Critical Dialogue

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— Seva Gunitsky, University of Toronto

One of the many lessons of Daniel Ziblatt’s book is the uncomfortable idea that democracy is a deeply unusual way to govern. After all, why would the powerful voluntarily give up their power? Standing in a grand Jacobean home, surrounded by portraits of wealthy aristocrats, Ziblatt wonders: How did these people, who had so much to lose from democratization, “ever come to terms with political democracy without fatally preventing its birth in the first place” (p. xi)?

In many cases, they did not. Attempts at democratization were often mired in revolutions, violent protests, and external impositions. But in some countries, like Britain, democratization unfolded through the acquiescence and willing participation of the elites. Ziblatt calls these the “settled” cases. Here backsliding, violence, and constitutional crises were rare, and the path to democracy was relatively stable, even boring. Besides Britain—the author’s paradigmatic peaceful case, which takes up three chapters—the settled group includes Sweden, Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, Denmark, and France after 1879. The book contrasts these with the “unsettled” group, as exemplified by Germany, which takes up another four chapters. In these cases, the trajectory of democratization is marked by sudden breakthroughs but also by reversals, breakdowns, and collapses. In addition to Germany, this volatile and uncertain path is taken up by Italy, Portugal, Spain, and France before 1879.

What made the difference? Ziblatt points to a single, somewhat counterintuitive factor: the strength of conservative forces. In the settled cases, conservative parties were well organized, self-assured, and ready to participate in the messy business of democratic governance. Their leaders looked upon democratization not as a catastrophe but as a gamble—a risky one, to be sure, but one on which they could place their own bets, and even win.

Strong conservative party organizations, in other words, were key to peaceful transitions. Where conservative parties maintained control over candidate selection, over the mobilization of party activists, and over the financing of their campaigns, they felt sufficiently confident to cautiously embrace democratization, instead of resisting it at all costs. In this way, Europe’s conservative parties became the unlikely midwives of peaceful democratization. Having developed strong organizational capacity in part to oppose democracy, they suddenly found themselves willing participants in its creation and maintenance.

Ziblatt cleverly uses bond market volatility as a rough measure of risk perception among the British elite. Episodes of suffrage expansion in 1832 and 1867 were preceded by an increase in perceived risk, but by the 1884 reforms, the bond market barely budges. This suggests two things. First, Britain’s path to democratization was not as settled and low stakes as it appears in retrospect. Investors continued to worry about revolutionary upheaval well past the constitutional settlement of 1832. Second, more optimistically, the fear of such upheaval declined over time. The spikes of volatility shrank in size, and expectations of turmoil receded after each episode of democratic experimentation. By the 1880s, conservatives actually helped to negotiate and pass the Third Reform Act, which created majority male suffrage. By piecemeal adaptation and organizational strengthening, they had learned to live with something they had previously despised.

By contrast, in the unsettled cases, the Right remained organizationally weak, insecure, and thus deeply threatened by any attempts to democratize. They had been caught flat-footed—refusing or unable to organize, weakly institutionalized, riven by factional or ethnic divisions, relying on the heavy hand of the state, or simply too stubborn and blinkered to anticipate, let alone take part in, any demands for democratization. When the demands came, conservative elites lashed out with resistance and repression. They believed, probably correctly, that unlike their better-organized counterparts, they would not survive a major institutional shake-up. The result was resistance, bloodshed, and radicalization.

In Germany, for example, attempts by conservative forces to organize a well-institutionalized party were jump-started by the scare of 1848 but never coalesced into a coherent strategy. Instead of embarking on the long road to party building, German conservatives looked for shortcuts in the form of collusive bargains with other
parties and “manipulative interventions” by the state (p. 22). Despite a strong working-class movement and economic development, German democratization stalled because its opponents were too strong to allow democracy, yet too weak to participate in it through institutionalized channels. What killed the Weimar Republic and opened the door for radicalism, Ziblatt argues, was not the fragility of the pro-democratic coalition but the lack of a cohesive, constitutional, center-right party.

In this story, institutional sequencing and party organization matter much more than elections or constitutional reforms. Before a country can begin to democratize, it needs strong, coherent, well-institutionalized conservative parties. Otherwise, the door is left open to right-wing groundswells and disruption by the old elites.

