

# DEGREES OF DEMOCRACY

## Some Comparative Lessons from India

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### INTRODUCTION

ONE of the most remarkable developments of the late twentieth century has been the number of countries that have made the transition from authoritarian to democratic rule. Even if, following Linz and Stepan,<sup>1</sup> one employs an exacting definition of democratic consolidation, there are far more countries today in which democracy is the only game in town than was the case just fifteen years ago. This development has in turn produced an empirically and theoretically rich literature on democratic transitions and consolidation. But if we have learned much about the conditions and processes under which the transition to democracy takes place, we have only just begun to scratch the surface of the equally challenging question of the *effectiveness* of democracy in the posttransition period. As Linz and Stepan note, beyond the consolidation of democracies there is room to

improve their quality by raising the minimum economic plateau upon which all citizens stand and by deepening political and social participation in the life of the country. Within the category of consolidated democracies there is a continuum from low to high quality democracy; an urgent political and intellectual task is to think about how to improve the quality of most consolidated democracies.<sup>2</sup>

This paper takes up this challenge by drawing on the case of India, which is of particular significance for theories of democratic deepening on two counts. First, the general picture of Indian democracy stands as a reminder that there is no linear progression to democracy. Much as

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<sup>1</sup> Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Consolidation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

the robustness of India's democratic institutions has been rightfully celebrated, the effectiveness of those institutions is increasingly in doubt. Fifty-three years of almost uninterrupted democratic rule has done little to reduce the political, social, and economic marginalization of India's popular classes. Second, a more disaggregated picture reveals that within the unitary institutional domain marked by the boundaries of the Indian nation-state, there are degrees of democracy or, as Guillermo O'Donnell has put it, differences in the intensity of citizenship.<sup>3</sup> India's posttransition history has produced multiple trajectories of democratization. Taken together these observations inform the central theoretical argument of this paper: in order to understand the conditions under which democracy can be deepened, we need to develop accounts of democratization that explore the dynamic interactions between institutions and social processes.

I define posttransition democratic deepening as a process under which the formal, effective, and substantive dimensions of democracy become mutually reinforcing. In much of the late-developing world social and economic conditions have conspired to limit the capacity of subordinate groups to effectively exercise their rights and to secure substantive gains. This has often produced a vicious cycle in which the ineffectiveness of formal democracy produces increased social tensions, which in turn trigger autocratic political responses and "movements of rage."<sup>4</sup> In India the increasing incidence of caste and communal violence, the criminalization of politics, the spread of corruption, and the rise of ethnic-chauvinist and communitarian parties all point to a crisis of the democratic state.<sup>5</sup> Within India there are, however, important exceptions.<sup>6</sup> Atul Kohli, for instance, has argued that the continuous

<sup>3</sup> O'Donnell, "On the State, Democratization and Some Conceptual Problems: A Latin American View with Glances at Some Postcommunist Countries," *World Development* 21, no. 8 (1993).

<sup>4</sup> Huber, Rueschemeyer, and Stephens provide a discussion of why a "vicious cycle" of interaction between these three dimensions of democracy—which they label formal, participatory, and social—is symptomatic of new democracies. Evelyne Huber, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and John D. Stephens, "The Paradoxes of Contemporary Democracy: Formal, Participatory, and Social Dimensions," in Lisa Anderson, ed., *Transitions to Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Mehta, for example, notes that "there is a widespread sense that the state and its laws can be manipulated to serve particular interests, that official decisions are guided by no principle but expediency, and that even this uncertain restraint on the arbitrary use of power is wearing thin." Pratap Mehta, "India: Fragmentation amid Consensus," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 1 (1997). See also Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, eds., *Nationalism, Democracy and Development* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 59.

