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As the title’s allusion to Barrington Moore’s (1966) classic would suggest, Acemoglu and Robinson (A&R) take on an ambitious project. They attempt no less than to synthesize the last 40 years of work on democratization into “the first systematic formal analysis of the creation and consolidation of democracy,” (p. 80) while simultaneously providing a common modeling framework for considering questions of regime change. A&R largely succeed. Rather than detracting from their argument, the inevitable holes and hand-waving will tend to stimulate productive future research, both theoretical and empirical.

A&R’s major theoretical contribution is the application of dynamic game theory to the study of democracy and regime change. Though the ingredients of their models will be familiar to political scientists (the median voter theorem, redistributive pressures in democracies, the threat of revolt, etc.), the use of dynamic games buys them several novel predictions. Specifically their models can account for gradual extensions of the franchise (e.g., Britain), persistent nondemocracy (e.g., Singapore), and oscillations between democracy and rule by the elite (e.g., Argentina). They also derive comparative statics that predict a non-linear relationship between inequality and the emergence of democracy: “[T]here is an inverted-U-shaped relationship between inequality and democratization. Highly equal or highly unequal societies are unlikely to democratize. Rather, it is societies at intermediate levels of inequality in which we observe democratization...having democratized, democracy is more likely to consolidate in more equal societies” (p. 244). This result differs from the linear relationships predicted by static models of democracy, democratization, and redistribution, e.g., Boix (2003). Readers familiar with the authors’ previous work will likely have
a strong sense of déjà vu, but this book is not a compendium of the their widely cited journal articles. Instead, the authors simplify the exposition of several of their most well known models in favor of presenting a greater number of extensions of their basic framework.

A strength of the book is its modular organization. Each part of the book could stand on its own and be deployed profitably for different audiences and to different ends. Part one (ch. 1-3) lays out their argument in intuitive and largely non-technical terms, grounding the discussion with historical reference to four illustrative cases: Britain, Argentina, South Africa, and Singapore. Chapter three provides and excellent review of both the theoretical and empirical literatures on democratization from the last 40 years. Part one, if not the whole book, should make its way into the required reading for upper division undergraduates and graduate survey courses in comparative politics and political economy.

Part two (ch. 4-5) is a quick review of the theoretical insights they use to construct their models. Chapter four reviews the median voter theorem in its many guises as well as the inequality-redistribution result from Meltzer and Richard (1981). These results form the basis of their reduced-form understanding of democratic politics. Chapter five is an extended discussion of politics in a nondemocracy, evaluating the possibilities for redistribution when the poor can threaten to revolt and expropriate the rich. This chapter is the first to formally introduce the dynamic games that underpin the rest of their theoretical exercises. The key building block introduced in this chapter is the inability of nondemocracies to make credible promises about future actions when the viability of revolt varies over time. Part two is sufficiently technical to frustrate readers not previously exposed to constrained maximization and dynamic programming yet also too cursory to serve as a complete, formal introduction to these models and tools on its own. It is a good review of the major results from formal studies of social choice, democratic politics, and redistribution and lays the foundation for the rest of the book.

At the core of the book is part three (ch. 6-7), which presents in formal detail their most stripped-down model of the emergence and consolidation of democracy. Politics is a dynamic game with two players, the Elite and the Citizens, fighting over the income tax rate. While the Citizens are more numerous, the Elite possess a disproportionate share of the economy’s wealth.
There are two possible configurations of political institutions: democracy and nondemocracy. In a democracy, the median voter (a Citizen) picks the tax rate, whereas in a nondemocracy a member of the elite picks the level of redistribution. The game begins with the Elite in control. The Elite must decide whether to repress the poor or not (repression is costly). If they do not repress the Elite then decide either to democratize or choose a tax rate. If they do not democratize, the Citizens decide whether to initiate a revolution. Revolution is costly, however, and its “price” is given by an exogenous parameter which follows a stochastic law of motion through time. This cost-of-revolution parameter ($\mu$) is critical to their models; it induces the dynamic nature of the game and the commitment problems that drive their results. More substantively, $\mu$ embodies A&R’s distinction between political power and political institutions. Actors have preferences over democracy or nondemocracy because institutions enable them to secure on an ongoing basis the benefits accruing as a result of having more de facto power in any particular period.