More pessimistically, the argument suggests that conservative elites’ commitment to democracy is always conditional on the promise of rewards. Even successful democracy, therefore, is bound to retain features of oligarchy, since its maintenance requires that the elites maintain a “diffuse but disproportionate influence on society” (p. 368). Ziblatt does not dwell on this uncomfortable conclusion, which could have used a bit more unpacking. Can conservative parties really be called the reluctant stabilizers of democracy if they tolerate democracy only so long as they can disproportionately partake of its benefits?

By focusing on the moderating role of conservative parties, the book also occasionally understates the pitfalls associated with conservative party building. Ziblatt documents the mid-nineteenth-century rise of techniques to bypass the democratic process—electoral fraud, institutional manipulation, clientelism, and general corruption —and contrasts these with the alternative strategy of “building the machinery” of competitive parties in order to win “clean” elections (p. 35). In practice, however, the two strategies have often gone together, and the same organizational strengthening that can help preserve democracy can also threaten its existence. Current threats to democracy in Eastern Europe, for example, stem not from the weakness of right-wing parties but rather from their seemingly unchecked strength. Relatedly, the book argues that strong party organization acts as a seemingly unchecked strength. Relatedly, the book argues the weakness of right-wing parties but rather from their democracy in Eastern Europe, for example, stem not from democracy only so long as they can disproportionately partake of its benefits?

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Although Donald Trump does not appear anywhere in the book, his specter looms over the argument. When Ziblatt talks about “the backlash and takeover from within by radicals of a moderate conservative party” (p. 300), one cannot help but think about the recent evolution of the Republican Party. To unfairly transpose the argument to modern day: By Ziblatt’s definition, the modern GOP is a weakly organized party. It does not control candidate selection, as the 2016 election demonstrated. (Or, as a 2018 Fox News headline put it: “Nazis and anti-Semites slip through GOP primaries, causing headaches for party.”) Financing of Republican campaigns is increasingly decentralized and multisourced. Yet by other measures—control of the federal government or state legislatures—the GOP is clearly in a position of political strength. Whatever the limits of historical analogies here, the book’s argument suggests that Trump may be as much a symptom of trends in the Republican Party as he is their catalyst. If so, the problems will only continue after he leaves.

I began the review by mentioning the historical rarity of democratic rule. In its modern form, democracy took
Response to Seva Gunitsky’s review of Conservative Parties and the Birth of Democracy

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— Daniel Ziblatt

Seva Gunitsky’s approach to the study of democratization shares with my own view that there is a lot to be learned from studying historical waves of democratization. Whether the goal is to highlight the international or domestic conditions that facilitate regime endurance, research on the past allows us to see patterns that are otherwise invisible. The erosion of democracy that followed moments of breakthrough in 1918, 1945, and 1989, for example, shows that we should never think of democracy as an end point. Whereas Gunitsky compellingly makes clear that international factors loom large, my particular angle is to ask how domestic opponents of regime change make their peace with it—and what happens when they do not.

Guntosky notes an apparent challenge to my argument when he observes that in many contemporary cases of democratic backsliding, the chief problem is not insufficient “strength” on the part of conservative or right parties, but rather the opposite—the monopolistic tendencies of overly successful incumbents. If one thinks of the autocratic inclinations of Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz in Hungary or Poland’s Law and Justice Party (PiS), the image of weak and frightened conservatives is certainly not the first to come to mind. Indeed, in our age it is overwhelmingly successful elected autocrats that we should worry about. So why worry about their weakness?

There are two answers to this question. First, robust conservative parties certainly can, of course, always degenerate into antidemocratic forces. There is no foolproof mechanism for preventing this outcome. However, if we conceptualize old regime parties as a method of countermajoritarian constraint that allows old regime elites to “buy into” democracy, this method stands as superior to the only alternative on offer: hard countermajoritarian constitutional institutions (e.g., unelected upper chambers, intentional malapportionment) that can permanently lock in advantages for former authoritarian incumbents. In contrast to those who advocate hardwiring old regime advantages into difficult-to-amend constitutions at a moment of transition, I advocate the softer approach of political parties as defenders of former autocratic interests because it is normatively superior and more effective. Rather than closing off arenas of democratic competition to old regime elites by writing constitutions that permanently shelter them, strong party organization can simultaneously achieve old regime acquiescence and generate a cycle of robust democratic contestation.