<sup>6</sup> Although this is hardly surprising in a federal system marked by such a high degree of socioeconomic heterogeneity, most treatments of Indian democracy focus on the national picture. When democracy is examined at the subnational level, the emphasis has almost always been on variations in the political party system, not on democratic deepening. State-level studies moreover remain more concerned with scaling-up to develop theories of Indian *democracy* than with scaling-down to develop theories of Indian *democracies*.

rule of a disciplined, left-of-center party in West Bengal—the Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPM)—has produced both order and some success in alleviating poverty.<sup>7</sup> The case has also been made that because of different histories of caste reform movements, democracy in South India is deeper than in the North, marked by more political participation and significant achievements on the social development front.<sup>8</sup> The most distinct departure from the general pattern, however, is the case of the southwestern state of Kerala (population thirty-one million). Here, as I hope to show, the procedural, effective, and substantive elements of democracy have evolved in a virtuous cycle, resulting in the political and economic integration of subordinate classes. Often cited as an exceptionally successful case of social development, substantive democracy in Kerala—which has included successful land reforms, poverty reduction, and social protection measures—has been tied to a long history of social mobilization and effective public intervention.<sup>9</sup> In contrast to the transition literature and an older literature on political modernization, both of which emphasize the difficulties developing countries face in managing high levels of popular mobilization, the case of Kerala suggests that under certain conditions, organized societal demands and democratic governance can be mutually reinforcing. And if the case of Kerala helps us understand the conditions under which democratization flourishes, it also allows us to reconstruct why the same conditions have not obtained for the rest of the country. This reconstruction in turn takes us beyond the analyses of elite decision making and institutional design that have informed much of the transition literature.<sup>10</sup> It brings us to causal accounts that in the

<sup>7</sup> Kohli, *The State and Poverty in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); idem, *Democracy and Discontent: India's Growing Crisis of Governability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>8</sup> Ashutosh Varshney, "Is India Becoming More Democratic," *Journal of Asian Studies* 59 (February 2000).

<sup>9</sup> On all the key measures of quality of life, Kerala has achieved levels that rival those of the West and are decades ahead of national averages. For a classic early study, see United Nations, *Poverty, Unemployment and Development Policy: A Case Study of Selected Issues with Reference to Kerala* (New York: Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 1975). For the most recent comparison with India, see Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, *India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995). Important studies that highlight the role of social movements include Richard Franke and Barbara Chasin, *Kerala: Radical Reform as Development in an Indian State* (San Francisco: Food First Development Report no. 6, 1989); K. P. Kannan, *Of Rural Proletarian Struggles: Mobilization and Organization of Rural Workers in South-West India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988); and V. K. Ramachandran, "On Kerala's Development Achievements," in Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, eds., *Indian Development* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Most notably, see Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead, eds., *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Prospects for Democracy*, 4 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986). In a review of the transition literature, Shin writes that the establishment of "viable democracy" is seen as "a product of strategic interactions and arrangements among political elites,

tradition of Barrington Moore's classic work on the social origins of democracy highlight the ways in which historically conditioned dynamic relations among broadly constituted social actors drive not only the *making* of democracy but also the *deepening* of democracy.<sup>11</sup> Such an analysis, in particular, helps us excavate the critical role played by subordinate classes.<sup>12</sup>

### THE DEMOCRACY DEBATE

The debate on democratic transitions has understandably focused on the installation of electoral, constitutional, and procedural institutions, with the unit of analysis invariably the nation-state. While useful for typologizing regimes and differentiating democracy from authoritarianism, focusing on formal national-level institutions provides only limited analytical leverage for conceptualizing democratic deepening. Because institutions and politics are relational and configurational, their attributes are never perfectly isomorphic either horizontally across different policy arenas or vertically from one level of the state to another. As the state radiates out from its geographic and functional core, its authority and its effectiveness fluctuate dramatically. Much as state-society theorists have recently called for disaggregating the state,<sup>13</sup> we need to disaggregate democracy. As conventionally defined, formal democracy is marked by universal suffrage, regular and competitive elections,

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conscious choices among various types of democratic constitutions, and electoral and party systems." Doh Chull Shin, "On the Third Wave of Democratization: A Synthesis and Evaluation of Recent Theory and Research," *World Politics* 47 (October 1994), 139.

<sup>11</sup> Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).

