

Michael Albertus, Victor Menaldo. *Authoritarianism and the Elite Origins of Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 322 pp. \$29.99, paper, ISBN 978-1-316-64903-9.

Reviewed by Marie-Josée Lavallée (Université de Montréal/ Université du Québec à Montréal)

Published on H-Socialisms (August, 2019)

Commissioned by Gary Roth (Rutgers University - Newark)

Democracy and Authoritarianism

Those who believe that actual democracies are, and strive to be, as true as possible to the classical definition of democracy as an expression of the power of, by, and for the people, will be disillusioned from the very first pages of *Authoritarianism and the Elite Origins of Democracy*. “Democracy is often an enterprise undertaken by elites and for elites,” write Michael Albertus and Victor Menaldo (p. 3). For scholars and interested readers, this book surveys the root causes of contemporary dissatisfaction with democracy.

Democracy has been plagued by corruption, polarization, ineffectiveness, and the privileging of elite interests rather than the people’s will. Moreover, democratic conditions like freedom, equality, and the protection of individual rights have suffered in recent years in many parts of the world in regimes claiming to be democratic. The strong popular support given to overtly populist and right-wing leaders and parties is another recent cause for concern. Disappointment with democracy, disaffection, and blatant rejection are far from new. Is democracy an inherently defective or corrupt regime, a conviction that was widespread during the darkest hours of the last century and was already voiced by some of the greatest minds of antiquity? In fact, democracy

has no definite form and can take on different physiognomies, depending on the soil in which it takes root and the conditions in which it grows. When the latter are not favorable, democracy can be a mere label used to lend an aura of legitimacy to autocratic regimes. *Authoritarianism and the Elite Origins of Democracy* identifies basic factors that have derailed democracy. The book combines empirical studies and theoretical discussion in order to identify the conditions in which transitions to democracy and democratizations occur and the main structural and circumstantial conditions and impediments that influence that process.

Transitions to democracy result either in an elite-biased or a popular democracy. The outcome depends on the type of regime that prevailed beforehand (referred to by the authors as either “consolidated dictatorship” or “volatile dictatorship”); structural factors like state capacity, the existence of a legislature under autocracy, and autocratic legacies like strong militaries, hegemonic parties, and preexisting political structures; and circumstantial factors. Constitutions are a key element. When the latter is drafted well before the transition, autocratic elites have plenty of room for defining its provisions and thus ensuring that their interests will continue to prevail in the new

democratic regime, usually an “elite-biased” democracy. Conversely, a popular democracy will be a more likely outcome when a constitution is written at a time of transition or if the new regime inherits a democratic constitution, as in the cases of Czech Republic and Slovakia, which were parts of former Czechoslovakia. Countries previously subjected to colonial or imperial rule are a different case. Because there is no indigenous regime to overthrow after independence, there is no need of a transition process to create a democratic regime. Even if imperialist elites leave the country afterward, the former occupiers leave behind institutional legacies that plague the flourishing democracy. This is especially the case when independence was initiated by the former colonial power rather than through an indigenous revolution. Newly independent countries are thus likely “to have political legacies imposed on them by their colonial forebears that resemble authoritarian legacies” (p. 249).

The typology of democracy on which the authors rely suffices to show that transitions and the democratization process are often initiated and controlled from above rather than from below, even though this framework can be overly minimalist. There exist so many competing conceptions and experiences of democracy that one must be more specific. The authors’ distinction between elite-biased and popular democracy is based on the mode of selection of leaders and the distribution of suffrage. Popular democracy is said to be more representative, pluralistic, inclusive, and redistributive than its counterpart. However, the actual democratic climate of a given country depends on the prevalence of these criteria. The distinction between democracies “by name” and more popular ones also relies on a set of qualitative criteria, like freedom of speech, civil liberties, opportunities for political action, and popular influence on decisional processes. The authors have no interest in these barometers of democracy, nor in informal institutions like political cultures or ideas. They choose to focus on formal institutions,

since the elites make their interests prevail through these channels.

That elite-biased democracy is the most common outcome of transitions and democratization, and that these processes are routine strategies for incumbent political and economic elites in dictatorships to secure their preexisting positions, are crucial observations often neglected by other studies. The chapter devoted to the analysis of these strategies is one of the richest in the book. Two-thirds of the transitions that occurred between 1800 and 2006 inherited a constitution from their autocratic predecessors. In the postwar era alone, this proportion reached 70 percent. This scenario applies to some of the oldest Western democracies, findings that are compatible with the conclusions of the most recent empirical studies.[1]

Acknowledging elites’ designs to make democracy subservient to their own interests greatly contributes to understanding why democracy so often suffers from unhealthy development and collapse, and fails to meet people’s expectations. However, this does not require reducing democracy to a mere battlefield for elites’ internecine struggles and intrigues. Most of the data and interpretations put forward in *Authoritarianism and the Elite Origins of Democracy* converge toward this conclusion, even though the authors affirm that democracies “do not all disappoint” (p. 99). They go so far as to suggest that even in cases where popular democracies are crafted by “outsiders and economic elites and the masses,” incumbent elites maintain control of the democratization process. Some democracies built upon an autocratic constitution managed to alter it later on, but this was not due to popular pressure and action, according to the authors.

