

Astonishing Switzerland

CHARLES TILLY
(1929–2008)

Let us see [...] whether we can convert the unruly political history of Switzerland into something like a disciplined set of observations on democratization and de-democratization. We close in on Switzerland as a relatively unknown experimenter with both democratization and de-democratization. A close look at Swiss history between the late 18th century and the middle of the 19th century allows us to clarify the questions that have been emerging [...]: how we can trace movement along the democracy-undemocracy dimension, whether regimes that have entered the zone of possibility for democracy then become more liable to both democratization and de-democratization, whether democratization and de-democratization typically occur at different tempos and with different forms of opposition between state and citizen power.

Swiss experience provides some surprises in all these regards, both because of the common assumption that the Swiss simply refashioned ancient Alpine local democracy into a national regime and because of Switzerland's reputation as a calm, smug, orderly country. In fact, the Swiss path to democracy led the country close to utter fragmentation, and passed through nearly two decades of civil war.

[...]

Switzerland's complex history between 1790 and 1848 poses a serious challenge for the representation of democratization and de-democratization. Our capacity-democracy space helps to meet that challenge. Figure 1 traces Switzerland's astonishing trajectory from 1790 to 1848.

Despite direct adult male democracy in a number of villages and highland cantons, the regime as a whole started its itinerary with low state ca-

© Charles Tilly, extract from Democracy (2007), published by Cambridge University Press, reproduced with permission. Note by the editor: This article is extracted from the second half of chapter 3 “Democratization and De-Democratization” (pp. 66–78). Because of the space constraints of this special section of the SPSR, significant parts of the historical narrative (pp. 67–70) had to be cut (A. K.).

pacity and little democracy. French intervention from 1798 onward boosted both capacity and democracy somewhat, but not permanently. At the 1815 peace settlement the Swiss regime both de-democratized and lost capacity. The energetic mobilizations of the 1830s restored some democracy to the regime as a whole without expanding the central state's capacity.

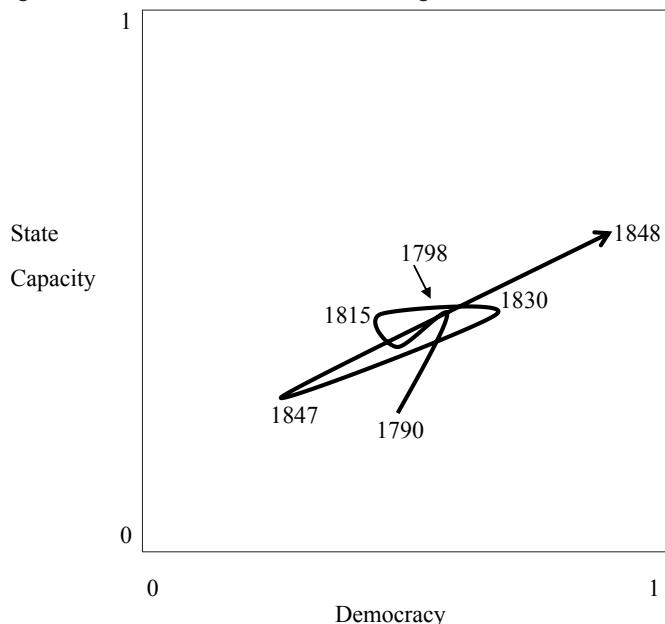
Soon Switzerland's divisions splintered first into civil wars at the cantonal and inter-cantonal levels before consolidating into the national civil war of the Sonderbund. By 1847 Switzerland had receded to its lowest levels of state capacity and democracy over the entire period. But with autonomist and conservative forces defeated militarily, the peace settlement of 1848 established a national regime of unprecedented democracy and state capacity. To be sure, later 19th century Switzerland never came close to neighboring France, Prussia, or Austria with regard to central capacity. But it became a European model for decentralized democracy.

Before 1798, Switzerland had never come close to substantial capacity or democracy at a national scale. The French conquest of that year simultaneously imposed a much more centralized national government and connected Switzerland's advocates of national representative government with powerful French allies. At that point, Switzerland switched into a long phase of rapid, and often violent, alternation between democratization and de-democratization. Precisely because of the regime's decentralized structure, variety, and sharp divisions, Swiss experience between 1798 and 1848 makes it difficult to divide national politics neatly into "state" and "citizens."

Swiss activists fought over that division for half a century. Yet a pair of generalizations that have been building up over other cases we have examined apply here as well: on the whole, Swiss de-democratization occurred more rapidly and violently than Swiss democratization, and in general privileged elites backed de-democratization against the expressed will of most citizens. The formation of the Catholic-conservative Sonderbund (1845) and its engagement in outright civil war against liberal forces (1847) brought Switzerland's crisis of elite reaction. In Switzerland, as elsewhere, democratization and de-democratization turn out to have been asymmetrical processes.

