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Democracy in the Global South

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Abstract

Given the legacies of colonialism and the inequities of the global capitalist system, consolidated democracies in the Global South were the exception prior to the third wave of democratization in the 1970s. As democratization in the Global South grew, a first generation of work by sociologists challenged mainstream political science's preoccupation with electoral and liberal democracy and brought popular mobilization to the center of the analysis. This literature made key contributions to the debate on democratic transitions and consolidation. A more recent wave of work has focused on the democratization of democracy, examining civil society, movements, participatory democracy, transnational activism, and the wide range of political actors and forms of collective action that have emerged in a democratizing Global South. Variation across and within democracies remains high, but there have been clear cases of democratic deepening. Improving our understanding of the fabric of democratic institutions and practices, including recent cases of regression, calls for more research, especially in subnational and local contexts.



INTRODUCTION

Any effort to make a general set of claims about democracy in the postcolonial world must, from the outset, be qualified by pointing to the extraordinary variety of democracies in the Global South. Not only are the nation-states of the Global South generously distributed across the full range of types that analysts have used to classify democratic regimes, but as Collier & Levitsky (1997) have noted, researchers have produced a bewildering proliferation of labels to capture the quality of democracy in these countries. Making matters even more complex, a whole new sub-literature has emerged to argue that even within nations, there is great variation in the degree of democracy at the subnational level (Giraudy et al. 2019, Goldfrank 2011, Heller 2000, O'Donnell 1993). The purpose of this review is not to engage in a classificatory exercise or to adjudicate between different paradigmatic perspectives on democracy. Rather, the goal is to move beyond traditional mainstream political science treatments of democracy to point to the specific ways in which sociologists, often in dialogue with comparativists in political science, have reframed the definition and understanding of democracy and shed new light on the dynamics of democratization. That reframing includes a more comparative and nonteleological historical understanding of democratic trajectories; a more relational perspective that views democracy as more than electoral competition and, in particular, recognizes the role of civil society in shaping preferences and constituting political actors; and a defining preoccupation with how democracy is shaped by and can in turn transform social and economic power. Methodologically, sociology's unique contribution is the diversity and breadth of research ranging from macro analyses providing a global-system perspective on democratization (e.g., Castells 2003), careful quantitative assessments that go beyond electoral results (Kadivar 2018, Usmani 2018), comparative-historical work (Kurzman 2008, Mahoney 2001, Moore 1966, Rueschemeyer et al. 1992, Sandbrook et al. 2007), comparative subnational investigations (Baiocchi et al. 2011, Bradlow 2021, Gibson 2018), deep field investigations exploring the relational and lived experiences of democratic life (Auyero 2001, Garrido 2019, Rao & Sanyal 2010, Roychowdhury 2020, Sanyal 2014), and a whole new range of research that examines the intersection of domestic and global fields of democratic action (Ciplet et al. 2015, Graizbord 2017, Paschel 2016, Santos & Rodríguez-Garavito 2005).

DEMOCRACY AND POWER

Tremendous variation notwithstanding, democracies of the Global South share historical and genetic similarities that distinguish them from first wave European/North American democracies. First, countries of the Global South are all postcolonial countries, having been either directly colonized or shaped by empire (Go 2016) and subordinated to a world capitalist system dominated by northern democracies. Sociologists have produced a wealth of research to show how colonial legacies have impacted intuitional formation, economic growth, and social inclusion in the Global South (Du Bois 2007, Go 2011, Itzigsohn & Brown 2020, Lange 2009, Mahoney 2010). Second, democracies of the Global South are relatively young. Following Huntington's (1993) classification, a first batch of 19 emerged from the second wave of democratization (1943–1962), with the rest coming in the third wave (1974–1996) and a few more since, most notably Tunisia in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. The age of a democracy is certainly no guarantee of its robustness or its quality, but like any complex system, especially one that depends on instantiating institutions and practices, time clearly does have solidifying effects. That said, the recent democratic backsliding in the United States (the oldest republic in the world) and in India and Brazil, two of the more successful cases of democracy in the Global South, is a disturbing reminder that the democratic project is always incomplete and never fully secured. Third, as I



elaborate below, the world historical and interstate conditions under which democracies in the South emerged have profoundly shaped trajectories of consolidation and deepening.

The bulk of the work sociologists have done on democracy in the Global South is informed by an explicit critique of conventional political science definitions of democracy. Most of the political science literature has worked with a minimalist and formalist definition of democracy derived from Schumpeter and Dahl that focuses on free and competitive elections (with participatory preconditions) as the mechanism for selecting representatives and holding them to account. Equating democracy with elections is defended on pragmatic and methodological grounds (Huntington 1993) but it also privileges a historically specific type of liberal (bourgeois) democracy built on the rule of law and individual liberty. Historically and theoretically, the problem here, as Mouffe (2000) and Habermas (1996) have pointed out, is that the liberal tradition stands in tension with the republican tradition “whose main ideas are those of equality, identity between governing and governed and popular sovereignty” (Mouffe 2000, p. 3). The two traditions produce a paradox (Mouffe 2000). The very preconditions that make democratic agency possible (individual civic and political rights) and allow for interests to be advanced and delegated to representatives stand in tension with the democratic ideal of the people as sovereign.

If the tension between the liberal (or representative) and the republican (or participatory) traditions raise fundamental questions about the workings and normative meaning of democracy, they also correspond to two different modes of analysis. The political science tradition, especially its more economic rational choice expressions, reduces political action to individuals acting on their given preferences and focuses on democratic processes as mechanisms for aggregating those preferences. If liberties are protected and elections are competitive and fair, then all interests are equally represented. The sociological tradition begins by seeing preferences as socially constructed rather than given and views the discursive and organizational capacities for collective action as unevenly distributed across social groups (gender, class, race, religion). Under adverse conditions, such as a thin democracy built against the backdrop of systemic inequality, elites dominate the process of interest formation either through institutional control over how interests and agenda-setting are organized or through their symbolic power to define the limits of what is possible [Gramsci’s hegemony, or Lukes’s (1974) third face of power]. Under more favorable conditions (a strong democratic system with a vibrant and pluralistic civil society), more inclusive and autonomous forms of participation emerge, more deliberated outcomes become possible, and the democratic process underwrites social solidarity (Alexander 2006, Cohen & Arato 1992, Habermas 1996, Marshall 1964). To make sense of these varied outcomes, sociologists have looked beyond the formal and representative dimensions of a given democracy to examine how political orientations and capacities are actually shaped and formed by political parties (De Leon et al. 2009, Desai 2002, Mudge & Chen 2014), social movements (Agarwala 2013, Paschel 2016), or, more broadly, the dynamics of civil society (Gramsci et al. 1972, Habermas 1996) and the civic sphere (Alexander 2006, Avritzer 2002).

