In Mesoamerica, Spanish conquerors more commonly encountered societies with hierarchical political systems—but not always. In 1519 as Hernán Cortés entered the territory of Tlaxcala he observed that as far as he could judge, the form of government was “almost like that of Venice, or Genoa, or Pisa, because there

is no one supreme ruler.”<sup>2</sup> His home country of Spain had such a single supreme ruler, King Charles I.

The examples of the Huron and of Tlaxcala are not isolated exceptions. Throughout human history many societies on multiple continents have independently developed political systems in which those who rule have been obliged to seek consent from those they govern. If we see seeking consent as a basic ingredient of democracy, then we can say that democracy itself occurs naturally among humans, even if it is far from inevitable. The question then becomes when and why democratic practices survive and prosper, and why this happened even in places where people had not read Aristotle.

The other question we need to ask is if early forms of democracy existed in many regions, then why did modern democracy—the selection of representatives through universal suffrage—emerge first in Europe and the United States? The answer, I will argue, has to do with the particular trajectory taken by Europe when compared with regions such as China and the Middle East. Ironically, it was Europe’s backwardness that laid the ground for the rise of modern democracy.

## Early Democracy and Modern Democracy

In its original sense as used by the Greeks the word “democracy” simply means that the people govern, or more literally that the people have power. Each citizen participates, and the people as a collective rule.<sup>3</sup> In the middle of the twentieth century, one scholar described the indigenous societies of southern Africa as having a “peculiar type of democracy.”<sup>4</sup> Free election of leaders was unknown, but tribal chiefs had to rule collectively with assemblies and councils that constrained their actions: the people, or a subset of them, participated in governance. Rather than calling this system “peculiar,” I will call it “early democracy.” This term is useful because early democracy differed from the modern form of democracy that we are familiar with today.

Early democracy existed in lieu of a state bureaucracy. It was a system in which a ruler governed jointly with a council or assembly composed of members of society who were themselves independent from the ruler

and not subject to his or her whim. They provided information while also assisting with governance. In some early democracies rulers were selected by a council; in others heredity played the primary role. Some councils in early democracies involved broad participation by the community, but it was on other occasions a more elite gathering. For those who had the right, participation took a deep and frequent form.

Early democracy was so common in all regions of the globe that we should see it as a naturally occurring condition in human societies. I am not the first person to say something like this, but I will try to provide a new and more comprehensive view of this idea while also showing when and why early democracy prevailed.<sup>5</sup> Athens, as well as many other democracies in ancient Greece, presents us with the most extensive example of early democracy, but there have been many other societies elsewhere in which early democracy was also the order of the day. This was true even if participation was not as extensive as in Athens. Examples of early democracy include those among the Huron and in Tlaxcala to which I have already referred. We will also see examples from ancient Mesopotamia, precolonial Central Africa, ancient India, and elsewhere.

Modern democracy differs from early democracy in several important ways. It is a political system in which representatives are chosen in competitive elections under universal suffrage. With universal adult suffrage, political participation is very broad, but in modern democracy popular participation in governance is also more episodic than in early democracy. Representatives meet frequently to engage in governance, but the broader populace does not participate directly, apart from at election time. Episodic participation is the first fracture point of modern democracy because it can produce citizen distrust and disengagement; there must be continual efforts to overcome this problem. The second fracture point of modern democracy is that it coexists with a state bureaucracy that manages day-to-day affairs, and the risk of this is that the people may no longer believe that they themselves are governing. This will be less likely to occur if democratic practices emerge before the creation of a state bureaucracy—then rulers and the people can build a bureaucracy jointly. But if bureaucracy comes first, this is less

likely to happen, and this means that bureaucracy can either substitute for or complement modern democracy. It all depends on the sequence of events.

If early democracy arose independently in many human societies, modern democracy is a more specifically European invention. Early democracy was a form of rule that proved durable over thousands of years. Modern democracy is something much more recent, and we should think of it as an ongoing experiment. To understand when and why this experiment will succeed, we need to first consider how both early and modern democracy emerged.

## Origins of Early Democracy

Early democracy emerged when rulers needed consent and cooperation from their people because they could not govern on their own. People had the opportunity to voice their consent or opposition in some form of an assembly or council. All rulers—both democratic and autocratic—need at least tacit consent from their people by not revolting, but consent in early democracy was not tacit: it was active.<sup>6</sup> In early democracy, even if a council of the governed had no formal prerogative to veto decisions taken by a ruler, it could still exercise power if its members possessed information that a ruler did not.<sup>7</sup>

Three underlying factors helped lead to early democracy. It was first of all more prevalent in small-scale settings. We see this whether we speak of polities in Europe, in precolonial Africa, or in North America prior to European conquest. Small scale made it possible for members of a society to regularly attend the councils and assemblies that were the lifeblood of early democracy. In some early democracies having a system of representation helped confront this problem of scale: instead of having all attend, choose one person. But individual representatives still needed to travel to an assembly, and constituents still needed to monitor them once they were there, and when people were spread over a large area this was more difficult. Representation was an adaptation to the problem of scale, but it did not solve it.<sup>8</sup>

The second factor that led to early democracy was when rulers lacked knowledge of what people were producing.<sup>9</sup> This gave them an incentive to share power to better know what sort of taxes they could levy. We should think of “taxation” in broad terms here—the problem was faced by any ruler who sought to appropriate or redistribute economic resources. Features of the natural environment sometimes drove uncertainty, as they made agricultural production harder to predict.<sup>10</sup> In other cases, rulers faced uncertainty because they lacked a state bureaucracy that could measure and assess production. Throughout history, uncertainty of this sort has been a great problem in taxation for rulers. Form an overly pessimistic judgment of how much you can tax, and you will be forgoing potential revenue; form an overly optimistic judgment of how much you can tax, and you risk provoking either a revolt or an exit of your population.

