THE NECESSITY OF POLITICS

The third wave of democratization and contemporary anxieties about the future of contemporary liberal democracy; how both the Left and the Right entertain fantasies about the abolition of government; how contemporary developing countries represent the fulfillment of these fantasies; how we take institutions for granted but in fact have no idea where they come from.

During the forty-year period from 1970 to 2010, there was an enormous upsurge in the number of democracies around the world. In 1973, only 45 of the world’s 151 countries were counted as “free” by Freedom House, a nongovernmental organization that produces quantitative measures of civil and political rights for countries around the world.¹ That year, Spain, Portugal, and Greece were dictatorships; the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites looked like strong and cohesive societies; China was caught up in Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution; Africa saw the consolidation of rule by a group of corrupt “presidents for life”; and most of Latin America had fallen under military dictatorship. The following generation saw momentous political change, with democracies and market-oriented economies spreading in virtually every part of the world except for the Arab Middle East. By the late 1990s, some 120 countries around the world—more than 60 percent of the world’s independent states—had become electoral democracies.² This transformation was Samuel Huntington’s third wave of democratization; liberal democracy as the default form of government became part of the accepted political landscape at the beginning of the twenty-first century.³

Underlying these changes in political systems was a massive social transformation as well. The shift to democracy was a result of millions of formerly passive individuals around the world organizing themselves and participating in the political life of their societies. This social mobilization
was driven by a host of factors: greatly expanded access to education that made people more aware of themselves and the political world around them; information technology, which facilitated the rapid spread of ideas and knowledge; cheap travel and communications that allowed people to vote with their feet if they didn’t like their government; and greater prosperity, which induced people to demand better protection of their rights.

The third wave crested after the late 1990s, however, and a “democratic recession” emerged in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Approximately one in five countries that had been part of the third wave either reverted to authoritarianism or saw a significant erosion of democratic institutions. Freedom House noted that 2009 marked the fourth consecutive year in which freedom had declined around the world, the first time this had happened since it established its measures of freedom in 1973.

**Political Anxieties**

At the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century, malaise in the democratic world took several distinct forms. The first was the outright reversal of democratic gains that had occurred in countries such as Russia, Venezuela, and Iran, where elected leaders were busy dismantling democratic institutions by manipulating elections, closing down or buying independent TV and newspaper outlets, and clamping down on opposition activities. Liberal democracy is more than majority voting in elections; it is a complex set of institutions that restrain and regularize the exercise of power through law and a system of checks and balances. In many countries, official acceptance of democratic legitimacy was accompanied by the systematic removal of checks on executive power and the erosion of the rule of law.

In other cases, countries that seemed to be making a transition from authoritarian government got stuck in what the analyst Thomas Carothers has labeled a “gray zone,” where they were neither fully authoritarian nor meaningfully democratic. Many successor states to the former Soviet Union, like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in Central Asia, found themselves in this situation. There had been a broad assumption in the years following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 that virtually all countries were transitioning to democracy and that failures of democratic practice would be overcome with the simple passage of time. Carothers pointed out that this
“transition paradigm” was an unwarranted assumption and that many authoritarian elites had no interest in implementing democratic institutions that would dilute their power.

A third category of concern has to do not with the failure of political systems to become or remain democratic but rather their failure to deliver the basic services that people demand from their governments. The mere fact that a country has democratic institutions tells us very little about whether it is well or badly governed. This failure to deliver on the promise of democracy poses what is perhaps the greatest challenge to the legitimacy of such political systems.

An example of this was Ukraine. Ukraine surprised the world in 2004 when tens of thousands of people turned up in Kiev’s Maidan Square to protest manipulation of that country’s presidential election. These protests, which came to be known as the Orange Revolution, triggered a new election and the rise of the reformer Viktor Yushchenko as president. Once in power, however, the Orange Coalition proved utterly feckless, and Yushchenko himself disappointed the hopes of those who supported him. The government quarreled internally, failed to deal with Ukraine’s serious corruption problem, and presided over a meltdown of the economy during the 2008–2009 global financial crisis. The result was the election in early 2010 of Viktor Yanukovich, the very man accused of stealing the 2004 election that had triggered the Orange Revolution in the first place.

Many other species of governance failure plague democratic countries. It is well understood that Latin America has the highest level of economic inequality of any region in the world, in which class hierarchies often correspond to racial and ethnic ones. The rise of populist leaders like Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia is less a cause of instability than a symptom of that inequality and the feeling of social exclusion felt by many who are nominally citizens. Persistent poverty often breeds other kinds of social dysfunctions, like gangs, narcotrafficking, and a general feeling of insecurity on the part of ordinary people. In Colombia, Mexico, and El Salvador, organized criminality threatens the state itself and its basic institutions, and the failure to deal effectively with these problems has undermined the legitimacy of democracy.