The refusal to recognize that people can play an autonomous and independent role in democratization, a point emphasized in many recent studies, is a weakness of the analysis.[2] Instances where elites’ plans were put in check by a popular vote or action are mentioned, but the logical con-

clusions do not follow. The masses are depicted as unable to unite, organize, and coordinate by themselves. They “suffer from a serious collective action problem” because they are divided by characteristics like race, ethnicity, and economic status. They also lack the ability to “coordinate on a single focal point or solution to translate their preferences into national political power” (p. 35). Thus, action depends on “mobilization from above” (p. 35), especially on the support of “outsider economic elites” (p. 36). For all these reasons, one cannot expect that the people have the necessary skills “to follow through and orchestrate long-lasting political change of their own” (p. 35). Another bold claim is that revolutions may be triggered or supported by outside groups and elites in a struggle against incumbent elites. Revolution is likely to result in popular democracy and economic redistribution, an outcome elites usually try to avoid.

Progress and popular democracy often rely on conjuncture and chance rather than popular action. An unexpected deterioration of conditions securing elites’ domination, a dictator’s death, an unexpected and large-scale protest action, an economic collapse, currency or debt crisis, or a natural disaster is sometimes the key factor. These types of circumstances serve as limited grounds for improvement, since they elicit initiatives and responses from above. According to the authors, real change is the outcome of institutional and constitutional measures. This was the case in Sweden, the topic of the sixth chapter. Although often celebrated as “the most egalitarian” country, its most admirable features resulted from medium- and long-term developments that were not present from the onset.

The use of different methodological approaches is one of the strongest features of *Authoritarianism and the Elite Origins of Democracy*. Its primary focus is democratic transitions that occurred during the second half the twentieth century, the period referred to as the “third wave

of democratization” and to which many empirical studies have been devoted since the mid-1990s, although the authors also reference the history of democratization since 1800 in order to give more depth to their analysis. They draw on empirical data, which they present in charts and tables, from influential studies in the field, and they also use raw data on occasion. In the fourth chapter, the authors use empirical calculations to quantify each of the factors put forward in the book. These tests confirm their thesis that democratic regimes often bear the scars of a previous autocracy. They also use calculations in the fifth chapter, where they explore the evolution from a democracy with an autocratic constitution to one based on a popular sovereignty. They identify the factors that trigger constitutional changes, measure their occurrence, and evaluate their impact. The authors also test their hypotheses on the qualitative level, through case studies. Chapters devoted to Sweden and Chile are intended to verify scenarios and conclusions related to authoritarian legacies. Canada, the Philippines, and Ukraine are used to illustrate the “pathologies” inherited from colonial or imperial episodes in the last chapter of the book (p. 248).

The authors also revisit long-debated issues concerning democratization, as in the connections between economic well-being, economic development or “modernity,” and democracy. Democratic regimes do not automatically foster economic equality, hold the authors. Moreover, autocracies may implement generous public policies to attract popular support and limit their opponents. This strategy is common among rising economic elites in new democracies. Using indicators of democratization current in other studies such as per capita income and total natural resources income per capita, the authors contest the commonly held position that economic modernity fosters democracy. Steady economic growth can stabilize authoritarian regimes. Modernization, according to the authors, enables “incumbent political and economic elites to coordinate for a favorable transition from

dictatorship and endow[s] them with the tools to realize it” (p. 56). In other words, economic modernity can help smooth the transition to an elite-biased democracy rather than for a popular democracy. In addition, the impact of imperial and colonial legacies may remain strong. Instead of considering cases from sub-Saharan Africa, where colonialism’s impact has been devastating, the authors focus on former British colonies that are often treated by other scholars as robust democracies and not included in studies of colonialism’s impact on democracy. The same is true for countries that had been occupied by the United States.

The overall impression from *Authoritarianism and the Elite Origins of Democracy* is that democracy as a regime of, by, and for the people is a fantasy, despite the authors’ declared intent to avoid a pessimistic reading of events. The book is also an invitation to take full measure of how deeply democracy has been captured by elites, in the hope that this process can be reversed. Despite the overemphasis on elites’ manipulation of democracy and failure to fully appreciate people’s potential for organization and action, *Authoritarianism and the Elite Origins of Democracy* is an outstanding book. It brings to light crucial elements of why democracy so often fails to fulfill its promises. The variety of methodological approaches enhances the book. The authors address important and long-debated issues while suggesting new explanations and perspectives. This approach serves as an open invitation to other scholars to join the discussion.

Notes

[1]. See for instance Scott Mainwaring and Fernando Bizzarro, “The Fates of Third-Wave Democracies,” *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 1 (2019): 99-113; 103-05, 107-08.

[2]. The decisive impact of social movements and popular parties is the common denominator of the essays gathered in the following volume, which explores democratization in most areas of the world: Nancy Bermeo and Deborah J. Yashar,

eds., *Parties, Movements, and Democracy in the Developing World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-socialisms>

Citation: Marie-Josée Lavallée. Review of Albertus, Michael; Menaldo, Victor, *Authoritarianism and the Elite Origins of Democracy*. H-Socialisms, H-Net Reviews. August, 2019.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=52623>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.