<sup>12</sup> If the first generation of analysts of democratic transitions highlighted the role of elite political actors (see fn. 10), a second generation has looked beyond the moment of the negotiation of transitions to more historical explanations in which the role of subordinate actors assumes greater explanatory weight. See, for example, Ruth B. Collier and David Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena: Critical Junctures, the Labor Movement, and Regime Dynamics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Ruth B. Collier and James Mahoney, "Adding Collective Actors to Collective Outcomes: Labor and Recent Democratization in South America and Southern Europe," *Comparative Politics* 24, no. 3 (1997); Anthony Pereira, *The End of the Peasantry: The Rural Labor Movement in Northeast Brazil, 1961-1988* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997); Gay W. Seidman, *Manufacturing Militance: Workers' Movements in Brazil and South Africa, 1970-1985* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Deborah Yashar, *Demanding Democracy: Reform and Reaction in Costa Rica and Guatemala, 1870s-1950s* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997); and Glenn Adler and Eddie Webster, "Challenging Transition Theory: The Labor Movement, Radical Reform, and Transition to Democracy in South Africa," *Politics and Society* 23 (March 1995). For the most important treatment of how subordinate actors, and in particular working classes, have contributed to democratic deepening, see Dietrich Rueschmeyer, Evelyn Huber Stephens, and John D. Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> Joel Migdal, Arul Kohli, and Vivienne Shue, eds., *State Power and Social Forces: Domination and Transformation in the Third World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

accountability of state apparatuses to elected representatives, and legally codified and enforced rights of association.<sup>14</sup> An *effective* democracy is one in which democratic practices have spread throughout society, governing not only relations between states and citizens but also public relations between citizens. Functionally and geographically the degree of public legality in many formal democracies remains severely constrained. In such democracies, notes O'Donnell, "the component of democratic legality and, hence, of publicness and citizenship, fades away at the frontiers of various regions and class, gender and ethnic relations."<sup>15</sup> Public spaces disappear to be replaced by areas of privatized power. Local institutions and officials are colonized by bosses, chiefs, dons, or caciques. Patrimonialism, clientelism, and coercion eat away at democratic authority. Thus we must look beyond the macroinstitutional level of parliaments, constitutions, and elections. And we must investigate instead the intermediate- and local-level institutions and consultative arenas located in the interstices of state and society where "everyday" forms of democracy either flourish or founder. We need, in other words, a political sociology of democracy, one that specifically recognizes that a working democracy must be an effective democracy.

An effective democracy has two interrelated characteristics—a robust civil society and a capable state. A free and lively civil society makes the state and its agents more accountable by guaranteeing that consultation takes place not just through electoral representation (periodic mandates) but also through constant feedback and negotiation. Civil society is critical to democratic performance because it extends the scope and style of claim making beyond the formal interest representation that defines political society. Social movements, associations, and unions raise new issues and mobilize new actors. In doing so they not only provide a counterbalance to more bureaucratic and aggregated forms of interest representation, but they also create new solidarities, which in many instances specifically challenge existing inequalities and hence help democratize society itself. The key point here is that the health of a democracy is measured as much in the qualitative nature of its social patterns of association as in the formal character of its institutions. And while these two variables condition each other—associational patterns are conditioned by institutional environments, and institutional responsiveness is conditioned by associational vitality—the interaction can be positively reinforcing just as it can be mutually corrosive.

<sup>14</sup> Huber, Rueschemeyer, and Stephens (fn. 4), 168.

<sup>15</sup> O'Donnell (fn. 3), 1361.

The capacity of the state is also central to the effectiveness of democracy. Procedural guarantees of civic and political rights, including rights of association and free speech, do not automatically translate into the effective exercise of democratic rights. Citizenship is not a right, it is a relation. Where inequalities between social categories are so pronounced as to create extraconstitutional forms of binding authority (clientelism, patriarchy, caste subordination), the exercise of citizenship is subverted. As theorists of civil society have long argued, its associational qualities emerge only when it is doubly differentiated from the state and from primary social groupings (families, kinship groups, lineages). A precondition for the effective exercise of civic and political rights requires a state capable of securing the even, uniform, and rational-legal enforcement of public authority. Individuals and groups must be protected from arbitrary state action but also from forms of social authority that might constrain or impinge upon their civic and political liberties. And creating public spaces that are protected from nondemocratic forms of authority requires far more than writing constitutions and holding officials accountable. It marks a fundamental shift in the distribution and locus of what Weber called "legitimate domination" from society to state. Given the contested and unfinished process of state formation in much of the developing world, the writ of legally enforced public authority remains limited, producing a low-intensity form of citizenship.<sup>16</sup> This problem is tied to both the infrastructural and the authoritative limits of state power. Infrastructurally, the apparatuses of the state—the police, the judiciary, the educational system—are simply cast too thinly and too unevenly to enforce and provide for citizen's rights. Authoritatively, the state's legitimate realm of domination (constitutionally prescribed arenas in which its authority is binding and backed by coercion) is contested and weakened by countervailing sources of authority.