India, to take another example, has been a remarkably successful democracy since its independence in 1947—an achievement all the more remarkable given its poverty, ethnic and religious diversity, and enormous size. (Why a longer historical view of Indian political development should
lessen our surprise is the subject of chapters 10–12.) Nonetheless, Indian democracy, like sausage making, looks less appealing the closer one gets to the process. Nearly one-third of Indian legislators, for example, are under some form of criminal indictment, some for serious crimes like murder and rape. Indian politicians often practice an overt form of patronage politics, in which votes are traded for political favors. The fractiousness of Indian democracy makes it very hard for the government to make major decisions on issues like investments in major infrastructure projects. And in many Indian cities, glittering high-tech centers of excellence exist next to African-style poverty.

The apparent chaos and corruption of democratic politics in India has frequently been contrasted to the quick and efficient decision making of China. Chinese rulers are not constrained by either a rule of law or democratic accountability; if they want to build a huge dam, bulldoze neighborhoods to make way for highways or airports, or mount a rapid economic stimulus package, they can do so far more quickly than democratic India.

A fourth broad source of political anxiety concerns the economy. Modern global capitalism has proved to be productive and wealth-creating beyond the dreams of anyone living before the year 1800. In the period following the oil crises of the 1970s, the size of the world economy almost quadrupled, and Asia, based on its openness to trade and investment, saw much of its population join the developed world. But global capitalism has not found a way to avoid high levels of volatility, particularly in the financial sector. Global economic growth has been plagued by periodic financial crises, striking Europe in the early 1990s, Asia in 1997–1998, Russia and Brazil in 1998–1999, and Argentina in 2001. This instability culminated, perhaps with poetic justice, in the great crisis that struck the United States, the home of global capitalism, in 2008–2009. Free markets are necessary to promote long-term growth, but they are not self-regulating, particularly when it comes to banks and other large financial institutions. The system’s instability is a reflection of what is ultimately a political failure, that is, the failure to provide sufficient regulatory oversight both at a national and an international level.

The cumulative effect of these economic crises has not necessarily been to undermine confidence in market-based economics and globalization as engines of economic growth. China, India, Brazil, and any number of other so-called emerging market countries continue to perform well economically based on their participation in global capitalism. But it is clear that the
political job of finding the right regulatory mechanisms to tame capitalism’s volatility have not yet been found.

POLITICAL DECAY

The latter point suggests an urgent but often overlooked area of concern about democracy’s future. Political institutions develop, often slowly and painfully, over time, as human societies strive to organize themselves to master their environments. But political decay occurs when political systems fail to adjust to changing circumstances. There is something like a law of the conservation of institutions. Human beings are rule-following animals by nature; they are born to conform to the social norms they see around them, and they entrench those rules with often transcendent meaning and value. When the surrounding environment changes and new challenges arise, there is often a disjunction between existing institutions and present needs. Those institutions are supported by legions of entrenched stakeholders who oppose any fundamental change.

American political institutions may well be headed for a major test of their adaptability. The American system was built around a firm conviction that concentrated political power constituted an imminent danger to the lives and liberty of citizens. For this reason, the U.S. Constitution was designed with a broad range of checks and balances by which different parts of the government could prevent other parts from exercising tyrannical control. This system has served the country well, but only because at certain critical junctures in its history when strong government was necessary, it was possible to forge the consensus to bring it about through the exercise of political leadership.

There is unfortunately no institutional guarantee that the system as designed will always check tyrannical power yet allow exercises of state authority when the need arises. The latter depends in the first instance on the existence of a social consensus on political ends, and this has been lacking in American political life in recent years. The United States faces a series of large challenges, mostly related to fixing its long-term fiscal situation. Over the past generation, Americans have spent money on themselves without paying their own way through taxation, a situation that has been exacerbated by years of too-easy access to credit and overspending on both a household and governmental level. The long-term fiscal shortfall
and foreign indebtedness threaten the very basis of American power around the world, as other countries like China gain in relative stature.\footnote{9}

None of these challenges is so enormous that it cannot be resolved through timely, if painful, action. But the American political system, which should facilitate the formation of consensus, is instead contributing to the problem. The Congress has become highly polarized, making the passage of legislation extremely difficult. For the first time in modern history, the most conservative Democrat in Congress is more liberal than the most liberal Republican. The number of seats in Congress won by a margin of 10 percent or less, meaning that they are up for grabs by either party, has fallen steadily from nearly two hundred in the late nineteenth century to only a little more than fifty in the early 2000s. Both political parties have become much more ideologically homogeneous, and deliberative debate between them has deteriorated.\footnote{10} These kinds of divisions are not historically unprecedented, but in the past they have been overcome by strong presidential leadership, which has not been forthcoming.

The future of American politics rests not just in politics but also in society. The polarization of Congress reflects a broad trend toward the growing homogenization of neighborhoods and regions, as Americans sort themselves out ideologically by where they choose to live.\footnote{11} The trend towards associating only with like-minded people is strongly amplified by the media, where the proliferation of communication channels ends up weakening the shared experience of citizenship.\footnote{12}

The American political system’s ability to deal with its fiscal challenges is affected not just by the Left-Right polarization of Congress but also by the growth and power of entrenched interest groups. Trade unions, agribusinesses, drug companies, banks, and a host of other organized lobbies often exercise an effective veto on legislation that hurts their pocketbooks. It is perfectly legitimate and indeed expected that citizens should defend their interests in a democracy. But at a certain point this defense crosses over into the claiming of privileges, or a situation of gridlock where no one’s interests may be challenged. This explains the rising levels of populist anger on both the Right and Left that contribute to polarization and reflect a social reality at odds with the country’s own legitimating principles.