This brief detour into democratic theory helps underscore two points about the democracy literature that are essential to making sense of difference and divergence of Global South democracies. First, and at a general level, the formalist view of electoral democracy (and the liberal tradition baked into it) makes for a more parsimonious definition, but fails, as Fishman (2016, p. 290) has argued, to capture the core idea of democracy as popular sovereignty. As the political theorist Giovanni Sartori has argued, what drives aspirations for democracy is not formalism, but the fact that “democracy embodies a project [and that] ends and goal attainment are a constitutive element of the theory of democracy” (cited in Fishman 2016, p. 291). To separate the formal institutional procedures of representative democracy from substantive outcomes, as much of the



political science literature has insisted on doing, is to abstract from the very conflicts that drive democratization and that produce such divergent patterns. The second point is historical. As the Indian political theorist Aijaz Ahmad has argued, if the first wave of democracies limited the franchise by design to mostly propertied white males, the twentieth century was the “century of democratic demand” driven by “workers, peasants, women, colonized peoples, subordinated castes and ethnic groups, the nonwhite victims of European racism whom the bourgeoisie has sought to exclude from the democratic project” (Ahmad 2000). Movements for democracy in the Global South were forged in the crucible of national liberation struggles that defined “the people” against the colonizer, often equating popular sovereignty with socialism.¹ The tension between representative and participatory democracy takes an acute form in the postcolonial world because national liberation struggles of the second and third waves often brought a highly centralized form of colonial state power that was designed to reinforce socio-racial hierarchies into direct and immediate confrontation with a constitutionally empowered and universally enfranchised citizenry (Chandhoke 2003). This tension has, in turn, animated much of the literature on democracy from the Global South. In an extension of the classic questions Du Bois (2007) and Ambedkar (2018) both raised about the equalizing promise of constitutional democracy and the sociological realities of racial and caste exclusion, Dagnino (1998) in Brazil; Jayal (2013), Mehta (2017), and Mahajan (1999) in India; and Mamdani (1996) in Africa have all explored the challenges of democratic citizenship in deeply hierarchical postcolonial societies.

Rueschemeyer et al.’s (1992) classic, *Capitalist Development and Democracy*, was the first comprehensive comparative-historical analysis to cut across European and Global South democracies and to move beyond the liberal definition of democracy. Their work generated an analytical frame that is especially useful for making sense of the conflicts that drive democratization. In subsequent work they came to terms with what they, like Mouffe, call the “paradoxes of democracy,” (Huber et al. 1997) and identify three dimensions of democracy: formal, participatory and substantive. Formal democracy includes “regular free and fair elections, universal suffrage, accountability of the state’s administrative organs to the elected representatives, and effective guarantees for freedom of expression and association as well as protection against arbitrary state action” (Huber et al. 1997, p. 323). Participatory democracy describes a democracy in which there are high levels of participation (in electoral politics and in civil society) across social categories of class, gender, ethnicity and race and where subordinate groups can effectively participate in the political process. Political equality is not gifted by constitutions (the liberal view) but rather is made possible by specific patterns of collective action. Finally, formal and participatory democracy may allow for active political contestation over public affairs, but the concept of substantive democracy points to the extent to which democratic engagement translates into tangible improvements in social and economic equality. Because of the historical and colonial-global circumstances of popular struggles for democracy in the Global South (elaborated below), these paradoxes, which were more or less tackled sequentially in the first wave of democratizations—as per Marshall’s (1964) famous, if somewhat mechanistic, progression of civic, political, and social right—have been compressed and amplified in the second (immediate postcolonial) wave and third (post-1973) wave.

IMPROBABLE DEMOCRACIES

Set against the stage-based modernization and Marxist accounts that dominated early theories of democracy, democracy in the Global South is an anomaly. The larger problem here is that

¹Ahmad (2000) notes that “the keenest writers on the issue of race in the 20th century—DuBois and Nkrumah, Césaire and Fanon—have all been deeply marked by the encounter with socialism.”



while capitalism and its violent processes of domestic and colonial primitive accumulation preceded democracy in the West, the demand for democracy in the Global South came in the wake of decolonization and was introduced well before agrarian transitions were complete and industry was driving the economy. This alternative sequencing produced particular conditions and problems for democratization (Kaviraj 2005).

First, while democracy in Europe and the settler colonies came after agrarian transitions and the political defeat or economic transformation of landed elites, in many postcolonies, the agrarian elites survived decolonization and have, as Moore's (1966) classic argument predicted, either blocked or severely compromised democratization. This pattern has been particularly acute in Latin America and South Asia, where countries that had the most entrenched landlord classes (e.g., Guatemala and Pakistan) were those that have generally had the most delayed and difficult transitions to democracy. Classic landlordism has been less of a problem in sub-Saharan Africa, but Mamdani (1996) has shown that rural forms of decentralized despotism in the guise of local chiefs empowered by colonial regimes through a fusion of executive, judicial, and coercive power have remained significant obstacles to democratization. And even in cases such as India, where the anticolonial movement successfully mobilized popular sectors in demanding democracy, the result was more often than not a passive revolution (Gramsci et al. 1972) in which elite-dominated nationalist parties ushered in representative democracy but left intact the power of dominant rural classes (Chatterjee 2004, Riley & Desai 2007).

