

Rediscovering Democracy

*A Review of *The Decline and Rise of Democracy: A Global History from Antiquity to Today* by David Stasavage (Princeton University Press, 2020)*

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In an age of anxiety about the future of democracy, when new publications routinely come out bearing such titles as *How Democracies Die* and *How Democracies End*, David Stasavage's new book offers a deeper probe into the past and a more hopeful message about the future. In contrast to the recent flurry of books and articles on the topic, which usually limit their focus to the past century or two, *The Decline and Rise of Democracy* claims to bring to light a global history of democracy spanning several millennia. In that respect, it continues the trend of "grand narrative" histories popularized by such writers as Jared Diamond, Ian Morris, and Walter Scheidel.

One of the book's objectives is to overturn the long-established narrative that democracy was invented at a particular time and place (viz. ancient Greece) and was later revived by modern Europeans. Stasavage argues that democracy, rather than being a hallmark of the West, was actually common across early societies all around the globe. However, as states became larger, democracy proved harder to scale than what he calls the "autocratic alternative." Many early democracies thus came to be overrun by larger-scale autocracies. Even when democratic societies prevailed against larger kingdoms and conquered them, they often became autocratic in the process because they inherited a centralized state with bureaucratic structures. In addition to the problem of scale, early democracy was also undermined by new technologies that allowed rulers to monitor their subjects' activities and production more closely.

This is the initial "decline of democracy" referred to in the book's title. The subsequent "rise of democracy" refers to the appearance of a new form of representative government in the 18th century, initially along the north Atlantic seaboard, from which it has now spread to much of the world. This new system, dubbed by Stasavage "modern democracy," is characterized by broad suffrage and a legislature in which—this is key—representatives are *not* bound by mandates from their constituents (more on that below). Modern democracy, the book argues, has solved

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Citation: Jack Visnjic. 2020. A Review of *The Decline and Rise of Democracy: A Global History from Antiquity to Today* by David Stasavage (Princeton University Press, 2020). *Clodynamics* 11(2): 72–76.

the problem of scale, while it has also incorporated certain autocratic features, such as a strong state with a centralized bureaucracy.

The book consists of twelve chapters organized into three main sections. Chapters 1–4 seek to explain the origins of democracy, to present evidence that it was widespread in premodern times, and to illustrate ways in which the progress of civilization often undermined early democracy. In chapters 5–8, Stasavage attempts to explain the political divergence between modern Europe and the rest of the world. He does so by first tracing the emergence of representation (one of the defining features of modern democracy) in medieval Europe in chapter 5. The next two chapters explore why large-scale democracies did not emerge in China and the early Islamic world, respectively. Chapter 8 works to debunk claims that economic history alone can explain the political divergence of modern Europe.

The third and final section of the book (chapters 9–12) explores the rise and spread of modern democracy. Chapters 9 and 10 illuminate just how much the character of modern democracy is indebted to the peculiarities of English and American history. Chapter 11 discusses the astonishing spread of modern democracy over the past few centuries, including recently to regions of the world that were thought to be too poor or underdeveloped to sustain democracy. The final chapter applies the lessons learned throughout the book to offer some thoughts on what the future may have in store for not just America, but also China. In the case of America, Stasavage claims that the long history of democracy should make us hopeful about its future, provided that we make continual efforts and investments to address two challenges in particular: growing executive power and citizen distrust in government.

The book's many virtues include its pellucid prose, broad historical scope, and the decades of careful research that went into writing it. To read the book is to be taken on a roller-coaster ride across four millennia of history, from ancient Mesopotamia and India, to pre-colonial America and Africa, to medieval Arabia and Europe, and beyond. Ultimately, Stasavage isolates three factors as being key to the rise of early democracy. Democratic rule was most likely to arise in (1) small scale settings where (2) rulers lacked accurate knowledge about what their subjects were producing. This information deficit gave rulers an incentive to share power in order to optimize their taxation system. Furthermore, democracy was more likely to arise when (3) rulers needed their subjects more than their subjects needed them. This last factor was especially pertinent in cases where rulers needed people to fight wars and where the people had exit options (they could pack up and move to a new territory). In such cases, rulers often made concessions to the ruled in exchange for their services and loyalty.