Finally, in the context of the developing world the distinction between formal and substantive democracy has to be taken more seriously. Because the Western trajectory of democratization passed, as T. H. Marshall argued,<sup>17</sup> through incremental stages of the civil, the political, and the social, most political scientists have treated the formal and substantive aspects of democracy as discrete and sequential phenomena. Yet while the distinction between process and outcome is heuristically useful, in the context of the developing world there are compelling reasons not to treat these attributes of democracy in analytical isolation.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class*, ed. Tom Bottomore (London: Pluto Press, 1992).

First, a strong case can be made that the persistence of acute social inequities compromises the basic logic of associational autonomy that informs the classical liberal claim for defending procedural democracy on its own merits.<sup>18</sup> As Weyland notes, “Abject poverty forces many people into clientelist bonds with elites who offer minimal benefits and protection in exchange for obedience and political support—that is for an abdication of citizen rights.”<sup>19</sup> In much of the developing world—and especially in the so-called informal sector—economic relations are to a great extent reproduced through social and political forms of domination. The intimate nexus between these domains, which exists at both the structural and the individual level, reduces the effective utility of formal political rights to subordinate groups. As Vilas notes succinctly, “Institutional rules are less important in these situations than personal arrangements and connections based on reciprocities, real or symbolic, explicit or implicit.”<sup>20</sup>

Second, in the postcolonial and postsocialist world, where the franchise was extended wholesale rather than incrementally, democratic legitimations were infused from the outset with substantive demands for distributive justice. Because peasants and workers were politically empowered at a much earlier stage of economic development than were their European counterparts, the tension between citizenship rights and property rights has always been especially acute. But in most democracies of the developing world the predominant pattern of subordinate-class incorporation has been clientelism or populism, rather than economic integration through the expansion of social citizenship, a pattern that has invariably exacerbated social tensions and threatened democratic stability.<sup>21</sup> In Latin America unresolved conflicts between propertied elites and the redistributive demands of organized labor or peasant movements have repeatedly produced authoritarian responses. In the East European context Przeworski et al. have argued that democratic consolidation is critically tied to the effectiveness with which elected governments can manage the social costs of market transitions. Linking the question of the legitimacy and viability of democratic rule to substantive outcomes, Przeworski et al. argue that “regardless of their

<sup>18</sup> For an important discussion of this point, see Jonathan Fox, “The Difficult Transition from Clientelism to Citizenship: Lessons from Mexico,” *World Politics* 46 (January 1994).

<sup>19</sup> Kurt Weyland, *Democracy without Equity: Failures of Reform in Brazil* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996), 5.

<sup>20</sup> Carlos Vilas, “Democracy and the Whereabouts of Participation,” in Doug Chalmers, Scott Martin, and Kerianne Piester, eds., *The New Politics of Inequality in Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 19.

<sup>21</sup> Nicos Mouzelis, “Modernity, Late Development and Civil Society,” in John A. Hall, ed., *Civil Society: Theory, History and Comparison* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1995).

age, democracies persist whenever all the major political forces find that they can improve their situation if they channel their demands and their conflicts within the democratic institutions."<sup>22</sup>