Let me draw a methodological conclusion. As pleasant as it would be to manipulate quantitative measures of democratization, de-democratization, increase in state capacity, and decrease of state capacity, in the present state of knowledge detailed analytical narratives of the kind we have just reviewed for Switzerland promise more for general explanations of de-

Figure 1: Fluctuations in Swiss National Regimes, 1790–1848



mocratization and de-democratization. They promise more because they allow us to match detailed changes in relations among political actors to alterations in their presumed causes. Although I will rely repeatedly on ratings such as those provided by Freedom House in chapters to come, the crucial matching of arguments and evidence will come in the form of analytical narratives.

What Next?

It is therefore time to move toward explanation of democratization and de-democratization. Almost inadvertently, we have accumulated a series of pressing explanatory questions. Any of the questions' answers, if correct, will provide major payoffs for today's studies of democracy. (If you yearn for fame and influence, if not necessarily fortune, as an analyst of democracy, answer one or more of these questions definitively.) Although I have phrased the questions in broadly historical terms, most students of the recent past are actually pursuing their own versions of the same questions.

The significant questions we have encountered so far are summarized in the following list:

1. In what ways did the truncated democratic institutions of city-states, warrior bands, peasant communities, merchant oligarchies, religious sects, and revolutionary movements provide models for more extensive forms of democracy? Given their availability, why did they never become direct templates for democracy at a national scale?
2. Why did Western Europe lead the way toward democratization, followed closely by the Americas?
3. How did (and do) such countries as France move from absolute immunity against national democratic institutions to frequent alternations between democratization and de-democratization?
4. Why, in general, did (and do) surges of de-democratization occur more rapidly than surges of democratization?
5. Again, how do we explain the asymmetrical patterns of support for and involvement in democratization and de-democratization?
6. Why does democratization typically occur in waves, rather than in each regime separately at its own peculiar pace?
7. What explains the spread of democratization and de-democratization outside those starting points during the 19th and (especially) 20th centuries?
8. Why (with the partial exceptions of Egypt and Japan) did democratization only start to occur in Asia and Africa well after World War II?
9. How can we account for the dramatically different experiences of post-socialist states with democratization and de-democratization?
10. Under what conditions, to what extent, and how does the growth of state capacity promote a regime's availability for democratization and de-democratization?
11. To what extent and how does an undemocratic regime's interactions with democratic regimes promote democratization in that regime?

12. How do the forms and sources of a state's sustaining resources (for example, agriculture, minerals, or trade) affect its regime's susceptibility to democratization and de-democratization?
13. Do any necessary or sufficient conditions exist for democratization and de-democratization, or (on the contrary) do favorable conditions vary significantly by era, region, and type of regime?

The list does not, to be sure, exhaust every interesting question that contemporary students of democratization are taking up. These days, for example, many people are asking whether widespread religious fundamentalism among a regime's citizenry undermines or inhibits democratization, and whether past some point of democratization ratchets fall into place that make de-democratization unlikely or impossible. But on the whole, the thirteen questions sum up the problems for whose solution students of democratization and de-democratization would be inclined to award each other major prizes.

[...]

Let me turn at once to number 13: necessary and sufficient conditions. Once you rule out conditions that belong to democratization and de-democratization by definition, I do not believe that any necessary, much less sufficient, conditions for either one exist. As we have already seen, comparison of otherwise similar cases in some of which democratization or de-democratization occurs and in others doesn't can clarify what we have to explain. But it will not identify universal conditions. At least no one has identified such conditions so far.

I do think, however, that some necessary *processes* promote democratization, and that reversals of those processes promote de-democratization. For the moment, let us neglect de-democratization, and concentrate on democratization, to make this line of argument clear. For democratization to develop in any regime, changes must occur in three areas: trust networks, categorical inequality, and autonomous power centers.

“Trust networks” are ramified interpersonal connections, consisting mainly of strong ties, within which people set valued, consequential, long-term resources and enterprises at risk to the malfeasance, mistakes, or failures of others. Trading diasporas, kinship groups, religious sects, revolutionary conspiracies, and credit circles often comprise trust networks. Over most of history, participants in trust networks have carefully shielded them from involvement in political regimes, for justified fear that rulers would

either seize their precious resources or subordinate them to the state's own programs.

So long as they remain entirely segregated from regimes, however, trust networks constitute obstacles to democratization; their segregation blocks members' commitment to democratic collective enterprises. Democratization becomes possible when trust networks integrate sufficiently into regimes that they provide the means of mutual binding – the contingent consent of citizens to programs proposed or enacted by the state (Tilly 2005). Two large processes affecting trust networks therefore underlie democratization: 1) dissolution or integration of segregated trust networks and 2) creation of politically connected trust networks. In Switzerland, the violent struggles of 1830–1847 and the peace settlement of 1848 promoted both processes (Tilly 2004: 187–90).