The complaint by Americans that the United States is dominated by elites and powerful interest groups reflects the reality of increasing income and wealth inequality in the period from the 1970s to the early 2000s.\footnote{13} Inequality per se has never been a big problem in American political cul-
ture, which emphasizes equality of opportunity rather than of outcomes. But the system remains legitimate only as long as people believe that by working hard and doing their best, they and their children have a fair shot at getting ahead, and that the wealthy got there playing by the rules.

The fact is, however, that rates of intergenerational social mobility are far lower in the United States than many Americans believe them to be, and lower than in many other developed countries that traditionally have been regarded as rigid and stratified. Over time, elites are able to protect their positions by gaming the political system, moving their money offshore to avoid taxation, and transmitting these advantages to their children through favored access to elite institutions. Much of this was laid bare during the financial crisis of 2008–2009, when it became painfully clear that there was little relationship between compensation in the financial services sector and real contributions to the economy. The industry had used its considerable political muscle to dismantle regulation and oversight in the previous decade, and continued to fend off regulation in the crisis’s aftermath. The economist Simon Johnson suggested that the power of the financial oligarchy in the United States was not too different from what exists in emerging market countries like Russia or Indonesia.

There is no automatic mechanism by which political systems adjust themselves to changing circumstances. The story of the failure to adjust, and thus the phenomenon of political decay, is told in later pages of this volume. There was no necessary reason why the Mamluk Sultanate in Egypt couldn’t have adopted firearms earlier to meet rising external threats, as the Ottomans who ultimately defeated them did; nor was it inevitable that emperors in the late Ming Dynasty in China would fail to tax their citizens adequately to support an army that could defend the country from the Manchus. The problem in both cases was the enormous institutional inertia existing behind the status quo.

Once a society fails to confront a major fiscal crisis through serious institutional reform, as the French monarchy did after the failure of the Grand Parti in 1557, it is tempted to resort to a host of short-term fixes that erode and eventually corrupt its own institutions. These fixes involved giving in to various entrenched stakeholders and interest groups, who invariably represented people with wealth and power in French society. The failure to balance the country’s budget led to bankruptcy and the delegitimization of the state itself, a course that finally terminated in the French Revolution.

The United States is not in nearly as serious a moral and fiscal crisis as
ancien régime France. The danger, however, is that its situation will continue to worsen over time in the absence of some powerful force that will knock the system off its current dysfunctional institutional equilibrium.

FANTASIES OF STATELESSNESS

A common thread links many of our contemporary anxieties about the future, from authoritarian backsliding in Russia to corruption in India, to failed states in the developing world, to entrenched interest groups in contemporary American politics. It concerns the difficulties of creating and maintaining effective political institutions, governments that are simultaneously powerful, rule bound, and accountable. This might seem like an obvious point that any fourth grader would acknowledge, and yet on further reflection it is a truth that many intelligent people fail to understand.

Let's begin with the question of the receding of the third wave and the democratic recession that has taken place around the world in the 2000s. The reasons for our disappointments in the failure of democracy to spread do not lie, I would argue, on the level of ideas at the present moment. Ideas are extremely important to political order; it is the perceived legitimacy of the government that binds populations together and makes them willing to accept its authority. The fall of the Berlin Wall marked the collapse of one of democracy's great competitors, communism, and the rapid spread of liberal democracy as the most widely accepted form of government.

This is true up to the present, where democracy, in Amartya Sen's words, remains the "default" political condition: "While democracy is not yet universally practiced, nor indeed universally accepted, in the general climate of world opinion democratic governance has achieved the status of being taken to be generally right." Very few people around the world openly profess to admire Vladimir Putin's petronationalism, or Hugo Chávez's "twenty-first-century socialism," or Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's Islamic Republic. No important international institution endorses anything but democracy as the basis for just governance. China's rapid growth incites envy and interest, but its exact model of authoritarian capitalism is not one that is easily described, much less emulated, by other developing countries. Such is the prestige of modern liberal democracy that today's would-be authoritarians all have to stage elections and manipulate the media from behind the scenes to legitimate themselves. Not only has to-
talitarianism virtually disappeared from the world; authoritarians pay a compliment to democracy by pretending to be democrats.

Democracy’s failure, then, lies less in concept than in execution: most people around the world would strongly prefer to live in a society in which their government was accountable and effective, where it delivered the sorts of services demanded by citizens in a timely and cost-effective way. But few governments are actually able to do both, because institutions are weak, corrupt, lacking capacity, or in some cases absent altogether. The passion of protesters and democracy advocates around the world, from South Africa to Korea to Romania to Ukraine, might be sufficient to bring about “regime change” from authoritarian to democratic government, but the latter will not succeed without a long, costly, laborious, and difficult process of institution building.