The related problem is that in the absence of the broadened material base that comes with industrialization, the kinds of class compromise that allowed for the political incorporation of the working class in the West (Przeworski 1985) without threatening dominant interests have been far more difficult—though not impossible (Sandbrook et al. 2007)—to secure in the Global South. The extension of the franchise to popular classes in the West only came after national bourgeoisies had established their economic dominance and industrial growth and colonialism had significantly expanded national wealth. The bourgeoisie and the middle class, celebrated in the European democracy literature as champions of democracy (Moore 1966 and Lipset 1959, respectively) have not been as economically secure in the postcolonial world and have proven to have a very fickle relationship to democracy. The turn to bureaucratic authoritarianism in the 1960s–1970s in Latin America was triggered by a dominant class reaction to increased demands from below at a time of economic contraction, and more recently, middle class support for elected autocrats in India, Brazil, and the Philippines (Bello 2020, Garrido 2019, Fernandes & Heller 2006) has been interpreted as a reaction to the increased assertiveness of popular classes.

Second, the process of democratization in the Global South, compared with first wave democracies, came against the backdrop of weakly consolidated nations and states. In South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, the boundaries of the nation were colonial concoctions and the first task of postcolonial leaders was simply molding and holding nations together and doing so with state apparatuses that were legacies of colonial rule. Decolonization and nation-building preceded the introduction of liberal democracy in Latin America, but only through a process of internal colonialism marked by the political marginalization or outright exclusion of indigenous and Afro-descendant populations. What is so remarkable about the third wave of democratization in Latin America is not so much that it was one of redemocratization but that it was driven by the idea of popular sovereignty and marked by the political incorporation of the formally excluded.² The exception here is East Asia, where long histories of state- and nation-building preceded colonialization. High levels of state capacity, national integration, and revolutionary

²Tellingly, the MAS (Movement for Socialism) indigenous party that came to power in Bolivia in 2005 was originally called the MAS-IPSP: Movement Toward Socialism–Political Instrument of Popular Sovereignty.



ruptures with the past (through revolution or full decolonization) have underwritten strong and comparatively inclusive patterns of growth (Kohli 2009). Authoritarianism or very limited electoral competition has been the rule, but the cases of South Korea and Taiwan are notable for how quickly democratization led to the expansion of the welfare state (Peng & Wong 2008).

Third, the circumstances of democratization in the Global South have often created a deep imbalance between civil and political society. Political emancipation in the colonies came against the backdrop of poorly developed civic identities and organizations (Chatterjee 2019, Mahajan 1999). The bifurcated nature of colonial rule (Mamdani 1996) denied citizenship to colonial subjects on racial lines. Where colonial authorities relied on indirect rule (Lange 2009), they reinforced traditional authority (caciques, chiefs, landlords, caste leaders). And in Africa, Mamdani (1996, p. 21) has argued that while postindependence regimes deracialized (that is, black majorities came to power), they did not de-ethnicize, and “unreformed Native Authority came to contaminate civil society.” Colonial states were, moreover, highly centralized and extractive apparatuses, and as the Pakistani sociologist Alavi (1982) famously argued, this legacy of an overdeveloped state (including a bloated military apparatus) has provided state elites with significant resources and capacity to resist democratization, a pattern that has persisted in Bangladesh and Pakistan. Finally, even where significant political liberalization did take place, it was often channeled through nationalist party-based mobilizations, parties that then often built on their nationalist credentials to demobilize civil society and establish one-party rule.

Fourth, as dependency and world systems theorists have long argued, power asymmetries in the global economy, marked by both the dominance of northern capital and multinationals and the northern control of global governance, have either directly subverted emerging democracies through external interventions (e.g., the Congo, Iran, Guatemala, Chile) or contributed to reproducing the class patterns of entrenched landed elites or insecure bourgeoisies that have been significant obstacles to democratization.

This litany of adverse conditions associated with the specific historical conditions under which the demand for democracy first emerged in the context of postcolonial struggles explains, in large part, why so few countries in the Global South successfully graduated to the status of consolidated democracies before the third wave (pre-1974). It also explains why the topic of democracy was all but ignored when sociology first seriously engaged with the Global South through dependency theory (Cardoso & Faletto 1979, Evans 1979).

Then came the third wave of democratization (post-1974), which, in 15 years, produced approximately 30 new democracies (Huntington 1993, p. 21). As Roberts (2016) notes, there have been few breakdowns or authoritarian reversions since (Turkey might now qualify). A number of different quantitative indexes that have been developed to measure regime types (Lührmann et al. 2018) all point to a general move from closed autocracies to electoral regimes that are more or less competitive, including a number that are institutionalized liberal democracies. There are distinct regional patterns. In Latin America, the redemocratization wave brought fairly competitive systems to almost every country, except Cuba, which remains a closed autocracy, and Venezuela and Haiti, which have been highly unstable. In South Asia, all countries have some degree of electoral competition and fairly open forms of political contention and civil society engagement. The democratic openings in East and Southeast Asia have been more hesitant and partial, but only China, Vietnam, and North Korea have consistently remained closed autocracies. If northern Africa and the Middle East have remained, with the notable exception of Tunisia, redoubts of authoritarian regimes, sub-Saharan Africa has seen significant democratic progress (Bellin 2004). After a careful review of the Varieties of Democracy data set, and taking into account not just transitions to democracy but also various measures of democratic quality, Kadivar et al. (2020, p. 1311) conclude that “by any long run indices available, democracy has spread far and wide,” and



despite some erosion in recent years, “the world over the last few decades has never been more democratic than it is now.”

But the skeptics remain. Schmitter (2009, p. 21) dryly observes that “democratization and the consolidation of democracy have been so successful because democracy has been so much less consequential than its proponents wished and that its opponents feared.” Two clear problems stand out, the first institutional and the second economic. Even where there is genuine electoral competition, there is not necessarily much participation, and the practice of democratic citizenship remains thin. In any unequal society, there are significant social and institutional barriers or costs to participation for subordinate groups. If this is problematic in any less-than-perfect democracy (and there are no perfect democracies), it is especially problematic in developing democracies where the basic rights of association are circumscribed and distorted by pervasive vertical dependencies (clientelism), routinized forms of social exclusion (e.g., the caste system, indigeneity, race), the unevenness and at times complete failure of public legality, and the persistence of what Dagnino (1998) has called social authoritarianism. As O’Donnell (1993, p. 1361) has argued, in Global South democracies—or what he calls noninstitutionalized democracies—the public authority of the modern state radiates out unevenly, and “the components of democratic legality and, hence, of publicness and citizenship, fade away at the frontiers of various regions and class, gender and ethnic relations.” The related problem here, and arguably the Achilles heel of southern democracies, is the weakness of local (municipal, village or district) governments. Second, even where participation is more robust and widespread and subordinate groups have been mobilized, weak states, economic dependency, and neoliberal austerity have frustrated the pursuit of social equality.