The substantive outcomes against which a democratic regime is judged are of course historically contingent. Comisso, for example, argues in her review of the track record of democratization in Eastern Europe that substantive democracy has assumed three different forms—liberal (sustaining a free enterprise economy), national (preserving a particular national characteristic), and egalitarian (promoting equity).<sup>23</sup> Most irreducibly, however, effective democracies give rise to redistributive pressures, as indeed classical theorists from Locke to Marx were quick to recognize. Przeworski makes this same point with characteristic clarity: "If the median voter is decisive, and if the market-generated distribution of income is skewed toward lower incomes (as it always is), then majority rule will call for an equality of incomes."<sup>24</sup> Where such interests fail to be aggregated or where the state fails to be responsive, democratic consolidation itself is threatened. As Linz and Stepan comment: "If a democracy never produced policies that generated government-mandated public goods in the areas of education, health, transportation, some safety net for its citizens hurt by major market swings, and some alleviation of gross inequality, democracy would not be sustainable."<sup>25</sup>

In sum, any understanding of democratic deepening must recognize the complicated interplay of the formal, effective, and substantive dimensions of democratic rule. Formal civic and political rights mean little if they are not backed by the authoritative power of the state or are routinely suspended or transgressed by extrademocratic powers. And effective rights of association and representation will necessarily give rise to substantive tests of the legitimacy of democratic rule.

### THE LIMITS OF EFFECTIVE DEMOCRACY IN INDIA

In any federal parliamentary system, and especially one that has been erected on an extremely heterogenous social landscape, the quality of

<sup>22</sup> Adam Przeworski et al., *Sustainable Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 70. In an earlier work Przeworski framed the question of transitions in static political equilibria terms, concluding that successful transitions are built on elite pacts that are "inevitably conservative, economically and socially." Quoted in Adler and Webster (fn. 12), 84.

<sup>23</sup> Ellen Comisso, "Is the Glass Half Full or Half Empty? Reflections on Five Years of Competitive Politics in Eastern Europe," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 30, no. 1 (1997).

<sup>24</sup> Adam Przeworski, "The Neoliberal Fallacy," *Journal of Democracy* 3, no. 3 (1992).

<sup>25</sup> Linz and Stepan (fn. 1), 12–13.



democracy is bound to vary dramatically. Within the boundaries of the Indian nation-state the formal institutional parameters of democratic rule can be held constant. Variations instead have to be located along the effective and substantive dimensions of democracy. These are dynamic relationships that have to be explored through a configurational analysis. Kerala lies at one end of the range of possibilities and represents one of many possible paths to democratic deepening in India. In order to tease out its configurational specificity and to identify the causal historical dynamics at work, the following section attempts to provide both context and comparative leverage by exploring the general pattern of posttransition democratization in India.

India's democratic institutions have withstood the test of time and the test of a fissiparous society. The basic procedural infrastructure of democracy—specifically the constitution and guarantees of the rights of association, the separation of powers, and regular and open elections at both the national and the state level—has become firmly entrenched.<sup>26</sup> At a minimum, despite infamous recent episodes of communal and caste violence, democratic institutions have not only helped forge a nation from multiple nationalities but have also institutionalized acceptance of the uncertainty of rule that comes with competitive elections.<sup>27</sup> The authoritarian episode of 1975–77 notwithstanding, the prospects of a democratic reversal in India are remote. India's dominant class factions, proprietary and professional, support democracy, if for no other reasons than that they have benefited so handsomely from the largesse of India's democratic politics of patronage.<sup>28</sup>

The effectiveness of India's democratic institutions is an altogether different matter. Throughout vast regions of India the exercise of citizenship rights, even in the limited political sense of the term, is circumscribed by the persistence of traditional forms of social control. With more than half of India's rural households depending on landlords for access to land or labor, clientelistic ties remain key to the sur-

<sup>26</sup> There are a total of twenty-five states in India, fifteen of which have populations surpassing fifteen million (hereafter the "major" states). Indian states have their own legislatures and executives and under India's federal constitution enjoy a wide range of powers and responsibilities, including independent sources of revenue collection (primarily sales taxes) and a wide range of development functions.

<sup>27</sup> One could simply point to border areas—the Northeast region, Kashmir, and Punjab—where separatist struggles have led to the suspension of basic democratic rights as the extreme cases of undemocratic practice. These, however, are in effect areas where the legitimacy of the nation-state itself is contested. It is variation within the boundaries of the consolidated and legitimated Indian nation-state that are of concern here.