There is in fact a curious blindness to the importance of political institutions that has affected many people over the years, people who dream about a world in which we will somehow transcend politics. This particular fantasy is not the special province of either the Left or the Right; both have had their versions of it. The father of communism, Karl Marx, famously predicted the “withering away of the state” once the proletarian revolution had achieved power and abolished private property. Left-wing revolutionaries from the nineteenth-century anarchists on thought it sufficient to destroy old power structures without giving serious thought to what would take their place. This tradition continues up through the present, with the suggestion by antiglobalization authors like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri that economic injustice could be abolished by undermining the sovereignty of states and replacing it with a networked “multitude.”17

Real-world Communist regimes of course did exactly the opposite of what Marx predicted, building large and tyrannical state structures to force people to act collectively when they failed to do so spontaneously. This in turn led a generation of democracy activists in Eastern Europe to envision their own form of statelessness, where a mobilized civil society would take the place of traditional political parties and centralized governments.18 These activists were subsequently disillusioned by the realization that their societies could not be governed without institutions, and when they encountered the messy compromises required to build them. In the decades since the fall of communism, Eastern Europe is democratic, but it is not thereby necessarily happy with its politics or politicians.19

The fantasy of statelessness most prevalent on the Right is that the
market economy will somehow make government unnecessary and irrelevant. During the dot-com boom of the 1990s, many enthusiasts argued along the lines of the former Citibank CEO Walter Wriston that the world was experiencing a "twilight of sovereignty," in which the political powers traditionally exercised by states were being undermined by new information technologies that were making borders impossible to police and rules difficult to enforce. The rise of the Internet led activists like John Perry Barlow of the Electronic Frontier Foundation to issue a "Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace," where governments of the industrialized world were told, "You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather." A global capitalist economy would replace the sovereignty of democratic governments with the sovereignty of the market: if a legislature voted for excessive regulation or restricted trade, it would be punished by the bond market and forced to adopt policies deemed rational by global capital markets. Fantasies of a stateless world have always found a sympathetic audience in the United States, where hostility to the state is a staple of American political culture. Libertarians of various stripes have suggested not just rolling back an overgrown welfare state but also abolishing more basic institutions like the Federal Reserve Board and the Food and Drug Administration.

It is quite legitimate to argue that modern governments have grown excessively large, and that they thereby limit economic growth and individual freedom. People are right to complain about unresponsive bureaucracy, corrupt politicians, and the unprincipled nature of politics. But in the developed world, we take the existence of government so much for granted that we sometimes forget how important it is, and how difficult it was to create, and what the world would look like without certain basic political institutions.

It is not only that we take democracy for granted; we also take for granted the fact that we have a state at all that can carry out certain basic functions. Fairfax County, Virginia, a suburb of Washington, D.C., where I lived for many years, is one of the richest counties in the United States. Every winter, potholes appear in the county's roads as a result of the seasonal freezing and thawing after winter storms. And yet by the end of the spring, all of those potholes get magically filled so no one has to worry about breaking an axle in one. If they don't get filled, the residents of Fairfax County get angry and complain about the incompetence of local government; no one (apart from a few specialists in public administration)
ever stops to think about the complex, invisible social system that makes this possible, or why it takes longer to fill potholes in the neighboring District of Columbia, or why potholes never get filled in many developing countries.

Indeed, the kinds of minimal or no-government societies envisioned by dreamers of the Left and Right are not fantasies; they actually exist in the contemporary developing world. Many parts of sub-Saharan Africa are a libertarian's paradise. The region as a whole is a low-tax utopia, with governments often unable to collect more than about 10 percent of GDP in taxes, compared to more than 30 percent in the United States and 50 percent in parts of Europe. Rather than unleashing entrepreneurship, this low rate of taxation means that basic public services like health, education, and pothole filling are starved of funding. The physical infrastructure on which a modern economy rests, like roads, court systems, and police, are missing. In Somalia, where a strong central government has not existed since the late 1980s, ordinary individuals may own not just assault rifles but also rocket-propelled grenades, antiaircraft missiles, and tanks. People are free to protect their own families, and indeed are forced to do so. Nigeria has a film industry that produces as many titles as India's famed Bollywood, but films have to earn a quick return because the government is incapable of guaranteeing intellectual property rights and preventing products from being copied illegally.

The degree to which people in developed countries take political institutions for granted was very much evident in the way that the United States planned, or failed to plan, for the aftermath of its 2003 invasion of Iraq. The U.S. administration seemed to think that democracy and a market economy were default conditions to which the country would automatically revert once Saddam Hussein's dictatorship was removed, and seemed genuinely surprised when the Iraqi state itself collapsed in an orgy of looting and civil conflict. U.S. purposes have been similarly stymied in Afghanistan, where ten years of effort and the investment of hundreds of billions of dollars have not produced a stable, legitimate Afghan state.²⁴

Political institutions are necessary and cannot be taken for granted. A market economy and high levels of wealth don't magically appear when you “get government out of the way”; they rest on a hidden institutional foundation of property rights, rule of law, and basic political order. A free market, a vigorous civil society, the spontaneous “wisdom of crowds” are all important components of a working democracy, but none can ultimately
replace the functions of a strong, hierarchical government. There has been a broad recognition among economists in recent years that “institutions matter”: poor countries are poor not because they lack resources, but because they lack effective political institutions. We need therefore to better understand where those institutions come from.