Generalized statements about the hollowness or thinness of democracy in the Global South do not, however, stand up to scrutiny. While theories of colonial path dependency or global capitalist structures have to be taken seriously, they often fail to recognize the degree of social and political agency in the Global South. Reviewing recent research by sociologists and comparative political scientists, I make three claims that, while far from generalizable, find sufficient empirical support across a range of cases to be identified as significant tendencies. First, the wave of transitions away from authoritarian rule to representative democratic systems in the developing world have been, to a large degree, driven by the mobilization of subordinate groups. Following Ahmad (2000), popular demands for democracy legitimates the idea itself and directly challenges and destabilizes entrenched forms of class power and status privilege. Second, democratic openings, however limited and qualified, have in many cases led to a horizontal diffusion of democratic practices and discourses, sometimes congealing into more mobilized and autonomous civil societies (Roberts 2016), some of which have even leveraged national and global political fields to advance participatory democracy and subordinate group interests (Paschel 2016, Santos & Rodríguez-Garavito 2005). These movements have not only demanded public legality and an expanded definition of citizenship, they have also innovated new modes of engagement with the state and political parties. Third, and contrary to the default assumptions in much of development sociology that neoliberalism has been hegemonic (for a critique, see Le Galès 2016), democracy has in many cases directly contributed to supporting social rights and, specifically, an expansion of the welfare state. This is most notable in Latin America, but also India and parts of East Asia.

Clearly, globalization has played an important role in all this. On the one hand, globalization has diffused and normalized liberal electoral democracy, including the human rights discourses and global legal codes that have fueled transnational advocacy networks (Keck & Sikkink 1998). On the other hand, globalization constrained, if not dictated, the possibilities for promoting economic inclusion in the Global South. The effects of globalization are, however, refracted by domestic social structures and institutions. In order to understand how the democratic paradox has



played out and to explain the dramatic variation across and even within countries, I highlight how democratization in the Global South has been driven by conflict and social agency, and how this agency, however conditioned by structural constraints and historical legacies, is marked by emerging subjectivities and new forms of collective action, which are in and of themselves constitutive of democracy.

TRANSITIONS AND DEMOCRATIC DEEPENING

The dominant approach in sociology to explaining democratic trajectories has been the power resources approach first developed in the European context (Korpi 1983). In direct response to the rational choice models that have dominated political science and that presume all social actors have the same capacity for collective action in a liberal democracy, sociologists have emphasized the role of power and, in particular, the contingent organizational capacity of social classes. Moving beyond the reductionism of rational choice as well as orthodox Marxist explanations of political behavior, Rueschemeyer et al. (1992, p. 53, emphasis in original) argued that “classes may indeed have *objective* interests, but in historical reality class interests are inevitably subject to *social construction*.” They went on to show that it was in the associational spaces of civil society that the working classes (and class allies) organized to push for greater inclusion and more redistributive forms of democracy in Europe, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

More recent work has modified the power resources model in two important directions. First, because the pattern of class formation in the South has been very different from the North, particularly due to the South’s far smaller and less homogenous industrial working class, the composition of subordinate classes and the nature of class alliances that have supported democratization have been quite different. In some key cases, such as Costa Rica, Mauritius, and the Indian state of Kerala, it is rural subordinate classes that played the pivotal role in advancing democracy (Sandbrook et al. 2007). But even where the working class has been active, it has been far more diverse than its European counterpart. The lack of state recognition and legal protection for informal workers has made collective action particularly difficult, but as Agarwala (2013) showed in her study of women workers in India’s construction and hand-made cigarette (*bedi*) sectors, successful cases of mobilization have been driven as much by demands for recognition and social rights as by traditional workplace-based labor issues. It is also notable that even the most programmatic and self-consciously workerist parties in the Global South, such as the African National Congress in South Africa, the PT (Partido dos Trabalhadores, or workers party) in Brazil, and the CPI(M) [Communist Party of India (Marxist)], are loosely knit constellations of the urban and rural poor working as much in the service sector as in commodity production, more precariat than proletariat (Paret 2016).

Second, precisely because the underlying objective conditions that might generate subordinate class support for democracy have been less sharply defined as a conflict between capital and labor, the literature has gone much further than did Rueschemeyer et al. (1992) in documenting the work of social construction, as in how working class militancy was manufactured through social movement unionism in Brazil and South Africa (Seidman 1994) or how popular support for the idea of democracy was culturally galvanized in South Korea and the Philippines (Villegas & Yang 2013). A diverse range of studies have pointed to the role of social movements and civil society organizations in giving voice to varied lower class and status groups (Fishman 2017, Paschel 2016, Roychowdhury 2020, Tarlau 2019). Other efforts to explain how subordinate identities are forged and politicized have included work on how populist leaders have constructed the category of the people (Laclau 2005) or appealed to a range of nonmaterial identities to mobilize support for democracy (Slater 2009) as well as careful studies of how parties have “articulated” shared subordinate interests (De Leon et al. 2009, Desai 2002, Williams 2008).



Most recently, and as a direct refutation of Huntington's (1984, p. 212) claim that "democratic regimes that last have seldom, if ever, been instituted by mass popular action," Kadivar (2022) and Kadivar et al. (2020) have positively and directly linked democratization to the dynamics of popular mobilization. Drawing on an original data set that measures the length of contentious, nonarmed prodemocracy mobilization in 80 cases of democracy after 1960, Kadivar (2018) finds a positive relation between the length of contention and democratic consolidation. The increasing recognition that many democracies in the Global South have consolidated (recent backsliding notwithstanding) and have done so on the strength of demands for popular sovereignty has raised a whole new set of questions about the actual workings of democracy. Recent book titles are evocative: *Becoming Black Political Subjects* (Paschel 2016), *Making Islam Democratic* (Bayat 2007), *Demanding Development* (Auerbach 2019), *Achieving Access* (Harris 2017), *Movement-Driven Development* (Gibson 2018), *Bootstrapping Democracy* (Baiocchi et al. 2011), and *Claiming the State* (Kruks-Wisner 2018).

