

# Why Late-Development Breeds Authoritarianism

Written by Anqi Yang

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ANQI YANG, JUL 5 2024

Capitalist development, the rise of the bourgeoisie, and the rise of the middle class will bring democratization according to the conventional expectation of modernization theory (Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Lipset 1959). This thesis has been challenged by both scholars and observers of the reality (O'Donnell 1973; Rosenfeld 2021, 49-53, 97; Tsai 2007; Slater and Wong 2022, 44-46). Despite long-term capitalist development, and with the economic elites gaining power and strength in many states in the developing world, authoritarianism and semi-authoritarianism remain steadfast. This article is part of a dissertation project that seeks to explain the phenomenon and address why late-development has a strong linkage with authoritarianism following works that have noted the particular characteristics of late-developing countries. Among others, state-dependence is a common theme identified in late-developing countries (Bellin 2002; Gerschenkron 1962; Rosenfeld 2021, 37).

Scholars have explained the lingering of authoritarianism despite advanced capitalist development from many perspectives. Among others, oil and valuable natural resources are believed to sponsor authoritarianism (Aslaksen 2010; Smith 2004, 2017; Goldman 2010; Huntington 1991, 65; Ross 2001), since the rulers have access to easy revenues and little need to extract from the society. The 'no-taxation-without-representation' mechanism is absent in those countries. Moreover, rich rulers can easily buy the allegiance of the citizens using monetary incentives without offering political freedom and participation. Yet one of the most recent works showed that the resource curse thesis might be mistaken (see Smith and Waldner 2021). Revolutionary regimes have been proposed as another particularly durable form of authoritarianism due to their cohesive ruling elites, enhanced coercive apparatuses, and the destruction of rival power centers (Levitsky and Way 2022, 4-5). Such a regime type has been identified to explain durable authoritarianism in post-revolutionary societies.

Although these are wonderful insights, they only apply to a certain region of the globe or explain authoritarianism of a certain type. The current research addresses economically-prosperous authoritarian regimes from another perspective: The author finds that successful late-economic-development is, counter to conventional expectations mentioned above, intrinsically linked to authoritarianism. The reason for the discrepancy between expectations and results hinges on world historical as well as geographical conditions. In other words, early European modernizers' democratization experiences are bound in temporality and region. Instead of addressing the question of why economically successful late-developing countries have not democratized, we should not apply the modernization theory (or variations of it) to the late-developing world in the first instance. Rather, it makes more sense to recognize that late developers follow a different developmental path—due to changing conditions of the world economy—that is most apt to move towards authoritarianism rather than towards democracy. As Fukuyama has stated, "Whig history" is more of an exceptional rather than universal trajectory (Fukuyama 2011, 326).

### Changing Contexts for the Late-Developing World

History matters (Skocpol and Somers 1980). Sometimes scholars neglect the importance of time, take "snapshots" of history, and try to make universally generalizable correlations between variables. They believe such truths travel across history (Pierson 2000). However, such synchronic analysis can generate misplaced or erroneous theory, or fail to capture context in ways that are materially significant. Taking "time" and "history" into consideration is crucial to our understanding of realities bounded by time (e.g., historicity and timing) and space (e.g., territoriality, regionality, and a politics of space). In alignment with this understanding, experiences and theory-generation of early-

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and late-comers to the world economy are meant to be quite distinct.

A few clarifications are prescient regarding what counts as late-development. The current work considers late-development not only a concept of temporality, but also a concept of space and relationality. The concepts of “center” versus “periphery” date back to social theorists including Tilly (1964), Shils (1975) as well as Useem’s application (Useem 1981). When Wallerstein addresses participants in the “world-economy,” he uses the concepts of “core-periphery” to describe a spectrum from leading industrial countries to the disadvantageous countries (Wallerstein 2004, 28). In this sense, the temporal components that we tie to the concepts of early- and late-development can be translated into geographical concepts as well: even when we take a snapshot of a moment in history, a country that belongs to the “core” production process can be considered an early-developer while a country that belongs to the “peripheral” production process can be viewed as a late-developer (Wallerstein 2004, 28-30). Thus, it is not useful to find a single year on a world historical calendar, or, similarly, a singular event, to serve as the demarcation of early- and late-development. In addition, a country may be an early- or late-developer, depending on the contexts in which we are discussing it. For example, Germany and France are considered late-developers in the European continent (Gerschenkron 1962, 44), while they are definitely early-developers compared with other world regions. A country’s developmental path is contingent upon time (e.g., historicity and timing), space (e.g., territoriality, regionality, and/or a politics of space), and relationality within those parameters. That is, it should be explained in terms of time in world historical terms, and in both regional and global-relational terms.

If the above is so, what precise mechanisms link late-development to higher likelihoods of sustained authoritarianism? The current work emphasizes the changing role and character of the state in response to the changing global environment for the late-developing world.