GETTING TO DENMARK

The problem of creating modern political institutions has been described as the problem of “getting to Denmark,” after the title of a paper written by two social scientists at the World Bank, Lant Pritchett and Michael Woolcock. For people in developed countries, “Denmark” is a mythical place that is known to have good political and economic institutions: it is stable, democratic, peaceful, prosperous, inclusive, and has extremely low levels of political corruption. Everyone would like to figure out how to transform Somalia, Haiti, Nigeria, Iraq, or Afghanistan into “Denmark,” and the international development community has long lists of presumed Denmark-like attributes that they are trying to help failed states achieve.

There are any number of problems with this agenda. It does not seem very plausible that extremely poor and chaotic countries could expect to put into place complex institutions in short order, given how long such institutions took to evolve. Moreover, institutions reflect the cultural values of the societies in which they are established, and it is not clear that Denmark’s democratic political order can take root in very different cultural contexts. Most people living in rich, stable developed countries have no idea how Denmark itself got to be Denmark—something that is true for many Danes as well. The struggle to create modern political institutions was so long and so painful that people living in industrialized countries now suffer from a historical amnesia regarding how their societies came to that point in the first place.

The Danes themselves are descended from the Vikings, a ferocious tribal people who conquered and pillaged much of Europe, from the Mediterranean all the way to Kiev in southern Ukraine. The Celtic peoples who first settled the British Isles, as well as the Romans who conquered them, and the Germanic barbarians who displaced the Romans, were all originally organized into tribes much like those that still exist in Afghanistan,
central Iraq, and Papua New Guinea. So were the Chinese, Indians, Arabs, Africans, and virtually all other peoples on earth. They owed primary obligation not to a state but to kinfolk, they settled disputes not through courts but through a system of retributive justice, and they buried their dead on property held collectively by groups of kin.

Over the course of time, however, these tribal societies developed political institutions. First and foremost was the centralized source of authority that held an effective monopoly of military power over a defined piece of territory—what we call a state. Peace was kept not by a rough balance of power between groups of kin but by the state's army and police, now a standing force that could also defend the community against neighboring tribes and states. Property came to be owned not by groups of kinfolk but by individuals, who increasingly won the right to buy and sell it at will. Their rights to that property were enforced not by kin but by courts and legal systems that had the power to settle disputes and compensate wrongs.

In time, moreover, social rules were formalized as written laws rather than customs or informal traditions. These formal rules were used to organize the way that power was distributed in the system, regardless of the individuals who exercised power at any given time. Institutions, in other words, replaced individual leaders. Those legal systems were eventually accorded supreme authority over society, an authority that was seen to be superior to that of rulers who temporarily happened to command the state's armed forces and bureaucracy. This came to be known as the rule of law.

Finally, certain societies not only limited the power of their states by forcing rulers to comply with written law; they also held them accountable to parliaments, assemblies, and other bodies representing a broader proportion of the population. Some degree of accountability was present in many traditional monarchies, but it was usually the product of informal consultation with a small body of elite advisers. Modern democracy was born when rulers acceded to formal rules limiting their power and subordinating their sovereignty to the will of the larger population as expressed through elections.

The purpose of this book is to fill in some of the gaps of this historical amnesia, by giving an account of where basic political institutions came from in societies that now take them for granted. The three categories of institutions in question are the ones just described:
A successful modern liberal democracy combines all three sets of institutions in a stable balance. The fact that there are countries capable of achieving this balance constitutes the miracle of modern politics, since it is not obvious that they can be combined. The state, after all, concentrates and uses power, to bring about compliance with its laws on the part of its citizens and to defend itself against other states and threats. The rule of law and accountable government, on the other hand, limit the state's power, first by forcing it to use its power according to certain public and transparent rules, and then by ensuring that it is subordinate to the will of the people.

These institutions come into being in the first place because people find that they can protect their interests, and the interests of their families, through them. But what people regard as self-interest, and how they are willing to collaborate with others, depends critically on ideas that legitimate certain forms of political association. Self-interest and legitimacy thus form the cornerstones of political order.

The fact that one of these three types of institutions exists does not imply that the others do so as well. Afghanistan, for example, has held democratic elections since 2004 but has an extremely weak state and is unable to uphold laws in much of its territory. Russia, by contrast, has a strong state and holds democratic elections, but its rulers do not feel bound by a rule of law. The nation of Singapore has both a strong state and a rule of law bequeathed to it by its former British colonial masters but only an attenuated form of democratic accountability.

Where did these three sets of institutions originally come from? What were the forces that drove their creation and the conditions under which they developed? In what order were they created, and how did they relate to one another? If we could understand how these basic institutions came into being, we could then perhaps better understand the distance that separates Afghanistan or Somalia from contemporary Denmark.