This new body of work explores fundamental questions about the limitations of liberal democracy, the sociological complexities of collective action and whose voices get heard, and the political economy and governance challenges of translating popular demands into substantive welfare outcomes. This literature is rich and diverse, and it explores these questions from different vantage points but can be bundled together into three streams of research: civil society, institutionalizing democratic participation, and the democratic developmental state.

CIVIL SOCIETY

If sociologists have already made the empirical case that civil society can strengthen democracy (Fishman 2017, Kadivar 2018, Rueschemeyer et al. 1992), they have generally done so at a relatively broad level of analysis and have left key questions unresolved. There is nothing inherently democratizing about civil society (Riley 2007). The forms of associational life that are at the heart of civil society can be uncivil and exclusionary (e.g., the Ku Klux Klan and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) as much as they can promote democratic ideals and practices. Whether civil society expands rights-based conceptions of democratic inclusion, serves as an extension of state power, or devolves into inward-looking and exclusionary forms of retrenchment (Castells 2003) is an empirical question, and one that is shaped by civil society's relation to the state, the market, and underlying social structures (Burawoy 2003). Reviewing recent work on civil society in the Global South reveals three different axes of analysis for unpacking the relationship between civil society and democratization: building associational capabilities, nurturing civic identities, and promoting organizational autonomy.

First, and most broadly, civil society creates spaces for subordinate actors who would otherwise be marginalized from politics to develop their associational capacities and become political agents. It is in the interstices of civil society that subaltern actors can build counterpublics in which they develop their organizational and discursive resources (Fraser 1992). An illuminating example is Sanyal's (2014) ethnography of microcredit groups in some of the most deeply patriarchal areas of rural northeastern India. Even though the microcredit groups largely failed in their official objective of providing economic support to poor women, their experience of meeting, talking, and sharing information and deliberating in small groups enhanced what Sanyal, building on Sen (1999b), calls their associational capabilities. These capabilities were manifested in their increased ability to challenge patriarchal norms and to engage in local politics. Moving to urban India, Roychowdhury (2020) shows how victims of domestic violence in India leverage the laws and sensibilities of an otherwise incapable democratic state to secure redress and, in the process, develop their own capabilities. In both cases, lower class/caste women use the associational spaces of an imperfect democracy to define and affirm their identities and to develop their organizational



and political capacities. To be clear, these claims about associational dynamics go beyond classic Tocquevillian and more recent neo-Durkheimian (Putnam et al. 1993) theories that treat associational life as an enactment of liberal rights. Instead, citizenship here is viewed in much more agonistic terms (Mouffe 2000), with new associational practices linked to the constitution of new democratic actors. Dagnino (2007, p. 549), for example, shows how movements in Latin America sought to redefine the meaning and the modalities of the political, a new politics of citizenship focused not just on legal rights but on “citizens being active social subjects, defining their rights, and struggling for these rights to be recognized.” And in *Becoming Black Political Subjects*, Paschel (2016) locates these dynamics in specific political fields to show how black movements, long marginalized by the dominant *mestizaje* discourse of national integration, emerged in the 1980s in Colombia and Brazil as significant political forces, successfully pressing for both recognition and regional autonomy (Colombia) and significant racial justice and redistributive reforms (Brazil). Both movements strategically leveraged political opportunities in the domestic and global political fields, but the key to their success was in how “blackness” “became legitimated as a category of political contestation in the eyes of the state and other powerful political actors” (Paschel 2016, p. 3). While the economic marginalization of indigenous and Afro-descendant groups remains pronounced throughout Latin America, the redemocratization of the 1980s firmly put questions of ethnic and racial oppression into the public sphere, produced multicultural constitutions that legally recognized ethnic pluralism and regional rights, and in some cases, most dramatically Bolivia, even brought indigenous parties to power (Van Cott 2008, Yashar 2005).

Second, a vibrant civil society can also construct more solidaristic identities and help nurture a democratic culture of other-regarding citizens through both bridging and prefigurative dynamics. A powerful example of the bridging argument is Varshney’s (2002) study of ethnic violence in India, in which he uses paired-city comparisons to show that cities with interethnic networks of civic engagement, and especially formal associations such as book clubs, professional organizations, and unions, were more likely to avert politically motivated episodes of sectarian violence. In *Mobilizing the Marginalized*, Ahuja (2019) demonstrates the prefigurative effects of subaltern counterpublics by comparing Indian states where Dalit social mobilization predated their political mobilization with states in which Dalits were first mobilized by parties. Where the social movements came first, Dalits developed dense, localized associational practices that allowed them not only to more effectively define and assert their rights but also to join redistributive multi-ethnic political coalitions rather than falling into the identity trap of ethnic bloc voting.

Civil societies can also cultivate essentialist identities, harbor opportunity hoarding groups (lobbies, clubs, ascriptive associations), and reify categories of exclusion (Alexander 2006, Chandhoke 2009). How and where civil society formations favor, on balance, encompassing over involuted identities and public over private interests is contingent and rooted in specific cultural and political histories. While this is an area of inquiry that calls for more controlled comparisons, from the existing literature, one can point to two general conditions that favor the civic outcome. The first is a backdrop of a well-developed rights-based culture in which the motivating ideals and norms of emergent civil society formations explicitly challenge existing hierarchies of power. The Latin American case is paradigmatic. The redemocratization movements in the 1980s emerged in a context in which demands centered not just on regime change but on broader political change and, in particular, a driving preoccupation with the right to have rights. In a highly influential contribution, Alvarez et al. (1998, p. 2) argue that Latin American social movements in the late twentieth century developed a new “cultural politics” and waged struggles “to resignify the very meanings of received notions of citizenship, political representation and participation.” These movements drew on long histories of contentious politics as well as convergent ideological streams of liberation theology, left populism, Gramscian Marxism (Freire’s radical pedagogy), feminism, and



human rights discourses. Similarly, in the South Indian states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, long histories of anti-Brahmin mobilization underwrote encompassing coalitions of the lower castes in which demands for recognition and redistribution were fused (Kalaiyarasan & Vijayabaskar 2021, Singh 2015). A third example is Viterna & Fallon's (2008) comparative analysis of the impact democratization has had on making states more gender equitable. In their multi-country study, the authors show that outcomes were shaped significantly by women's previous mobilization and the context of democratic transition. For example, in the case of South Africa, women's organizations and movements that cut across race and class played a critical role in driving the transition and produced a democratic constitution that is one of the most gender equitable in the world, with specific state machinery to promote gender equality (Hassim 2006, Seidman 2003).