The global market has changed significantly for countries entering the world-economy late in world historical terms. Late-developing countries face a more saturated global market and higher levels of competition than do early-developers. In order to be sufficiently competitive, these countries need not only more highly complex technology than their predecessors but also larger-scale, mass production (typically factories) rather than small-scale production such as craftsmanship or family businesses that sustained early-developing countries (Gerschenkron 1962, 11). Besides, such late-developers have usually lacked sufficient skilled labor and capital accumulation at their initial stage of development (Gerschenkron 1962, 9). Considering all of these variables, late-developing countries, according to Gerschenkron (1962, 20, 44), require a powerful central coordinator in order to mobilize all the resources necessary in the society for industrialization and global competition. While the state is not the only central coordinator fulfilling this role, in late-developing contexts, it has most often served as the best central coordinator. It usually implies an executive authority, or a highly centralized government.

## Changing Role of the State

At least three conditions relating to the state must be in place for successful late-development to take place: state involvement in development must be high (Evans 1995, 10; Gerschenkron 1962); economic development must be a priority of the state (Evans 1995, 11; Kohli 2004); and both the state and the newly-emergent economic elites must ally with one another in order to reach this goal (Kohli 2004). Such are the ingredients leading most often to authoritarian regimes rather than to democracy.

The level of state involvement in capitalist development constitutes a fundamental disparity between late- and early-developing nations. In the case of successful late-developers, which have attained certain levels of capitalist development and modernization, a dependable and robust state apparatus a *sine qua non*, as it serves as the primary central coordinator and resource mobilizer (Gerschenkron 1962, 20). This necessity is evident across various world regions from European late-developing countries such as Germany and Russia to the East Asian tigers and China, where the state’s role in development is indispensable.

Conversely, this imperative does not hold true for early developers such as England. Such nations entered the global capitalist market at a juncture when it was less saturated, timing and conditions which enabled small-scale commercial activities (e.g. those run by families with only a few employees) to facilitate initial capitalist accumulation

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in the society. Simultaneously, since early developers experienced minimal international pressures on economic development, they had the luxury of time for initial capitalist accumulation, which created the conditions that allowed European modernization and industrialization as we understand them today. This protracted process, spanning centuries, allowed local industries to evolve at their own pace. In such scenarios, state sponsorship, policy intervention, or the state's role as a coordinator and mobilizer of resources were not critical during this phase for these developers.

Conditions for late-developers have been quite different dependent upon world historical moment, and relational development context within and across regions. Prioritization of development by late-developing states becomes critical in response to the evolving international system. In response to the global capitalist expansion, third-world countries are under strong pressure to 'catch up,' in order to ensure their survival and eventual prosperity within the international framework. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, amid Western expansion, a prevailing narrative in post-colonial, third-world countries revolved around the imperative to bolster their military, political, and, most significantly, economic capacities to safeguard their national sovereignty. Development was deemed the essential step to achieve all these goals and, thus, has become the prioritization of such states.

As a result of these two disparate conditions, the dynamics of the third condition—the relationships between the state and domestic social classes—also diverge among early- and late-developers. In late-developing countries, the bourgeoisie has aligned itself with the state for two primary reasons: first, the bourgeoisie tends to be more state-dependent in this scenario as industrialization is often guided and sponsored by a strong state with concentrated resources (Bellin 2002; Rosenfeld 2021). Second, both entities are forced to contend with the escalating demands of the burgeoning working class (e.g. Luebbert 1991).

Germany, for example, experienced swift industrialization following the 1871 unification. It was propelled by a formidably strong state and witnessed the concurrent ascent of the bourgeoisie, the middle class, and the working class. Unlike in earlier contexts, where the bourgeoisie could negotiate and secure their dominance more easily, the German scenario presented challenges. The bourgeoisie, often referred to as the liberals in this case, found it arduous to establish and safeguard their authority amidst the resistance from both the monarchical state and the working class (usually referred to as the democrats in this case) (Luebbert 1991, 116-120). During the 1848 revolutionary wave, German liberals initially joined forces with the democrats to challenge the state and demand greater political and economic liberties. However, it soon became apparent that their interests diverged from those of the democrats (Berman 2019, 78). Opportunistically, conservatives capitalized on this discord, forging alliances with the liberals in order to suppress the democrats. The liberal aspiration to simultaneously oppose the state, initially alongside the democrats, while leveraging state power to constrain the democrats proved futile (Feuchtwanger 2001, 5). Consequently, the 1848 liberal revolutions faltered. The liberals eventually assimilated into conservative political circles, perpetuating their dominance in German politics for the longer term (Luebbert 1991; Snell and Schmitt ed. 1976, 87).