The main result in chapter six characterizes the dynamics of democratization. Elites democratize only when the threat of revolution is below a certain threshold and repression is sufficiently costly. This occurs because, due to the level of inequality and the value of $\mu$, they cannot redistribute enough in this period to stave off revolution and they cannot credibly promise to redistribute in the future when the threat of revolution is lower. In chapter seven they investigate the consolidation of democracy by introducing a “cost of coup” parameter ($\varphi$). In this richer model, the level of redistribution in a democracy can be constrained or “unconsolidated” as the ability of the Elite to mount a coup varies through time. As the cost of democracy to the elite increases (i.e., the society is more unequal), coups become more attractive. In a “semi-consolidated” democracy the Citizens are able to moderate their redistributive demands in periods when $\varphi$ is low to prevent a coup. Democracy is unconsolidated when inequality is so high that Citizens cannot reduce taxes enough to make a coup unattractive to the Elite. Here the Elite mount a coup whenever they have power and democratize whenever the Citizens do. A key implication is that redistribution is no longer increasing monotonically in inequality, as in Meltzer-Richard. Redistribution increases with inequality only up to a point. Beyond this point, redistributive demands must be moderated to forestall a coup. At very high levels of inequality, the redistributive demands undermine the
stability of the regime.

Part four (ch. 8-10) profitably extends the core model in several directions. Chapter eight introduces a middle class, bringing us back to Moore’s “no bourgeoise, no democracy” dictum. Introducing a middle class makes both the introduction and consolidation of democracy more likely as their presence will moderate redistributive demands, making democracy less threatening to the Elite. Chapter nine introduces a richer economic structure in which agents are now endowed with productive factors (land, labor, capital). As a result, the type and distribution of assets affects the players’ strategies. Land will be taxed more than capital, making landowners more willing to engage in repression and coups than capitalists, with corresponding implications for democracy. Chapter ten builds on the model from chapter nine by opening the economy to trade. Since increasing openness affects the returns to productive factors, this extension yields a variety of predictions that are contingent on the structure of the economy. They argue that opening the economy will make democratization more likely where labor is the relatively abundant factor but less likely where land is.

The book is open to criticism from numerous angles. As the authors acknowledge, their application of Occam’s razor is brutal. Area specialists will surely bristle at the just-so historiography found throughout the book, though the breadth of historical discussion is impressive. The conception of politics (and the economy) is extremely simplified. It is open to debate whether preferences over regimes are derived from the redistributive outcomes they putatively engender rather than other facets of government. Those who find rational actor models unsatisfactory will find plenty to object to. Even here, however, A&R, present extensions of the model which include ideological parties and probabilistic voting. They repeatedly caution that intergroup inequality may not map on to class; regional or ethnic division may be more salient.

More problematic, however, are some frustratingly vague concepts. Consolidation, in particular, is defined recursively: “a democracy is consolidated if the set of institutions that characterize it endure through time.” (p. 30) Leaving aside an adequate definition of institutions, this definition begs many questions, particularly when it comes to empirical testing of the model. How long is enough? Are there particular events which signal consolidation? The key event in their models is
whether the Elite mount a coup when \( \varphi \) is low. What, empirically, is \( \varphi \) (or \( \mu \), for that matter)?

Though the historical discussions are compelling, more rigorous empirical examination will not be a trivial task. Despite their parsimony, the models contain several moving, interacting parts. In any empirical exercise, determining which variables to treat as initial conditions and which are endogenous is not obvious. There will be difficulty measuring core concepts over long periods of time, inequality chief among them.

At an empirical level, this book seems to have ignored one of the greatest simultaneous mass shifts in institutions in history, namely the collapse of the Soviet Union. This is particularly noteworthy since the post-Soviet states tended to inherit relatively egalitarian societies yet follow quite different trajectories. Much of the recent work in democratization has emerged from students of these events. It is unclear whether A&R have digested it. The post-Soviet transition will be an excellent laboratory in which to test or modify their models.

All these criticisms point toward fruitful paths for research: Acemoglu and Robinson have succeeded in tilling extremely fertile soil. The book both presents the next generation of theoretical tools and frames the debate for years to come. The parsimony of their argument combined with the astonishing breadth of its implications and the significant difficulties in empirical testing will surely fuel much productive research. A well-worn copy of the book should be on the shelves of comparativists, political economists, and students of development.

References