A second favorable precondition has to do with sequencing and, in particular, strengthening horizontal ties across civil society actors before the formation of organized political parties. A number of comparative studies (Ahuja 2019, Fishman 2017, Heller 2019, Hipsher 1996) have shown that where civil society structures or movements are weak at the time parties emerge, patterns of political incorporation tend to contain any subsequent civil society development. In contrast, if parties at the time of transition have to deal with more organized civil society actors that have developed political identities and mobilizational resources, political incorporation is more balanced.

PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

One of the most striking developments in democracies of the Global South in the past two decades has been concerted efforts to promote participatory democracy. Democratic participation refers to the institutional channels through which collective actors constituted in civil society engage formally and informally with political society, be it the state or political parties. Participation is the translation of demands that emerge in civil society into politically actionable claims. Political scientists have mostly focused on electoral participation. But even in a highly consolidated and extremely competitive electoral system, representative structures are, at best, a very blunt form of accountability or, at worst, subverted by money and power. Writing in the spirit of the republican critique of liberal democracy, Tilly (2004, p. 13) remarks that "even in systems of representative government . . . social movements pose a crucial question: do sovereignty and its accumulated wisdom lie in the legislature or in the people it claims to represent?" Democratization movements in the Global South, confronting elite-dominated electoral systems, states institutions that are often captured or highly insulated, and forms of political intermediation dominated by clientelism, have embraced the idea of popular sovereignty and have demanded and secured extraelectoral forms of participation. Baiocchi (2018, p. xii) nicely captures the nature of this new democratic configuration: "Popular sovereignty is a much more common concept on the left in Latin America and southern Europe, where the idea of combining the energies and democratizing forces of social movements with strong state institutions in a mutually transformative relationship to advance social justice is commonplace and has many inflections." The most institutional of those inflections has been the adoption of new constitutions, such as in South Africa, Brazil, and Bolivia, that explicitly endorse participatory democracy and include provisions for specific structures that allow for continuous representation of civil society in national, subnational, and local governance. A growing literature has, moreover, explored the workings of such structures, as well as a range of other participatory experiments and how these have impacted the distribution and efficacy of political power (Avritzer 2002, Baiocchi et al. 2011, Cornwall & Coelho 2007, Santos 2005, Touchton et al. 2017).

Breaking with the dominant (northern) social movement literature that makes an association between engagement with the state (or political parties) and the risk of demobilization and



co-optation (Williams 2008), the participatory democracy literature directly addresses how participation can translate into effective policy. Important theoretical statements from Klein & Lee (2019), Fishman (2016), Tornquist (2009), and Fung & Wright (2003) unpack the delicate internal balancing act that participatory institutions must strike between providing new venues of popular demand-making and developing designs and processes that allow for aggregating or coordinating those demands and translating them into state action.

The case study literature explores three different types of participatory institutions. The first type consists of top-down official development projects, whether sponsored by multilateral agencies, governments, or professional nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), covering areas as diverse as microfinance, local agricultural projects, and climate resilience and presented as centered on community participation. The track record here is very mixed, with a comprehensive overview finding that many such projects are limited by project time cycles and the absence of organic linkages to civil society (Mansuri & Rao 2012). Many are doomed from the outset as “invited spaces” that “are framed by those who created them, and infused with power relations and cultures of interaction carried into them from other spaces” (Cornwall & Coelho 2007, p. 11).

The second type consists of new statutory forums or councils that emerge out of political processes and are created to facilitate direct inputs from civil society actors into the policy-making process. The most carefully documented example is participatory budgeting in Latin America (Wampler 2015), but there is a growing literature on participatory local governments across the Global South (Cornwall & Coelho 2007, Kruks-Wisner 2018, Rao & Sanyal 2010). One of the most carefully documented large-scale cases of promoting participatory governance is Isaac & Franke’s (2021) detailed account of the political alignments, complex governance reforms, and civil society inspired institutional designs that drove the People’s Campaign for Decentralized Planning in the Indian state of Kerala (population 35 million). This is quite possibly the most ambitious effort to empower local government in the Global South and one that has had a particularly marked impact on women’s participation (Gibson 2012).

The third type concerns instances where social movements directly engage with and even inject themselves into the policy-making process. In his study of the Brazilian Movimento Sanitário (Health Movement), Gibson (2018) marshals a wealth of quantitative and qualitative data across seven cities in Brazil to show that there is a direct relation between the degree to which the *sanitaristas* penetrated local municipal government and the quality and effectiveness of the expansion of public health care. Similarly, Tarlau’s (2019) study of Landless Workers’ Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra) in Brazil traces how a highly contentious movement that emerged through land occupations scaled up and out to transform education both through its own direct provisioning of schooling and by transforming the pedagogy and policies of national programs. Maybe the most impressive instance of scaling up comes from India’s Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (Association for the Empowerment of Laborers and Farmers). What started out as a village-level effort to demand greater transparency in local government budgets, after years of contentious mobilization and building out networks that included journalists, former government officials, judges, and allied movements, produced national legislation—the Right to Information Act—now widely held up as a model of social accountability (Fox 2015, Roy 2018).

This literature suggests that success in expanding the demos and transforming democratic governance revolves around three different dynamics. First, participation is most likely to succeed when it is initiated by a strong and autonomous set of civil society organizations. Baiocchi et al. (2011) use an eight-city discontinuous regression design that controls for region, city size, and political parties to show that participatory budgeting in Brazilian cities was most likely to actually reshape municipal budgets where civil society was densely organized and, in particular, had developed strong horizontal coordination structures.



