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Incorporating social movement insights into democratisation theory: elaboration of a potential framework

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David Andrew Jeffrey Vincent

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Abstract

Scholarship which has sought to identify the causes of political democratisation has historically paid little attention to the role of the 'masses' in such processes. Contributors working from a structural perspective have typically identified factors such as socioeconomic modernisation as being responsible for political change, without specifying the intervening mechanisms by which this change occurs. Alternatively, scholarship which asserts the significance of agents has focused almost exclusively on the actions of political elites, without explaining the contextual forces which influence these elites' decisions. In order to properly understand democratisation, one can ignore neither the significance of structural factors in determining context, nor the fact that political elites invariably write constitutions and pass laws. However, it appears that there is a pressing need for theory which explains the mechanisms by which structural variables lead to elite decisions to create democratic institutions.

An increasing quantity of evidence suggests that the actions of the masses may be a significant vehicle for understanding this evolution. As the democratisation literature has interfaced with the masses in only the most limited manner, it seems expedient to look elsewhere for understandings which might aid in the comprehension of their role. One field which appears to bear particular potential is that of social movement scholarship. While this field has largely concerned itself with movements in Western democracies, attempts to adapt social movement concepts to the study of democratisation bear witness to the feasibility of this venture. Despite the appearance of a number of such attempts, social movement scholars have thus far failed to develop convincing, generalised theory of democratisation as it is influenced by the masses. Contributions in this vein have been afflicted by a tendency to draw understandings from a restricted area of social movement research, and by a failure to interface with the rich body of existing democratisation literature.

This work seeks to contribute to the rectification of this situation by providing a theoretical framework for a more comprehensive incorporation of the masses in democratisation theory. In order to do so, it will take seriously the understandings of over half a century of democratisation research, while attempting to adapt the concepts of the social movement literature to suit the authoritarian contexts in which democratisation takes place. This work will thus identify three ideal paths suggested by the social movement literature by which the masses may influence the emergence of democratic politics. It will then examine a wide range of social movement theories in order to discover the most salient insights regarding the likely emergence and trajectories of movements. A research agenda will then be suggested for subsequent research which may shed more light on the exact working of the processes identified here as potentially salient. In doing so, it is hoped that a theoretical platform will be provided upon which future contributions may erect a comprehensive explanation of the role of the masses in democratisation processes. Such a development may well in turn go far in filling the theoretical void which currently exists between long-term structural accounts of the variables influencing eventual democratisation, and the agency-based accounts of the immediate actions of political elites in establishing the relevant institutions.

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