The third factor that led to early democracy involved the balance between how much rulers needed their people and how much people could do without their rulers. When rulers had a greater need for revenue, they were more likely to accept governing in a collaborative fashion, and this was even more likely if they needed people to fight wars. With inadequate means of simply compelling people to fight, rulers offered them political rights. The flip side of all this was that whenever the populace found it easier to do without a particular ruler—say by moving to a new location—then rulers felt compelled to govern more consensually. The idea that exit options influence hierarchy is, in fact, so general it also applies to species other than humans. Among species as diverse as ants, birds, and wasps, social organization tends to be less hierarchical when the costs of what biologists call “dispersal” are low.<sup>11</sup>

Over time, early democracy persisted in some societies, but it died out in many others. It did so as societies grew in scale; it also did so as rulers acquired new ways of monitoring production; it did so finally when people found it hard to exit to new areas. It is for all these reasons that the title of this book refers first to a decline in early democracy and then to the rise of modern democracy.

## Is Early Democracy an Appropriate Term?

Those familiar with classical Greek thought may fear that my definition of early democracy is an overly broad one. The Greeks distinguished between rule by the one, the few, or the many, and for them the word *demokratia* was only associated with rule by the many, typically in a large assembly.<sup>12</sup> Rule by the few was oligarchy, and it took place in the form of a council with limited participation. Even if governance under oligarchy had a collective air to it, this was not democracy as the Greeks would have understood it. Scholars have used the assembly versus council division to distinguish empirically between democracies and oligarchies.<sup>13</sup>

So why do I adopt a definition of early democracy that the Greeks would have seen as including both democracies and oligarchies? I do this because many human societies that at first blush appear to have had rule by the few also had participation by the many. In some of the early democracies that I will describe, a small number of individuals participated directly in governance, but they had to then face an assembly or council in the locality in which they resided. Among the Huron, only chiefs attended central councils, but they would face another council in their home village. In other societies the few would ordinarily make decisions, but on other occasions there was much broader discussion and consultation.<sup>14</sup> This was the case in the towns of the Mesopotamian kingdom of Mari.<sup>15</sup> This phenomenon was also known in the Greek world, and it would come to be called a mixed constitution. Those who have catalogued the political regimes of Greek cities have found many examples of mixed constitutions, and they have also attested to the fact that it is often difficult to classify a polis as clearly oligarchic versus clearly democratic—almost every Greek polis had some elements of these two regimes.<sup>16</sup> Aristotle himself spoke of cities that mixed oligarchy and democracy.<sup>17</sup> To me all this sounds as if the barrier between oligarchy and democracy was a very porous one.

For all of these reasons it makes sense to adopt a broad definition of early democracy. As I do so, I will take care to emphasize the diversity within the group of early democracies. Some had popular participation that was very extensive while in others this was more limited.

## The Autocratic Alternative

Autocracy was the alternative to early democracy. Since it is impossible in almost any society for someone to truly rule on their own, successful autocracy was aided by the construction of a state bureaucracy. Rather than rely on members of society to help provide information and collect revenue, autocrats created bureaucracies staffed with subordinates they themselves had selected and they themselves controlled. This was fundamentally different from relying on a council or assembly composed of members of society not subject to the ruler's whim. Bureaucrats could be sent out to assess what people were producing and how much they could be taxed, and they could also collect the taxes. They could also be used to enforce a system of conscription without having to give people political rights. Behind all this lay the reality of military force—autocrats needed to hire and pay specialists in violence. Some of the autocracies I will consider were very efficient and others much less so, but in all cases, they were a clear alternative to early democracy.

Opting for the autocratic alternative also depended on the mastery of techniques generally associated with civilization. The most important of these was having a system of writing so that bureaucrats could communicate across distances and over time. In chapter 3 I will provide evidence of where writing came from, showing that there were both demand and supply elements to this story. Writing was more likely to emerge when societies had a need for it, such as when they grew storable crops that could be recorded. But there was also an important supply element because inventing a system of writing from scratch is no easy task. Writing was more likely to be adopted by societies that found themselves near neighbors who had developed writing before them.

Opting for the autocratic alternative depended not only on the presence of writing but also on other elements of civilization. An understanding of geometry helped with surveying fields for tax purposes; an understanding of the soil allowed state officials to classify land according to how fertile it was and to levy differential tax rates on this basis. The paradox of civilization's advance was that it made autocracy function more effectively.