Second, political parties can play a decisive role. Dating back to Weber, sociologists have generally seen parties as class- and status-based organizations that, regardless of where they come from, tend to “rationalize around the basic goal of power seeking” (Mudge & Chen 2014, p. 306). Given their stake in hoarding power and access to the state, parties are more often than not hostile to creating direct forms of engagement between citizens and the state. But parties that emerge out of movements and preserve linkages to popular organizations have been instrumental in supporting participatory democracy. Studies on the Community Part of India (Marxist) in Kerala, India; the South African Communist Party (Williams 2008); the Uruguayan Frente Amplio (broad front); and the Bolivian MAS (Anria et al. 2021), as well as the PT in Brazil (Baiocchi 2018), have shown how parties defied the “iron law of oligarchy” by developing new mechanisms of popular incorporation through which “social movements could speak” (Baiocchi 2018, p. 45).

Third, because of all the complexities of securing the chain of the people’s sovereignty (Tornquist 2009), these initiatives are dependent on paying close attention to institutional designs as well as complex regulatory and legal interventions that can effectively balance inclusion with procedures for translating demands into actual policies. This invariably implies the active cooperation of either reformist bureaucrats (Roy 2018, Fox 2015), engaged professionals (Harris 2017), or allied progressive NGOs (Appadurai 2002, Beck 2017, Roychowdhury 2020).

THE DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENTAL STATE

The greatest skepticism about democracies in the Global South has to do with their capacity to actually promote inclusive development. The legacies of colonialism, the asymmetries of global capitalism, and the imposition of neoliberal policies have created an economic environment hostile to redistribution and expanding social rights. But this had not been overdetermining. First, there are the remarkable cases of Costa Rica, Kerala (India), Chile, and Mauritius that Sandbrook et al. (2007) label as exceptions of a general type. Despite being historically highly dependent and peripheralized, all four stand out as successful cases of social democracy. Noting that each of these countries shared structural conditions with their neighbors, Sandbrook et al. point to how political processes of multi-class coalition building, facilitated by robust civil society configurations in the early stages of decolonization, propelled demands for social democracy.

Second, the impact of neoliberalism has been uneven and has triggered a democratic backlash. In the heyday of neoliberalism (roughly 1980–2000), structural adjustment policies and financial markets pressured states to downsize and roll back social provisioning, but the effects were far more pronounced in the more dependent countries (such as sub-Saharan Africa) and in those with weaker democracies. Because “neoliberalism stresses the necessity and desirability of transferring economic power and control from governments to private markets” (Centeno & Cohen 2012, p. 318), it produced both social movement (Rossi 2017) and political party responses. In Latin America, the so-called pink tide that saw left-of-center parties sweep into power across much of the continent has been directly linked with discontent over deteriorating public services and increasing inequality (Cardoso 2008, Huber & Stephens 2012, Roberts 2016). Referencing growing support for democracy in Africa, Mkandawire (2010, p. 69) surmises that “Democracy in its widest sense contests the hollowing out of the state.”

Based on a review of the literature, the clearest substantive gains have been made in Latin American and East Asia (especially Taiwan and South Korea). In both regions, there has been a significant expansion of social welfare measured in terms of both actual social expenditures and the introduction of programs for social protection and more universal access to education, health, and basic services (Harrard & Kaufman 2008). The link between social welfare and democracy is well established and lines up with a class analytic perspective. Thus, in Latin America, the



more left-of-center the ruling party and the more closely linked it is to lower classes, the greater the expansion of social welfare (Huber & Stephens 2012). Countries with longer traditions of social democratic politics (Costa Rica, Chile, and Uruguay) as well as with more recent social democratic parties (the PT in Brazil and MAS in Bolivia) have the most impressive records in promoting redistribution and welfare. In East Asia, the most robustly democratic countries in the region, Taiwan and South Korea, have forged ahead of their less democratic neighbors (Haggard & Kaufman 2008) largely on the strength of a “democratic coalition” formed during the 1980s and 1990s “that bridged state and societal actors, specifically progressive social movements, from within civil society” (Peng & Wong 2008, p. 84). Maybe most surprising of all is India. Despite a sharp turn to market-friendly policies in the early 1990s and a party system that is highly fragmented, is regionalized, and lacks anything resembling a national left-of-center programmatic party, the coalition government of the United Progressive Alliance period (2004–2014) ushered in a series of rights-based welfare reforms that have significantly expanded the capacity of the state to provide primary education, poverty reduction, and food security.

In a review of this literature, Evans et al. (2017, p. 400) parse out three “analytical models of state–society” relations that can explain the successful cases of substantive democracy. The first is the “left social democracy model” which builds on power resource theory and, following Huber & Stephens’s (2012) comprehensive study of democracy and the Left in Latin America, emphasizes the role of programmatic left parties in pushing and sustaining welfare policies, with the important qualification that left parties that are tied to civil society organizations are much more likely to be “aggressively redistributive and universalistic in their policy proposals” (Huber & Stephens 2012, p. 253). The second model, the state–civil society model, of which there is a growing list of examples (Agarwala 2013, Gibson 2018, Heller 2019, Isaac & Franke 2021, Kadivar 2022, Rossi 2017), acknowledges the central role a left party can play but argues that outcomes, especially over time, are highly conditioned by party and state ties to civil society. This model tries to account for why left parties like the African National Congress in South Africa (Buhlungu 2005, Hart 2014, Seekings 2013) or the CPI(M) in West Bengal, India (Desai 2002), failed to pursue redistributive policies by arguing that it was precisely because these parties were too politically hegemonic that they shunned civil society, contained their movement bases, and, absent countervailing mechanisms, fell prey to Michelsian oligarchical drift. The model can also better explain cases where, even in the absence of programmatic left parties, movement-based coalitions did promote significant sectoral reforms of health (Harris 2017, Gibson 2018) and rural poverty reduction (Veeraraghavan 2021). A third model, carefully developed by Lee (2012), moves beyond institutional configurations and focuses more on networks and associational dynamics. Looking at South Korea, Taiwan, Argentina, and Brazil, Lee finds that overlapping party–civil society ties of activists forged in democratization struggles explain the embedded cohesiveness of successful democratic states. The works on movement activists by Mische (2009), Gibson (2018), Paschel (2016), and Agarwala (2013) take a similar line by carefully exploring patterns of iterated engagements between activists and political institutions and how, in the process, activists and movement organizations develop the skills, capacities, and networks to balance the communicative practices of cross-cutting movement structures with the strategic necessity of staking out pragmatic or partisan positions. In his study of São Paulo, Bradlow (2021) examines how one of the most spatially unequal cities in the world was able to extend public housing, public transport, and sanitation to the urban poor. Examining a 20-year period during which right and left governments alternated in power, Bradlow shows not only that movement activists exerted constant pressure on municipal officials to deliver but that, in doing so, they helped municipal agencies develop greater interagency cohesion and effectiveness.



