POE 320: Comparative Politics I

Reading Review

Samuel P. Huntington

*The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*

Presented to:

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Introduction

Samuel P. Huntington’s 1991 piece *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* proposes the existence of a pattern for the democratization of various states in the twentieth century. He groups the democratization process by years, or into various “waves”. Huntington defines a wave of democratization as “a group of transitions from nondemocratic to democratic regimes that occur within a specified period of time and that significantly outnumber transitions in the opposite direction during that period of time “(19). In addition to these basic waves, he also identifies the existence of a “reverse wave” corresponding to each initial wave. A reverse wave is defined as a movement “in which some but not all of the countries that had previously made the transition to democracy reverted to nondemocratic rule” (19).

Huntington opens *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* by providing a timeline of democratization occurring prior to the waves identified, noting that democratization is far from a modern concept. It is undeniable that it existed in Antiquity, and experienced a rebirth in the 1600s. In fact, the shifts that Huntington describes were predicted as early as 1830 by Alexis de Tocqueville. However, the most significant mass shifts towards democracy have occurred within the last century or so.

The Three Waves

This table is designed to provide a comparison of sorts between Huntington’s three proposed waves of democratization, and their corresponding reverse waves. The comparison highlights the nations involved, the events that initiated the shift, the characteristics that defined each shift, and some figures to give an idea of the number of countries accepting or renouncing democracy after each wave or reverse wave. Please see the attached table for the comparison.
Examples

Huntington provides case studies for each identified wave or reverse wave. His first example, I found, was the easiest to track and understand (the litany of examples proposed later seemed to blend together, perhaps because the criteria for democratization are not stated as explicitly for the later waves). Huntington manages to assign an exact date to the democratization of the United States: 1828. He bases this on the two criteria for First Wave democratization mentioned in the table: the eligibility of 50% of adult males to vote (achieved with the abolition of property qualifications and the admission of new states) and a responsible executive who must either maintain majority support in an elected parliament, or be chosen in popular elections (a criterion which had been previously satisfied).

Conclusion

The ideas proposed by Huntington in The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century would later be overshadowed by his profoundly pessimistic expectations for world development published in The Clash of Civilizations only two years later. Nonetheless, this particular piece raises some interesting points. For example, the idea of the wave: when looking at Huntington’s case studies, it becomes apparent that the idea of the “wave” is not only due to the selection of a particular time period, but to the fact that democratization truly swept the planet, with no discrimination based on continent. An exploration of this phenomenon would be an interesting read – is it due to improved communications, to the end of colonialism, to other factors? The occurrence of “seesawing” (two steps forward, one step back) that many countries experienced is almost stunning, and demonstrated how even democracy (often a “go-to” work
when describing stable or desirable governments”) can be unstable and fail, and how the process of achieving it is almost always fraught with serious obstacles.

Works Cited


There is a lot of work in this review. Overall, it is very well done. The text alone is a good summary of the content and main ideas. The addition of the table makes it a particularly valuable resource for reviewing the content of the main argument in the chapter. (You owe Alexandra a “thank you” for this!) The critique (p. 3) is relevant, but slightly off the mark – focus thinking on sources and methods for a critique that would be more relevant to the purpose of the assignment. The conclusion is definitely on the mark in terms of linking the reading to other material—good work on the exegesis and the deduction. Again, however, think in terms of theory and method. Huntington is interesting because he has been a prolific engine of new ideas – from the soldier and the state to ideas about democracy, freedom, the sources of political culture, and clash of civilizations. He keeps churning out new ideas. BUT he has been fairly consistent in his method, which has usually been large-scale historical case comparison, and this has helped him support “big ideas” while telling coherent stories. The fact that Alexandra has been able to summarize his evidence in a single table is indicative of the clarity with which he organizes information, and is a model for you to approach the organization of case studies in your own work.