

Exchange

THE VAIN HOPE FOR “CORRECT” TIMING

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Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder rightly observe that over the last few years the euphoria surrounding democracy’s “third wave” has largely diminished as observers have recognized how difficult the path from democratization to consolidation really is. This recognition has prompted the development of a new wave of “preconditionists”: As opposed to their predecessors who argued that without the right prerequisites democratization would not occur, today’s preconditionists argue that without the right prerequisites consolidation will not occur.

Mansfield and Snyder argue in this issue that “it is dangerous to push states to democratize before the necessary preconditions are in place and that prudent democracy-promotion efforts should pay special attention to fostering those preconditions.” Since there is also widespread agreement that stable liberal democracies are more likely to develop in countries that also possess a wide range of what Thomas Carothers prefers to call “facilitating” conditions (high levels of economic development, strong and legitimate states, citizenries that agree on the democratic “rules of the game”) and very unlikely to develop in failed states, the real debate seems to be about the likely political trajectories of those countries in between, and what if anything outsiders can do to affect them.

Mansfield and Snyder worry about democratization in such countries because they believe that political development is path-dependent: “Once a country starts on an illiberal trajectory, ideas are unleashed and institutions are established that tend to continue propelling it along that trajectory.” They claim that “premature democratization will push a country down this path,” and thus that “premature, out-of-sequence

attempts to democratize may make subsequent efforts to democratize more difficult and more violent than they would otherwise be.” Because they think that outside intervention at critical junctures “can provide a decisive impetus for good or ill,” Mansfield and Snyder warn about the dangers of pushing too hard for democratization in inappropriate cases (and too lightly in appropriate ones).

I see fewer dangers than they do in “premature” democratic experiments and am skeptical about their recommendation of trying to hold off democratic change until conditions are ideal. My reading of the West European experience sees little else but a pattern of false starts, failed liberalizations, and temporary regressions. Yet far from trapping the continent in a suboptimal path, this pattern ultimately resulted in a set of stable, liberal democracies.

I often joke with my students that when I look at today’s new democracies, I can only hope that they have an easier time of it than did the West European ones I study. After enduring an incredibly bloody and divisive revolution starting in 1789, France suffered through more than a century and a half of deep social and political conflict before achieving a stability of sorts with the founding of the Fifth Republic in 1958. Otto von Bismarck created a unified Germany in 1871 and then tried to forestall democracy in it with a form of soft authoritarianism. Yet he succeeded only in generating rising political frustration and social conflict that set the country on the path toward the cataclysm of the First World War. From there, of course, still more twists and turns ensued and things got even worse. Only after total military defeat, invasion, occupation, the forced redrawing of borders, and ethnic cleansing on an unprecedented scale did democracy and stability finally come to Germany—and then at first only to its western portion as the East found itself forced by the fortunes of war to spend decades languishing under Soviet domination.¹

Similar winding and difficult paths have characterized the political development of Spain, Italy, Austria, and almost all other European countries. Even England, the paradigmatic case of the “right” sequencing, is often misunderstood. England was placed on the path to democracy only by a bloody period of civil war and domestic chaos during the seventeenth century that reshaped the nature and norms of its political institutions and shifted the balance of power in English society—and even then, it took another 150 years for a full democratic transition to occur. If we turn to some of the “auspicious” non-European cases that Mansfield and Snyder cite, a closer look reveals similar turmoil. The relatively successful late-twentieth-century transitions of Chile, South Korea, and Brazil, for example, all had stormy and violent backstories that included failed democratic experiments, civil wars, and occupations.²

If genuine examples of “correct” sequencing and hence unproblematic democratic development are practically nonexistent, so is evidence that

“premature” attempted transitions inevitably make things worse in the long run. Pace Mansfield and Snyder, the West European cases seem to show that false starts, problems, and reversals not only failed to preclude later democratic success, but were in fact integral parts of the

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long-term process through which non-democratic institutions, elites, and cultures were delegitimized and eventually marginalized in order to make way for democratic successors.³ (Thomas Carothers is, I think, making a similar point in “The ‘Sequencing’ Fallacy” [p. 20] when he notes that the establishment of things such as the rule of law, strong political institutions, and accountability is much more likely to develop as part and parcel of the struggle for democracy than separate from it.)⁴

Mansfield and Snyder argue that pushing for democratization in sub-optimal situations is unlikely to help and likely to hurt. I agree that it is not likely to do much good, since the main drivers of democratic development are generally internal rather than external. But on the margins, taking the side of the local democrats and reformers rather than their authoritarian overlords makes more sense both morally and politically. The construction of stable liberal democracy generally requires breaking down the institutions, relationships, and culture of the *ancien régime*, a process that is never easy and about which the *ancien régime* itself is rarely enthusiastic. Yes, achieving a full transition to consolidated democracy is difficult. But it cannot be completed if it never starts.

NOTES

1. Ethnic cleansing affected not only the Jews and other “undesirables” during the Third Reich and Second World War, but also ethnic Germans after the war was over. Estimates suggest that hundreds of thousands died and millions of lives were disrupted in the population transfers that followed the Second World War.

2. Here I disagree with Fukuyama. As Mansfield and Snyder point out, there are more than just East Asian cases in the category of relatively successful late-twentieth-century transitions; to attribute the East Asian successes to cultural factors such as Confucianism seems misguided. As many have argued, South Korea’s strong state is as much a product of Japanese occupation as it is of indigenous development (see most recently Atul Kohli, *State Directed Development: Political Power and Industrialization in the Global Periphery* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004]). In any case, the political and economic disaster of North Korea would seem to balance out the purported “positive” impact of culture in South Korea. Similarly, China’s “strong” political institutions were built up via the tragedy of the Maoist era, bringing into question not only the impact of culture but also the price in turmoil and lost lives that China has had to pay for its current economic success and relative political stability.

3. A similar argument can be made about successful late-twentieth-century transitions as well. For example, South Korea suffered about a million deaths (85 percent of them civilian) in the Korean War, which among other things was a civil war fought over regime type. But that conflict, together with the legacy of earlier democratic experiments plus postwar agrarian reform, helped to eliminate the remnants of the country's *ancien régime* and lay the basis for the wealthy and successful democracy that today flourishes on the southern half of the Korean Peninsula. And to understand Chile's contemporary democratic success one must consider not only the many advances that the country made during the pre-Pinochet period, but also the willingness to compromise which has now been absorbed as a key "lesson learned" from the painful conflict and violence that marked the Allende-Pinochet era.

4. Fukuyama is correct to note that there are important differences between Europe's state-building experience and that of countries in the contemporary era. Most importantly, Europe's process took hundreds of years, and although borders were influenced by international agreements and outside actors, there was nothing analogous to today's "international community" working to disallow violent change. As authors like Jeffrey Herbst, Robert H. Jackson, and Carl G. Rosberg, and others have pointed out, keeping in place borders that domestic states cannot defend may ultimately slow down rather than speed up political and economic development. See Jeffrey Herbst, *States and Power in Africa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); and Robert H. Jackson and Carl G. Rosberg, "Sovereignty and Underdevelopment: Juridical Statehood in the African Crisis," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 24 (March 1986): 1–31.