The story of how political institutions developed cannot be told without understanding the complementary process of political decay. Human institutions are “sticky”; that is, they persist over time and are changed only with great difficulty. Institutions that are created to meet one set of
conditions often survive even when those conditions change or disappear, and the failure to adapt appropriately entails political decay. This applies to modern liberal democracies encompassing the state, rule of law, and accountability as much as to older political systems. For there is no guarantee that any given democracy will continue to deliver what it promises to its citizens, and thus no guarantee that it will remain legitimate in their eyes.

Moreover, the natural human propensity to favor family and friends—something I refer to as patrimonialism—constant reasserts itself in the absence of strong countervailing incentives. Organized groups—most often the rich and powerful—entrench themselves over time and begin demanding privileges from the state. Particularly when a prolonged period of peace and stability gives way to financial and/or military crisis, these entrenched patrimonial groups extend their sway, or else prevent the state from responding adequately.

A version of the story of political development and political decay has of course been told many times before. Most high schools offer a class on the “rise of civilization,” which presents a broad overview of the evolution of social institutions. A century ago, the historical account presented to most American schoolchildren was highly Euro-, and indeed, Anglocentric. It might have begun in Greece and Rome, then progressed through the European Middle Ages, the Magna Carta, the English Civil War and Glorious Revolution, and thence perhaps on to 1776 and the writing of the U.S. Constitution. Today, such curricula are far more multicultural and incorporate the experiences of non-Western societies like China and India as well, or else dwell on history’s marginalized groups like indigenous peoples, women, the poor, and so on.

There are several reasons to be dissatisfied with the existing literature on the development of political institutions. First, much of it is not comparative on a sufficiently broad scale. It is only by comparing the experience of different societies that we can begin to sort through complex causal factors that explain why certain institutions emerged in some places but not in others. A lot of theorizing about modernization, from the massive studies of Karl Marx to contemporary economic historians like Douglass North, has focused heavily on the experience of England as the first country to industrialize. The English experience was exceptional in many ways but is not necessarily a good guide to development in countries differently situated.

The multicultural approaches that have displaced this narrative in re-
cent decades are not for the most part seriously comparative. They tend to select either positive stories of how non-Western civilizations have contributed to the overall progress of humankind, or else negative ones about how they were victimized. One seldom finds serious comparative analysis of why an institution developed in one society but not in another.

The great sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset used to say that an observer who knows only one country knows no countries. Without comparison, there is no way of knowing whether a particular practice or behavior is unique to the society in question or common to many. Only through comparative analysis is it possible to link causes, like geography, climate, technology, religion, or conflict, to the range of outcomes existing in the world today. In doing so, we might be able to answer questions like the following:

- Why are Afghanistan, the jungle regions of India, the island nations of Melanesia, and parts of the Middle East still tribally organized?
- Why is China's default condition to be ruled by a strong, centralized government, while India has never seen that degree of centralization except for very brief periods over the past three millennia of its history?
- Why is it that almost all of the cases of successful authoritarian modernization—countries like South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and China—are clustered in East Asia, rather than in Africa or the Middle East?
- Why have democracy and a strong rule of law taken root in Scandinavia, while Russia, subject to similar climactic and geographical conditions, experienced the growth of unconstrained absolutism?
- Why have countries in Latin America been subject to high inflation and economic crises repeatedly over the past century, while the United States and Canada have not?

The historical data presented in this book are interesting precisely because they shed light on the present and explain how different political orders came to be. But human societies are not trapped by their pasts. If modern states emerged in China or Europe as a result of certain factors like the constant need to prepare for and fight wars, this does not necessarily mean that weak states in Africa today must replicate this experience if they are to modernize. Indeed, I will argue in Volume 2 that the conditions for political development today are very different from what they
were in the periods covered by Volume 1. The social deck is being constantly shuffled by economic growth, and international factors impinge to a much greater extent on individual societies than they did in the past. So while the historical material in this book may explain how different societies got to where they are now, their paths to the present do not determine their futures, or serve as models for other societies.

CHINA FIRST

The classic theories of modernization written by such towering figures as Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, Henry Maine, Ferdinand Tönnies, and Max Weber tended to regard the experience of the West as paradigmatic of modernization as such because industrialization took place first in the West. This focus on the West is understandable since the explosion of productivity and sustained economic growth that occurred after about 1800 in Europe and North America was unprecedented and transformed the world into what it is today.

But development is not only about economics. Political institutions develop, as do social ones. Sometimes political and social development are closely related to economic change, but at other times they happen independently. This book focuses on the political dimension of development, the evolution of government institutions. Modern political institutions appeared far earlier in history than did the Industrial Revolution and the modern capitalist economy. Indeed, many of the elements of what we now understand to be a modern state were already in place in China in the third century B.C., some eighteen hundred years before they emerged in Europe.