Within the two processes appear a series of recurrent mechanisms, for example

- disintegration of existing segregated trust networks e.g. decay of patrons' ability to provide their clients with goods and protection promotes withdrawal of clients from patron-client ties
- expansion of population categories lacking access to effective trust networks for their major long term risky enterprises e.g. growth of landless wage-workers in agrarian regions increases population without effective patronage and/or relations of mutual aid
- appearance of new long term risky opportunities and threats that existing trust networks cannot handle e.g. substantial increases in war, famine, disease and/or banditry visibly overwhelm protective capacity of patrons, diasporas, and local solidarities

In Switzerland, all three of these mechanisms reshaped trust networks between 1750 and 1848. Intensive growth of cottage textile production preceded 19th century re-concentration of lowland cities, including Zürich. That two-stage industrial transformation swelled Switzerland's proletarian population as it shook the patronage-cum-control of landlords and parish priests (Braun 1960, 1965; Gruner 1968; Gschwind 1977; Joris 1994; Joris and Witzig 1992; Rosenband 1999). Successive French invasions, the 1815 great power settlement, and the struggles of 1830–1847 themselves had dual effects: They shook old relations between trust networks and public politics at the cantonal level, but – at least for Protestants and secular

liberals – created new connections between interpersonal trust networks and the new half-regime that was emerging at a national scale within the Protestant-Liberal coalition.

Each of the three mechanisms just listed promotes the dissolution of segregated trust networks and the creation of politically connected trust networks. [...]

What of categorical inequality? The term means organization of social life around boundaries separating whole sets of people who differ collectively in their life chances, as is commonly the case with categories of gender, race, caste, ethnicity, nationality and religion, and is sometimes the case with categories of social class. To the extent that such inequalities translate directly into categorical differences in political rights and obligations, democratization remains impossible. Any democratization process depends not necessarily on diminution of categorical inequality but on insulation of public politics from categorical inequality. Two main processes contribute to that insulation: equalization of the categories themselves in some regards, and buffering of politics from the operation of those categories.

Here are the sorts of mechanisms that operate within the broader processes of equalization and buffering:

- equalization of assets and/or wellbeing across categories within the population at large e.g. booming demand for the products of peasant agriculture expands middle peasants
- reduction or governmental containment of privately controlled armed force e.g. disbanding of magnates' personal armies weakens noble control over commoners, thereby diminishing nobles' capacity to translate noble-commoner differences directly into public politics
- adoption of devices that insulate public politics from categorical inequalities e.g. secret ballots, payment of officeholders, and free, equal access of candidates to media forward formation of cross-category coalitions

These and similar mechanisms figured prominently in the Swiss history we have reviewed. In Switzerland, the regime that formed in 1848 established effective barriers between public politics and the categorical inequalities over which Swiss activists killed each other during the previous 17 years.

Autonomous power centers operate outside the control of public politics, of regular citizen-state interactions. They can include all those interpersonal connections that provide political actors – both individuals and segments of the citizenry – with the means of altering (or, for that matter, defending) existing distributions of resources, population, and activities within the regime. Sometimes they exist within the state itself, most obviously when the military run the state or operate independently of civilian authorities. The configuration of lineages, religious congregations, economic organizations, organized communities, and military forces in a given regime strongly affects the possibility that the regime's public politics will move toward broad, equal, protected, and mutually binding consultation. It does so both because that configuration shapes what sorts of political actors are readily available, and because it affects which segments of the citizenry are directly available for participation in public politics. To the extent that power centers, especially those controlling autonomous coercive means, remain detached from public politics, democratization remains difficult or impossible.

Democracy-promoting processes involving autonomous power centers include 1) broadening of political participation, 2) equalization of access to political resources and opportunities outside the state, and 3) inhibition of autonomous and/or arbitrary coercive power both within and outside the state. Although their weights and timing vary from one case of democratization to another, to some degree all three must occur for democratization to happen.

Mechanisms within these processes include:

- coalition formation between segments of ruling classes and constituted political actors that are currently excluded from power e.g. dis-sident bourgeois recruit backing from disfranchised workers, thus promoting political participation of those workers
- central co-optation or elimination of previously autonomous political intermediaries e.g. regional strongmen join governing coalitions, thus becoming committed to state programs
- brokerage of coalitions across unequal categories and/or distinct trust networks e.g. regional alliances form against state seizure of local assets, thus promoting employment of those alliances in other political struggles

All of these mechanisms and more operated within the transition of Switzerland from enormous fragmentation to low-capacity partial democracy. Most important, the military victory and peace settlement of 1847–1848 definitively checked the longstanding capacity of communities and cantons to deploy their armed forces – which continued to exist – autonomously.