In defending these claims, Stasavage marshals an impressive array of arguments and "big data" analyses. For example, how does one measure how well rulers

know what their subjects are producing? One proxy that can be used is the predictability or unpredictability of crop yields in a given territory. If Stasavage is right, we would expect to see a positive correlation between *caloric variability* of agricultural output and democracy in early societies. And in fact, the data compiled in the book shows that regions with high caloric variability were significantly more likely to exhibit council governance (a proxy for democracy) than places with predictable agricultural yields. In the end, each of the three aforementioned factors for early democracy are supported by a wealth of evidence, leaving little room for doubt that they are each in fact conducive to democracy. What is left unclear is whether these were the only important factors at play, and how many of them needed to be present to enable early democracy. One may point here to the late Roman Republic (an early democracy under Stasavage's definition) as an exception to the small scale requirement. Similarly, numerous ancient Greek democratic *poleis* that did not employ direct taxation would seem to constitute exceptions to factor number two.

Besides being an impressive new entrant in the field of grand narrative histories (as mentioned above), the book can also be contextualized within the longstanding debate about whether democracy is a uniquely Greco-Roman legacy or not. On the one hand, Stasavage's deemphasizing of Athens' role in the birth of democracy is in line with the recent work of classical scholars such as Robinson (1997) and Ober (2015), who have shown that Athens' democratization was part of a larger trend happening across the ancient Mediterranean. Moreover, his exploration of "early democracy" in other societies around the world is both illuminating and constitutes the most comprehensive such survey to date. On the other hand, his underlying claim that these early societies may legitimately be called "democracies" has been made before,¹ and was controverted as recently as 2016 by Paul Cartledge in his book *Democracy: A Life*. Given the similarity of Cartledge's book to Stasavage's in terms of its chronological breadth and overall purpose, it is somewhat striking that Stasavage nowhere responds to Cartledge's argument.

What Stasavage's book makes indisputable is that non-autocratic regimes with cooperative structures have existed the world over and for millennia. Moreover, the book offers perhaps the most thorough analysis to date of the factors that promoted and sustained non-autocratic governance in premodern times. However, it is not clear what is gained by grouping all non-autocratic regimes under the label of "democracy"—a term that has carried a more specific meaning for so long. Classical political theory distinguishes between many forms of non-autocratic rule, including democracy, oligarchy, aristocracy, ochlocracy, republic, and federation. Under the framework proposed by this book, all of these regime types are collapsed under the label of "early democracy." This leads to the somewhat

¹ By Goodie (2006) as well as Isakhan and Stockwell (2011), among others.

awkward result that the Roman Republic and the ancient Mesopotamian kingdom of Mari would both fall under the label “early democracy,” even though Rome resembles Mari less than it does modern America.²

One might have expected America’s special connection with the Roman Republic to come up in the section of the book dealing with modern democracy. However, the book offers no indication at all that many of the Founders and Framers looked to the Roman Republic as a model while they strove to usher forth a new republic of their own. This reticence, whether intentional or not, helps keep the focus instead on another aspect of modern democracy that the book tries to explain—its indebtedness to legacies of European and, in particular, British systems of representation. In that regard, the book succeeds unequivocally. It offers a detailed and fascinating account of the evolution of representative governance through the Middle Ages and explains why representation took a different turn in England. Interestingly, it was the English crown’s unique success (compared to other European monarchies) in compelling constituencies to grant their representatives in Parliament full power to operate free of mandates that laid much of the crucial groundwork for modern democracy. While representation unbound by local mandates initially favored the crown, it also freed the Parliament from local blocking power, thus allowing it to operate as an independent body that grew in power until it eclipsed that of the monarchy. Stasavage also explains how this type of representation, while undemocratic in certain respects, helped increase state capacity, was adopted by the new United States government, and has become a backbone of modern democracy around the world today.

In conclusion, *The Decline and Rise of Democracy* is an important book for our age of political uncertainty. In a world where there is no shortage of “democracy experts,” each offering ghastly predictions about the future, this book offers much-needed historical depth and nuanced analysis. The discussions of democratic regimes across history are complimented by parallel discussions of autocratic states which helpfully illustrate the factors, choices, and sequences of events that led different states down the path of either democracy or autocracy. The scope of the book is so broad that all readers (even historians) stand to learn much from it. While some of the arguments are likely to prove controversial, the evidence for them is always transparently laid out in such a way that readers may use it to reach their own conclusions. Instead of ending with a vivid prediction, Stasavage prefers to conclude by offering historically based reasons for optimism, reasons for pessimism, and steps that we can take to help ensure the longevity of democracy. The book is sure to influence debates about democracy among historians, economists, and concerned citizens in the years to come. Hopefully, it will encourage them to

² The Roman Republic is surprisingly never discussed in the book. Nevertheless, it clearly falls under Stasavage’s conception of early democracy.

Visnjic: Review of The Decline and Rise of Democracy. Cliodynamics 11:2 (2020)

take “a long-term view” of democracy, as Stasavage advises (p. 192), and not just focus on the events of the past century.

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