It is for this reason that I begin my account of the emergence of the state in Part II with China. While classic modernization theory tended to take European development as the norm and ask why other societies diverged from it, I take China as a paradigm of state formation and ask why other civilizations didn't replicate the path it followed. This is not to say that China was better than other societies. As we will see, a modern state without rule of law or accountability is capable of enormous despotism. But China was the first to develop state institutions, and its pioneering experience is seldom referred to in Western accounts of political development.

In beginning with China, I skip over other important early societies
like Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece and Rome, and the civilizations of Meso-
and South America. The decision not to cover Greece and Rome at greater
length in this volume requires further explanation.

The ancient Mediterranean world set precedents that were extremely
important to the subsequent development of European civilization, which
from the time of Charlemagne on were self-consciously imitated by Euro-
pean rulers. The Greeks are commonly credited with having invented de-
mocracy, in which rulers were not hereditary but selected by ballot. Most
tribal societies are also relatively egalitarian and elect their rulers (see
chapter 4), but the Greeks went beyond this by introducing a concept of
citizenship that was based on political criteria rather than kinship. The
form of government practiced in fifth-century Athens or under the Ro-
man Republic is probably better described as “classical republicanism”
rather than “democracy,” since the franchise was given to only a limited
number of citizens, and there were sharp class distinctions that excluded
large numbers of people (including the numerous slaves) from political
participation. These were, moreover, not liberal states but highly com-
munitarian ones that did not respect the privacy or autonomy of their
citizens.

The classical republican precedent established by Greece and Rome
was copied by many later societies, including the oligarchic republics of
Genoa, Venice, Novgorod, and the Dutch United Provinces. But this form
of government had one fatal defect that was widely recognized by later
writers, including many of the American Founding Fathers who thought
deeply about that tradition: classical republicanism did not scale well.
It worked best in small, homogeneous societies like the city-states of
fifth-century Greece, or Rome in its early years. But as these republics grew
larger through conquest or economic growth, it became impossible to
maintain the demanding communitarian values that bound them together.
As the Roman Republic grew in size and diversity, it faced irresolvable
conflicts over who should enjoy the privileges of citizenship and how to
divide the spoils of empire. The Greek city-states were all eventually con-
quered by monarchies, and the Roman Republic, after a prolonged civil
war, gave way to the Empire. Monarchy as a form of government proved
superior in its ability to govern large empires and was the political system
under which Rome achieved its greatest power and geographical extent.

I will return to the question of classical republicanism as a precedent
for modern democracy in Volume 2. But there is good reason for paying
closer attention to China than to Greece and Rome in studying the rise of the state, since China alone created a *modern* state in the terms defined by Max Weber. That is, China succeeded in developing a centralized, uniform system of bureaucratic administration that was capable of governing a huge population and territory when compared to Mediterranean Europe. China had already invented a system of impersonal, merit-based bureaucratic recruitment that was far more systematic than Roman public administration. While the total population of the Chinese empire in 1 a.d. was roughly comparable to that of the Roman empire, the Chinese put a far larger proportion of its people under a uniform set of rules than did the Romans. Rome had other important legacies, particularly in the domain of law (discussed at greater length in chapter 18). But although Greece and Rome were extremely important as precursors of modern accountable government, China was more important in the development of the state.

Among the societies to be compared with China is India. India graduated from a tribal to a state-level society at about the same time as China. But then, around twenty-five hundred years ago, it took a big detour due to the rise of a new Brahmanic religion, which limited the power that any Indian polity could achieve and in some sense paved the way for modern Indian democracy. The Middle East at the time of the Prophet Muhammad was also tribally organized; it took not just the advent of a new religion, Islam, but also a curious institution of slave-soldiers to enable certain polities in Egypt and Turkey to turn themselves into major political powers. Europe was very different from these other societies insofar as its exit from tribalism was not imposed by rulers from the top down but came about on a social level through rules mandated by the Catholic church. In Europe alone, state-level institutions did not have to be built on top of tribally organized ones.

Religion is also key to the origins of the rule of law, which is the subject of Part III. Religiously based law existed in ancient Israel, India, the Muslim Middle East, and also the Christian West. It was Western Europe, however, that saw the strongest development of independent legal institutions that managed to take on a secular form and survive into the present day.

The story of the rise of accountable governments in Part IV is also largely a European one. But Europe was hardly uniform in this respect: accountable governments arose in England and Denmark but not in France or Spain; Russia developed a form of absolutism comparable in its power to
that of China. The ability of certain societies to force accountability on their sovereigns, then, depended on a host of specific historical conditions such as the survival of certain feudal institutions into modern times.

The sequencing of political development in Western Europe was highly unusual when compared to other parts of the world. Individualism on a social level appeared centuries before the rise of either modern states or capitalism; a rule of law existed before political power was concentrated in the hands of centralized governments; and institutions of accountability arose because modern, centralized states were unable to completely defeat or eliminate ancient feudal institutions like representative assemblies.

Once this combination of state, law, and accountability appeared, it proved to be a highly powerful and attractive form of government that subsequently spread to all corners of the world. But we need to remember how historically contingent this emergence was. China had a strong state, but without law and accountability; India had law and now has accountability, but has traditionally lacked a strong state; the Middle East had states and law, but in much of the Arab part it lost the latter tradition. Societies are not trapped by their pasts and freely borrow ideas and institutions from each other. But what they are in the present is also shaped by what they were in the past, and there is not one single path that links one to the other.