As Gunitsky notes, however, even this sometimes is not enough. A case like Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz suggests that strong conservatives can be a threat, not a boon, to democracy. I agree with this empirical assessment but believe this tells only half the story. The rise of a figure like Orbán and the gradual radicalization of his own political party from a Christian Democratic center-right party in the late 1990s to a self-described “illiberal democrat” in the 2010s did not happen overnight. Indeed, it was arguably the historical vacuum created by the absence of a genuine and institutionalized postcommunist center-right party (in addition to a fragmented left opposition) that propelled Orbán further and further to the right in the first place. The existence of strong autocrat parties is not a refutation of my thesis but, rather, an illustration of what happens over time when strong center-right parties are missing.

This brings me to a final point: Gunitsky notes a dark undertone to my account. Democracy only works when conservatives find that it is in their self-interest to comply. I believe that this description, while apt, slightly misstates my account. Self-interest may propel democracy’s opponents initially to accept it. However, in the process of engaging in the combat of modern democratic politics, conservatives discover the profession of democratic politics and its associated norms. As Lord Salisbury, the conservative opponent of Britain’s modest 1867 Reform Act, for example, began to rely on a new breed of professional political advisor—the “wirepuller”—to protect his class interests, professional self-interest and norms of
bargaining, negotiation, and compromise merged. Indeed, the presence of each bolstered the other. At the end of the day, a norm such as mutual toleration, so critical for democracy’s survival, does not require that former enemies embrace each other. It means only that they publicly accept what they privately may despise.

The difficulties of building democracy in capitalist societies involve convincing those who initially might be hurt by democracy that their evolving interests and status would be hurt by abandoning it. This insight, ultimately compatible with Max Weber’s in his famous 1919 speech “Politics as Vocation,” is key to understanding the viability of democracy in the past and today.


— Daniel Ziblatt, Harvard University

Democracies are not born alone nor do they die alone. The shattering of authoritarian regimes and the breakdown of democracies typically occur when they are happening somewhere else nearby. It was Samuel Huntingdon (1991) who first memorably captured this phenomenon with his notions of “democratic waves” and “democratic reverse waves.” When a democracy emerges, others are likely to be coming close in its wake. When a democracy falters, so too are many other democracies likely to be doing the same. That democratization is a “wave-like” phenomenon, subject to a dynamic of cross-national diffusion, is well known. Why precisely such cycles get started in the first place has evaded the sustained theoretical attention of scholars.

Seva Gunitsky’s book gives us a novel explanation for this phenomenon. Aftershocks is a tour de force, traveling across the twentieth century, simultaneously providing a parsimonious theoretical map of the entire century’s experience with democratic breakthroughs and breakdowns, while also remaining immersed in rich historical detail. Gunitsky combines theory and historical depth. He is theoretically careful, deeply informed by the most relevant historiography, and learned (for example, his prose is filled with unfamiliar but always pointed quotes, from George Orwell to Mark Twain and Mao Zedong).

The analysis is structured chronologically across four major historical inflection points when, according to Gunitsky, global power was reshuffled: 1918, 1933, 1945, and 1989. At each point, he argues, a “hegemonic shock” occurred in which there was a sudden shift in the distribution of relative power among the leading states in the international system.

These dates are, of course, familiar, but the author goes further, providing systematic and careful evidence of shifts in global power in 1918, 1945, and 1989 as measured by the volatility of a composite index of national capabilities (CINC), which measures factors such as iron and steel production, energy consumption, military expenditure, and urban population. In 1918, with these data in hand, we see the rise of the United States; in 1945, the ascendance of the Soviet Union and the United States; and in 1989, the reverberations accompanying the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is interesting that Gunitsky decides, though his own data do not support the decision, that the Great Depression and the subsequent rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime after 1933 should “count” as a hegemonic shock—albeit an authoritarian one that sparked imitators world-wide. While Germany did not surpass the United States economically in the 1930s, it provided a model to would-be fascists in Europe and beyond. This twist aside, the theoretical point remains that sudden shifts in the global distribution of power are a precondition for understanding democratic waves and reverse waves.

