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Democratization

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Making waves: democratic contention in Europe and Latin American since the revolutions of 1848, by Kurt Weyland

Matthijs Bogaards

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Pagoda makes it very clear that it still will take some time for democracy and national reconciliation to take root in Myanmar.

Marco Bünte
School of Arts and Social Sciences, Monash University Malaysia
✉ marco.buente@monash.edu

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Making waves: democratic contention in Europe and Latin American since the revolutions of 1848, by Kurt Weyland. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014, 318 pp., £59.99 (hardcover), £21.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-107-04474-6

Kurt Weyland's book on waves of democratic contention across two continents and three time periods makes a major contribution to comparative area studies and to what might be called "comparative era studies". The research monograph convincingly demonstrates the explanatory power offered by the qualitative study of political diffusion across space and time. The analysis is informed by the regional and historical expertise of the author, extensive interviews, archival research, and wide reading of both original sources and secondary literature.

Observing how the speed of democratic diffusion is inversely related to its success, Weyland advances a new theory combining micro-foundations with macro-variables to explain why the European revolutions of 1848 and 1917 created a huge wave of emulative contention with little impact, whereas the third wave of democratization in Latin America took almost two decades to unfold but enjoyed lasting success. His conclusion is that "haste makes waste" (8). The explanation is sought in the bounded rationality of early diffusion, when ordinary people, excited by a spectacular event abroad (the "availability heuristic") jumped into action in the belief that the same feat could be accomplished at home (the "representativeness heuristic"). In the second part of the nineteenth century, the political landscape began to change with the development of trade unions and political parties. The representative leaders of these meso-organizations reacted more prudently to external impulses, as organizational development increased political rationality. Weyland's account thus integrates cognitive psychology and political science.

The external triggers of regime contention changed as well. Four changes stand out. First, while the revolutions of 1848 (France) and 1917 (Russia) had a clear epicentre, the impulse for the third wave of democratization was "fragmented and decentered" (256). Second, as political organizations developed first on the left and later on the right, negotiation became the dominant mode of transition. Thus, the pacted transition in Spain provided a model for Latin America. Third, a negotiated transition does not stir democrats the same way as a revolution. Finally, despite talk about globalization, politics is said to have become more inward looking, reducing the importance of foreign examples. Weyland's chapters on Latin America and Chile make this last point so convincingly that the reader wonders whether it is still useful to speak of diffusion at all.

Weyland is modest about his aims. He strives to build a theory rather than testing it and the cases of Germany and Chile that are at the centre of attention in the empirical analysis

merely serve as an “illustration” and “plausibility probe” (230). How, then, could Weyland’s theory be tested? The concluding chapter looks at diffusion processes in different places and times. Africa’s “inchoate societies” (233) help account for rapid diffusion and limited success. Democratization efforts were instigated by “common people who relied on cognitive shortcuts and were susceptible to the rash inferences such shortcuts yielded” (234). Similarly, the colour revolutions in the post-communist world and the sad story of the Arab Spring corroborate Weyland’s account. The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe was not because of a horizontal diffusion process. When Gorbachev denied military assistance to East European communist regimes, “democracy was bound to emerge” (236). This is too easy. Strangely, no mention is made of democratization in Asia.

Any lessons for democrats are implicit, as Weyland shies away from policy recommendations other than noting that “upgrades in the organizational density of polities” (257) are difficult and slow but will pay off over time. More controversially, Weyland’s analysis displays a distrust of mass involvement in politics, unless it is channelled by the leaders of national organizations. The term “mass-absorbing parties” (78), though used only once, is revealing. So is the statement that “professional politicians [are] less bounded in their political rationality than ordinary citizens” (94).

Weyland’s theory and case selection lead him to favour reform over revolution, even though the democratization literature has moved away from an early preoccupation with negotiated transitions. He prefers the kind of “contained contention” managed by political elites to the “transgressive contention” that the overly optimistic masses are likely to engage in. In other words, democratization is a process best left to politicians heading broad-based organizations. Where these are absent, waves of democratic contention will hit the hard rock of authoritarianism with a big splash of blood and disillusionment. Or will they? Weyland helps to explain short-term success, but there is nothing in the theory that accounts for contention’s long-term success. Hence, the book does not deal with democratic backsliding in the Andes and is silent on the nine countries that Freedom House considers free in Sub-Saharan Africa.

This raises a broader question: Is Weyland’s theory of political diffusion also a theory of democratization? Weyland’s waves of contention do not overlap with Huntington’s waves of democratization and the contention in this book is about regime change, not necessarily the introduction of democracy. At best, some revolutions in 1848 resulted in liberalization, not democratization.

Finally, the author is more interested in demonstrating causal heterogeneity in history than around the world. The geographical location of the waves selected for analysis is not central to the argument. This leaves us without a systematic analysis of the way in which the mechanisms of political diffusion that Weyland highlights so effectively have played out across different world regions in subsequent waves of democratization. The recent literature on comparative area studies provides valuable clues as to how this kind of research can be designed.

Matthijs Bogaards
Central European University
 visbogaards@ceu.edu

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