**Turtles all the way down**

The purpose of this book is less to present a history of political development than to analyze some of the factors that led to the emergence of certain key political institutions. A lot of historical writing has been characterized as ODTAA—“one damn thing after another”—without an effort to extract general rules or causal theories that can be applied in other circumstances. The same can be said of the ethnographies written by anthropologists, which are highly detailed but deliberately shy away from broad generalization. That is definitely not my approach, which compares and generalizes across many civilizations and time periods.

The overall framework for understanding political development presented here bears many resemblances to biological evolution. Darwinian evolution is built around the two principles of variance and selection: organisms experience random genetic mutation, and those best adapted to
their environments survive and multiply. So too in political development: there is variation in political institutions, and those best suited to the physical and social environment survive and proliferate. But there are also many important differences between biological and political evolution: human institutions are subject to deliberate design and choice, unlike genes; they are transmitted across time culturally rather than genetically; and they are invested with intrinsic value through a variety of psychological and social mechanisms, which makes them hard to change. The inherent conservatism of human institutions then explains why political development is frequently reversed by political decay, since there is often a substantial lag between changes in the external environment that should trigger institutional change, and the actual willingness of societies to make those changes.

In the end, however, this general framework amounts to something less than a predictive theory of political development. A parsimonious theory of political change, comparable to the theories of economic growth posited by economists, is in my view simply not possible. The factors driving the development of any given political institution are multiple, complex, and often dependent on accidental or contingent events. Any causal factors one adduces for a given development are themselves caused by prior conditions that extend backward in time in an endless regression.

Let us take one example. A well-known theory of political development argues that European state building was driven by the need to wage war. The relationship between the need to wage war and the development of modern state institutions is fairly well established for early modern Europe, and as we will see applies equally well to ancient China. But before we can declare this to be a general theory of state formation, we need to answer some difficult questions: Why did some regions that experienced long-term warfare fail to develop state institutions (e.g., Melanesia)? Why did warfare in other regions seem to weaken rather than strengthen states (e.g., Latin America)? Why did some regions experience lower levels of conflict than others (e.g., India when compared to China)? Answering these questions pushes causality back to other factors such as population density, physical geography, technology, and religion. Warfare in places that are densely populated, with good physical communications (e.g., plains or steppe) and appropriate technologies (e.g., horses) has very different political effects from war in sparsely populated mountainous, jungle, or desert regions. So the theory of war and state formation dis-
solves into a series of further questions about why certain forms of warfare erupt in some places and not in others.

What I am aiming for in this book is a middle-range theory that avoids the pitfalls both of excessive abstraction (the vice of economists) and excessive particularism (the problem of many historians and anthropologists). I am hoping to recover something of the lost tradition of nineteenth-century historical sociology or comparative anthropology. I do not confront the general reader with a big theoretical framework at the outset. While I engage various theories in the course of the historical chapters, I reserve the more abstract treatment of political development (including definitions of some basic terms) for the last three chapters (chapters 28–30). This includes a general account of how political development happens as well as a discussion of how political development relates to the economic and social dimensions of development.

Putting the theory after the history constitutes what I regard as the correct approach to analysis: theories ought to be inferred from facts, and not the other way around. Of course, there is no such thing as a pure confrontation with facts, devoid of prior theoretical constructs. Those who think they are empirical in that fashion are deluding themselves. But all too often social science begins with an elegant theory and then searches for facts that will confirm it. This, hopefully, is not the approach I take.

There is a perhaps apocryphal story, retold by the physicist Stephen Hawking, about a famous scientist who was giving a public lecture on cosmology when he was interrupted by an old lady at the back of the room who told him he was speaking rubbish, and that the universe was actually a flat disc balanced on the back of a turtle. The scientist thought he could shut her up by asking what the turtle was standing on. She replied, “You’re very clever, young man, but it’s turtles all the way down.”

This then is the problem with any theory of development: the particular turtle you pick as the starting point for your story is actually standing on the back of another turtle, or else an elephant or a tiger or a whale. Most purportedly general theories of development fail because they don’t take into account the multiple independent dimensions of development. They are, rather, reductionist in seeking to abstract a single causal factor out of a much more complex historical reality. And they fail to push the story back far enough historically to the conditions that explain their own starting points and premises.

I push the story back very far. Before we get to state building in China,
we need to understand not just where war comes from but also how hu-
man societies originated. The surprising answer is that they didn't come 
from anywhere. Both society and conflict have existed for as long as there 
have been human beings, because human beings are by nature both social 
and competitive animals. The primates from which the human species 
evolved practiced an attenuated form of politics. To understand this, then, 
we need to go back to the state of nature and to human biology, which in 
some sense sets the framework for the whole of human politics. Biology 
presents a certain degree of solid ground resting below the turtles at the 
bottom of the stack, though even biology, as we will see in the next chapter, 
is not an entirely fixed point.