There is, of course, much complementarity between these models, which differ more in the level and focus of analysis than in substance. All three, moreover, converge in clearly pointing to the need for more embedded approaches—both in Polanyi’s intuitionist and Granovetter’s social ties senses—to understanding how the spheres of state and civil society, often treated as distinct and antithetical, can, in fact, under specific historical and political conditions, develop synergistic ties. If, as Evans (1995) shows, the embedded autonomy of the twentieth-century industry-promoting state rested on fairly narrow ties to economic elites, the type of embeddedness required for promoting socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable development is far more demanding and requires broad, multi-stranded ties to civil society (Evans & Heller 2015). In terms of thinking about how democracy can underwrite the expansion of welfare and social rights, this is a particularly productive line of inquiry because it links up directly with a parallel literature that has argued that the key to the success of the democratic developmental state is its greater capacity for deliberation, coordination (across sectors and levels of government), and coproduction with civil society actors (Gibson & Woolcock 2008, Rodrik 2007). This might also prove to be a productive analytical frame for thinking about how democratic states can tackle the challenges of climate change.

NEW CHALLENGES, NEW DIRECTIONS

As Sen (1999a) argues, the postcolonial world was long viewed as unfit for democracy. Indeed, the first generation of sociologists and comparative political scientists to engage with the postcolonial world did so through modernization or Marxist lenses that treated democracy as a contingent by-product of specific cultural dispositions or economic development. Sociologists have debunked these teleological paradigms by showing that democratization is the outcome of social and political struggles (Mahoney 2001, Skocpol & Fiori 1999). In the postcolonial context, the stakes of those struggles have always gone beyond the liberal vision of democracy to include broader claims for popular sovereignty and participation. Such aspirations have, moreover, been inextricably tied as much to the material struggles between economic classes as to demands for recognition and full citizenship by culturally and socially subordinated groups. The resulting and highly varied trajectories of democratic transition, consolidation, and, in some cases, deepening have all been shaped by colonial legacies and relations of global dependency, but also by internal contention among social groups and between states and civil societies.

The resulting range of regimes types has spawned a massive literature, especially among political scientists, that focuses on the institutional dimensions of representative democracy, including some important efforts to quantify varieties of democracy. Sociologists have expanded the scope of inquiry by focusing on the collective actors and forms of contention that shape democratic institutions, as well as the ways in which those institutions, in turn, shape the practices of subaltern citizenship. The research that has emerged has made three substantive contributions. First, we now have a much richer and more analytically powerful understanding of how specific configurations of civil society actors and patterns of engagement with state authorities generate the identities, discourses, and collective practices that fuel democratic politics. Second, moving beyond representative structures and elections, research has revealed a wide range of participatory structures and practices that, in some cases, have changed the balance of power between elites and subordinates groups and, in many others, have impacted everyday politics and claim making. Third, against the overly generalized claim that the circumstances of postcolonial democratization preclude the possibility of substantive economic and social change, a growing body of work has documented how democratic politics can strengthen the capacity of the state to pursue welfare-enhancing policies.

Despite the increased attention to democracies in the Global South in recent decades, we have only begun to scratch the surface. There are any number of areas of inquiry that sociologists can



contribute to, but two in particular can illustrate how much work needs to be done. The recent trend of democratic backsliding in many Global South democracies (India, Brazil, Turkey, the Philippines) is alarming but, compared with the explosion of research on right-wing populism in the United States and Europe, has received limited attention. If backsliding underscores the fragility of democratic institutions and state–civil society relations, it also underscores just how far democracy has transformed political and social landscapes. While the drivers of reaction are diverse [see the special issue of *International Sociology* edited by Evans (2020)], the cases of Modi and his Hindu nationalist party in India and Bolsonaro and his brand of demagogic populism in Brazil reveal a clear pattern. In both cases, right-wing ethno-nationalist leaders came to power on the strength of a middle- and upper-class-led reaction to the gains made by popular democratic forces over the previous two decades. The reaction to multiculturalism and the rights-based welfare state that both regimes represent is a direct response to the success with which democratic deepening in Brazil and India, two of the three largest democracies in the Global South, has challenged traditional class and status hierarchies of race, caste, and gender (Braga & Purdy 2019, Heller 2020, Jaffrelot 2021). Linking democratic erosion to realignments of status/class configurations is a good starting point but only begs for more focused analyses of specific shifts in identity politics, sectoral dynamics, and mobilizational patterns that might explain the reaction. Good examples include McKenna's (2020) work on the inroads evangelical churches made into an increasingly precarious Brazilian working class in building support for Bolsonaro and Bhatti & Sundar's (2020) research showing how the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh—the civil society organization that Modi rode to power—has slowly infiltrated and subverted democratic institutions such as the media, the judiciary and the educational system.

Second, we must take to heart O'Donnell's (1988, p. 283) dictum that “if political democracy is to be consolidated, democratic practices need to be spread throughout society, creating a rich fabric of democratic institutions and authorities.” This is critical to developing a better understanding not only of when and how genuinely democratic forms of effective citizenship can take hold, but also of how democratic regimes and institutions can tackle pressing questions of expanding social rights, providing protection against the increasing precarity of work in a globalizing economy and changing climate. Sociologists have precisely the tools necessary to study this fabric, but doing so requires more intensive and closer examination of not just national institutions but also the subnational and local arenas in which democracy is practiced (or subverted) and citizens are made (Glenn 2011, Somers 1993). There have been some important and exciting recent contributions (Carter 2012, Levien 2018, Marques 2021, Roychowdhury 2020, Veeraraghan 2021, Vijayakumar 2021), including a rapidly growing body of work on cities of the Global South (Bradlow 2021, Garrido 2019, Goldfrank 2011, Ren 2018, Weinstein 2009), but the terrain remains vast and diverse and calls for innovative research strategies.

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