By contrast, for earlier developers and industrializers such as England, the bourgeoisie adopted a more confrontational position towards the state. It bargained with the state to achieve enfranchisement, leading to the advent of liberal representative politics (North and Weingast 1989). This phenomenon stemmed from the favorable circumstance wherein early developers modernized at a relatively slower pace, requiring less extensive mass production which is a condition conducive to the emergence of the working class. The working class did not suddenly emerge in large scale and threaten to overwhelm political participation. Consequently, the bourgeoisie could gradually solidify their position of authority before facing the demands for redistribution and enfranchisement from the expanding working class (Kurth 1979; Luebbert 1991).

Conditions in the more peripheral world regions have differed somewhat from countries such as Germany but still share the general traits of late-development: the bourgeoisie has most typically allied with the state in order to maintain an upper hand over the working class. As above, having endured the imperial and colonial eras, most states in the semi-periphery and periphery recognized the need for modernization, (state-led) prioritizing of economic development, and (again, state-led) bolstering of national defense. Consequently, the state's priority aligns with the interests of the burgeoning industrialists and bourgeoisie, while the interests of the landed aristocrats conflict with the

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state's imperative to thrive in the evolving international order (Skocpol 2015).

Elite cohesion among the capitalist class and the state has been vital among late-developers to ensure that the state prioritizes developmental goals (Kohli 2004; Vu 2010; Waldner 1999). Both Kohli and Evans cite South Korea as a prime example, labeling it a "cohesive-capitalist" state and a "developmental" state, respectively (Kohli 2004, 27; Evans 1995, 51). Such a coalition kept labor subdued, preventing disruptions to the state's developmental objectives. In the "cohesive-capitalist" state of South Korea, where labor has been relatively non-active, the state became "developmental," while active labor in Nigeria diverted the government from focusing solely upon economic developmental goals (Kohli 2004, 101, 365). In fragmented-multiclass states such as Brazil and India, development was sluggish as the state had to address various societal demands simultaneously (Kohli 2004, 128, 256; Evans 1995, 68). While neither author argues it explicitly, a developmental, labor-repressive state is almost always an authoritarian one; by contrast, a fragmented-multiclass state is typically a democracy in which the state needs to tend to the interests of different constituencies rather than enjoying autonomous power sufficient to ignore them.

While South Korea has democratized, it is worth noting that its economic takeoff and rapid industrialization occurred, historically, under authoritarian rule. It is reasonable to assume that South Korea's economic development would have followed a different path had democratization preceded industrialization. Waldner, in the same vein, argues, if state-building precedes popular incorporation, it can more effectively mold state institutions to be more conducive to economic development; conversely, if the lower classes are already incorporated by the time of state-building, the state must cater to their benefits, potentially hindering economic development success (Waldner 1999).

Contemporary China under a communist regime which formally represents the interests of the proletariat offers another example of a labor-repressive regime (Franceschini and Nesossi 2018; Fu 2017; Pun and Lu 2010). In this case, only corporate labor unions under close supervision of the Chinese Communist Party are permitted. "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" implies a communist regime with a capitalist economy, prioritizing the interests of the bourgeoisie, who are often politically well-connected. Understandably, the regime struggles to focus simultaneously on rapid economic advancement, and to meet the demands of the large, emerging working class that accompanies the process of rapid, state-led industrialization.

## Conclusions

The current work has revisited the question of why we have witnessed so many stable authoritarian regimes in successful and prosperous late-developing countries. Beyond region-specific or ideology-specific explanations, the current work expands upon the concept of 'late-development' *per se*, arguing that developmental path is contingent upon time (e.g., historicity and timing), space (e.g., territoriality, regionality, and/or a politics of space), and relationality within those parameters. That is, development should be explained in terms of time in world historical, regional, and global-relational terms.

Three common threads in late-development which, in fact, *predispose* countries to authoritarianism are discussed: the changing global capitalist market (Gerschenkron 1962), higher levels of state involvement in development (Gerschenkron 1962), and the consequent coalitional shift of the state (Kohli 2004).

The global capitalist market becomes more saturated as late-comers enter, leading these late-developing countries to face fiercer competition than their predecessors, as well as more endogenous and exogenous interference or demands. This condition forces late-developers to have a powerful central coordinator to mobilize all societal resources to gain competitiveness in the global market (Gerschenkron 1962). Thus, a strong state is often a prerequisite for successful late-development. Faced with the challenge of catching up in the global capitalist economy, the state realigns itself with the burgeoning bourgeoisie, which represents the driving force of economic development.

At the same time, late-development typically involves mass-scale industrialization, leading to the sudden emergence of the working class, who are likely to demand their political and economic rights. Economically successful late-developing countries usually prioritize economic development, so they typically repress the labor (Kohli 2004). These

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factors collectively point to a higher likelihood of authoritarianism. The analysis, above, briefly addresses the cases of England, Germany, China, South Korea and a few other countries to highlight the development processes theorized herein. It is a preliminary analysis and is part of a wider dissertation research project in progress.

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