Obviously larger changes in social life lie behind these crucial alterations of trust networks, categorical inequality, and non-state power. Eventually we will have to pay attention to transformations of economic organization, mass communications, population mobility, and education. We will eventually see that four powerful political processes – domestic confrontation, military conquest, revolution, and colonization – have regularly accelerated transformations of trust networks, categorical inequality, and public politics. They have sometimes produced rapid democratization or de-democratization as they have done so.

All these changes will remain mysterious, and perhaps dubious as well, until we explore them in much more detail. [...] However, let me simply lay out the argument involving them in a straightforward series of points:

1. Trajectories of regimes within our capacity-democracy space significantly affect both their prospects for democracy and the character of their democracy if it arrives.
2. In the long run, increases in state capacity and democratization reinforce each other, as state expansion generates resistance, bargaining, and provisional settlements, on one side, while on the other side democratization encourages demands for expansion of state intervention, which promote increases in capacity.
3. At the extremes, where capacity develops farther and faster than democratization, the path to democracy (if any) passes through authoritarianism; if democratization develops farther and faster than capacity and the regime survives, the path then passes through a risky zone of capacity building.
4. Although the organizational forms – elections, terms of office, areal representation, deliberative assemblies, and so on – adopted by democratizing regimes often emulate or adapt institutions that have strong precedents in villages, cities, regional jurisdictions, or adjacent national regimes, they almost never evolve directly from those institutions.

5. Democratization depend on changes in three arenas – categorical inequality, trust networks, and public politics – as well as on interactions among those changes.
6. Regularities in democratization consist not of standard general sequences or sufficient conditions, but of recurrent causal mechanisms that in varying combinations and sequences produce changes in categorical inequality, networks of trust, and non-state power.
7. Under specifiable circumstances, revolution, conquest, colonization, and domestic confrontation accelerate and concentrate some of those crucial causal mechanisms.
8. Almost all of the crucial democracy-promoting causal mechanisms involve popular contention – politically constituted actors' making of public, collective claims on other actors, including agents of government – as correlates, causes, and effects.
9. Despite important alterations in the specific forms of democratic institutions such as legislatures and the relative impact of different causal impact of different causal factors such as international certification of democratic regimes, the fundamental processes promoting democratization have remained the same over democracy's several centuries of history.

These arguments center on a core. Democratization never occurs without at least partial realization of three large processes: integration of interpersonal trust networks into public politics, insulation of public politics from categorical inequalities, and elimination or neutralization of autonomous, coercion-controlling power centers in ways that augment the influence of ordinary people over public politics and increase the control of public politics over state performance. Substantial withdrawal of trust networks from public politics, increasing insertion of categorical inequalities into public politics, and rising autonomy of coercive power centers all promote de-democratization. Although delays occur in the effects of these processes as a function of institutions set in place by a regime's previous history, always and everywhere the three large processes and their reversals dominate moves toward and away from democracy.

References

- Braun, R. (1960). *Industrialisierung und Volksleben*. Zurich: Rentsch.
- (1965). *Sozialer und kultureller Wandel in einem ländlichen Industriegebiet*. Zurich: Rentsch.
- Gruner, E. (1968). *Die Arbeiter in der Schweiz im 19. Jahrhundert*. Bern: Francke.
- Gschwind, F. (1977). *Bevölkerungsentwicklung und Wirtschaftsstruktur der Landschaft Basel im 18. Jahrhundert*. Liestal: Kantonale Drucksachen- und Materialzentrale.
- Joris, E. (1994). Auswirkungen der Industrialisierung auf Alltag und Lebenszusammenhänge von Frauen im Zürcher Oberland (1820–1940).
- In Agirreazkuenaga, J. and M. Urquijo (eds.), *Historias Regionales – Historia Nacional: La Confederación Helvética*. Bilbao: Servicio Editorial, Universidad del País Vasco.
- Joris, E. and H. Witzig (1992). *Brave Frauen, Aufmüpfige Weiber: Wie sich die Industrialisierung auf Alltag und Lebenszusammenhänge von Frauen auswirkte (1820–1940)*. Zurich: Chronos.
- Rosenband, L. (1999). Social Capital in the Early Industrial Revolution. *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 29: 435–58.
- Sauter, B. (1972). *Herkunft und Entstehung der Tessiner Kantonsverfassung von 1830*. Zurich: Schulthess.
- Tilly, C. (2004). *Contention and Democracy in Europe, 1650–2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (2005). *Trust and Rule*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.