Why, exactly? Gunitsky argues and demonstrates that shifts in international power and the rise of new hegemons matter because they directly and indirectly alter the political landscape of other states. This happens via three mechanisms: outright conquest (e.g., remaking states in one-shot acts of coercion); inducements (e.g., longer-term sanctions, foreign assistance); and emulation (e.g., the dynamic in which conquered and peripheral powers imitate rising powers). When a new power emerges on the scene, this transformation reverberates through the international system, powered by these mechanisms, as the new hegemon directly and indirectly reshapes life in other states.

This argument is intended not to supplant but rather to supplement existing accounts. Democratization, as Gunitsky rightly notes, is normally thought to be the domain of comparative politics, and so scholars typically highlight its domestic roots, including a high GDP per capita, a large middle class, stable political parties, a well-organized civil society, or low socioeconomic inequality. He does not reject the importance of these factors in explaining why democracies endure over the long run. He simply believes that at certain key moments, especially at the beginning of momentous transnational democratic waves, international factors may matter more.

For example, once the United States emerged victorious against the great German war-making machine in 1918–19, calls to make the world safe for democracy were bolstered precisely because of the rise of the United States. First, the initial terms of peace required the end of Wilhelmine monarchy and democracy in Germany, reinforcing the prodemocratic forces within Germany and other fledgling democracies. Second, the promise of foreign aid and loans softened the opposition of recalcitrant enemies of democracy—even if for short-run and
opportunist reasons. And the military success of the United States itself suggested that democracies could fight wars, providing a model worthy of imitation. Democracy spread, becoming in James Bryce’s (1922) famous words, “universally accepted.”

We see variations on this theme after 1945 and after 1989 as well. The post-1945 context differed from the post-1918 environment, as Gunitsky’s measures of hegemonic power, since two new and competing hegemons, the Soviet Union and the United States, straddled and competed for control of the globe. In wartime and after, America’s hegemony unleashed a democratizing impulse across the globe, especially in the mid 1940s. And in the post–Cold War environment, the author’s perspective generates new insights. Huntington’s “third wave” of democracy, which often is thought to have begun with Portugal’s 1974 democratic transition, is too monolithic a category in Gunitsky’s view. The regional cluster of southern European and Latin American democratic transitions of the 1970s and 1980s, to Gunitsky, needs to be delineated from the more sweeping fallout of the collapse of the hierarchical Soviet world order that began in 1989, with reverberations in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and Africa. The sudden shift in the global distribution of power that came from the sudden fall of the Soviet Union left, as he puts it, “third world orphans” in place, creating a temporary surge in the number of democracies worldwide. This retelling of the post-1989 democratic era is one of the most compelling and lasting contributions of the book.

At several points in his analysis of hegemonic shocks, Gunitsky uses the language of “positive feedback,” suggesting a path-dependent process at work. This makes sense. In politics, after all, victories lock in advantages that become self-reinforcing over time. As Paul Pierson (2015) has argued in a different context, power is self-reinforcing because it brings with it a one-time transfer of stocks, a rechanneling of resource flows, an inducement to fence-sitters to join the winning side, and the opportunity to control public debate and discourse. At first glance, nowhere ought the dictum “power begets power” be more relevant than with hegemonic shocks, because wars and military victories are critical junctures that typically have enduring effects.

Can Gunitsky’s thesis also make sense of why democracies founder after global surges in the number of democracies? This, it turns out, is the most challenging test of Gunitsky’s framework. The theoretical framework is intended to explain, after all, not only why waves of democratization get unleashed but also why democracy misfires and why reverse waves occur. One of the virtues of Gunitsky’s framework is precisely the recognition that diffusion is not a one-way street—and that waves of democratization always crest and moments of optimism are superseded by democratic backsliding. What explains these reversals?

Gunitsky answers the question this way: “[D]emocratic failures . . . have their origins in the same factors that initially created the wave” (p. 68), and “autocratic rollback . . . is baked into the dynamics of transnational regime cascades” (p. 59). In particular, he identifies four mechanisms through which a rising hegemon’s influence saps away over time, creating counterwaves: the decline of external pressures, the dissolution of prodemocratic domestic coalitions, the adaptation of autocrats, and the realization that democratic activists have overestimated their chances for success.

These points are central because the problem Gunitsky calls “overstretch” comes from democracy’s spread to countries where it ultimately cannot survive (e.g., Poland after 1918; Peru after 1945; Zaire after 1990). This, he asserts, is an endogenous part of regime cascades. Here, however, are the limits of a view focusing on international dynamics. Overstretch, or regime cascades into inhospitable settings, is a function not merely of regime cascades themselves but of democracy’s extension into contexts marked by the domestic variables that comparativists have long highlighted—low GDP per capita, a weak party system, or inadequate civil society. To the author’s credit, he willingly admits that rollback happens when international power encounters inhospitable domestic environments. It is, he claims, the interaction of international and domestic variables that matter.

Yet if domestic politics and economics can be insurmountable, as Gunitsky admits, what does this tell us about the importance of “hegemonic shocks”? Ironically, if anything, this core finding suggests that path-dependent “shocks” might be more anemic than they may at first appear. In the short run, military victory or the rise of new powers appears to change politics globally. But, in this case, power seems not to beget power. The “aftershocks” of rising powers are short-lived, and the path dependence of domestic politics and economics ultimately simply trumps the much more short-lived path dependence of hegemonic shocks.

Nonetheless, Gunitsky has given us a powerful lens to understand not only the past but the present as well. In a last chapter, he raises the question of what the long-run decline of the United States and the accompanying rise of China tell us about the future of democracy and authoritarianism. His account provocatively gives us a distinctive vantage point on the contemporary crisis of democracy around the world. Perhaps, the crisis of democracy is rooted in an inexorable shifting of global power that is happening around us. If Gunitsky is correct, however, his book’s main findings suggest that new and old democracies’ crises may not be inexorable. The crises might have distant global sources, but the ability of democracies to survive hinges on the actions of political leaders and collective actors, as well as on how well built
their domestic political and economic institutions are in the first place.

Response to Daniel Ziblatt’s review of Aftershocks: Great Powers and Domestic Reforms in the Twentieth Century
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— Seva Gunitsky

Daniel Ziblatt’s thoughtful and generous review raises a key question. Why focus on hegemonic influences if domestic factors so often shape democracy’s chances of survival? If hegemonic shocks are short-lived and democratic waves are doomed to fail, can they really help explain institutional outcomes?

There are three reasons why I think the answer must be yes. First, unsuccessful transitions act as critical junctures that set institutional precedents and shape the trajectories of future reforms. Failed waves like Europe’s brief attempt at democratization after the Great War still left a deep imprint on the evolution of European regimes. Understanding failed transitions is useful even when it does not help explain regime consolidation.

Second, the linkages between domestic and external forces are often subtle and indirect. Domestic factors that ostensibly “determine” the final outcome may themselves come from changing systemic forces. Party coalitions in postwar Latin America, for instance, often reflected shifting great-power alignments as much as internal dynamics. And even where domestic factors take precedence, they rarely operate in isolation from outside influences. The neat separation of domestic and systemic influences becomes untenable in times of global upheaval.

Third, a focus on hegemonic shocks highlights the broad underlying forces that have shaped the evolution of domestic regimes. In Aftershocks, I argued that the sudden rise and fall of powerful states has been responsible for intense bursts of domestic reforms, both toward and away from democracy. Here, an emphasis on the key but often contradictory role played by great powers let us view modern regime evolution from a different perspective. It helps explain, for instance, why two seemingly incompatible things can both be true: that U.S. power has been crucial for global democracy, and that U.S. attempts to spread its power have been detrimental to global democracy.

One of the lessons that emerges from this story is that a great power’s strength is closely tied to its ability to serve as an example. As I argue in the book, America’s most important role in shaping the spread of democracy has been through its status as a model worth following and a side worth joining. We do not need to get high-minded here; an example can be followed for selfish or instrumental reasons, but is followed nevertheless. Seeing regime change through the prism of hegemonic shocks highlights how the decline of American unipolarity will help shape institutional reforms around the world.

Victor Hugo said that no army can stop an idea whose time has come. But the same works in reverse: No military budget can revive an idea whose time is gone. The lessons of past hegemonic shocks are becoming especially important as we consider America’s changing role in an uncertain global order.

Both Ziblatt and I did something predictable in our reviews: I critiqued his book for not having enough international relations, and he critiqued mine for not having enough comparative politics. Both of us, however, seem to recognize the merits of each other’s perspective, and I do not think it is just a case of reviewer politeness. Given the increased entanglement of local reforms with global forces, the task ahead is not battles over domestic versus systemic explanations but closer studies of how they interact. Here’s to synthesis!