<sup>28</sup> Pranab Bardhan, *The Political Economy of Development in India* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1984).

vival strategies of subordinate groups.<sup>29</sup> With its ritualized exclusions and deeply ingrained hierarchical relations, the caste system has inscribed these material inequalities with a degree of social and cultural control that has few parallels. Low levels of literacy and discriminatory treatment by upper-caste-controlled state institutions have further limited the associational autonomy of lower castes and classes. The corollary of this picture is the predominance of fragmented sovereignty. The reach and authority of the juridical and democratic state ends—or more accurately is transfigured—where the writ and power of local strongmen and their caste-based followings begin. In a pattern that closely resembles both the Brazilian and the African cases, extrademocratic sources of authority not only resist but also colonize and privatize state power.<sup>30</sup> Local notables routinely dominate local institutions, including village governments, schools, cooperative societies, and the development bureaucracy. The permeability of state authority is most dramatically exposed by the existence of private caste armies (especially in Bihar) and elite control over local police forces. On these counts, the general picture of Indian democracy bears a striking resemblance to Putnam's description of the uncivic regions of southern Italy:

Public life in these regions is organized hierarchically, rather than horizontally. The very concept of "citizen" here is stunted. From the point of view of the individual inhabitant, public affairs is the business of somebody else—*i notabili*—"the bosses," "the politicians"—but not me. . . . Political participation is triggered by personal dependency or private greed, not by collective purpose.<sup>31</sup>

This is not to say that democratic institutions in India have been altogether lifeless. The past two decades have witnessed an erosion of traditional clientelist politics. Formal and competitive democracy in India has undermined the legitimacy of traditional social authority, spawned a whole new generation of political entrepreneurs, and created spaces in which new groups have been successfully mobilized. But the political forces that have emerged are more rooted than ever in social cleavages.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> In 1982, 66.6 percent of rural households fell below the marginal ownership category of 2.5 acres. Together they accounted for 12.2 percent of total land ownership, less than the 14.3 percent share of the top 1 percent of households. C. T. Kurien, *The Economy: An Interpretive Introduction* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1992), 321.

<sup>30</sup> For Brazil, see Weyland (fn. 19). For Africa, see Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

<sup>31</sup> Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 115.

<sup>32</sup> Pradeep Chhibber, *Democracy without Associations: Transformation of the Party System and Social Cleavages in India* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

The basis for mobilization has shifted from patronage to identity populism. The pattern has varied greatly from state to state, but the trend has been one of a marked increase in the political saliency of essentialized identities of caste, religious community, and ethnicity (subnationalism). That this pattern has affected every state in India underscores the significance of two broad developments. The proximate cause is the decline of the Congress Party and its catchall electoral politics. The deeper structural cause lies in the well-documented social and redistributive failures of the Indian state.<sup>33</sup> The electoral dominance of the Congress Party was sustained by vast and vertically organized patronage networks that held together a wide range of interests and groups. The resulting pattern of state-society engagement that Herring has called “embedded particularism”<sup>34</sup> nourished rent-seeking interests at the expense of the state’s capacity to provide public goods and institutional reform. These developmental failures have unleashed new sources of social conflict.

As elections have become more competitive and more groups have been brought into the political arena on their own terms, patronage has become increasingly tied to identity politics. The demand for government quotas and special privileges, whether of majority or minority communities, now dominates claim making. This explosion of narrow demands has triggered a frantic zero-sum scramble for preferential treatment that Bardhan has aptly described as “equal-opportunity plundering by all interest groups.”<sup>35</sup> Subjected to this chaotic chorus of particularistic claims, governing coalitions have become increasingly opportunistic and unstable. Thus scholars ranging from a neo-Huntingtonian to a neo-Marxist persuasion have noted a severe erosion of the state’s autonomy and the eclipse of its developmental mandate.<sup>36</sup>

In this political climate of populism and organizational fragmentation, encompassing political formations have been the exception to the rule. Labor unions have rarely extended beyond the protective confines of the organized sector (large factories and public employees) and in many instances have become little more than vehicles for the political ambitions of local bosses. Farmers’ associations have been dominated

<sup>33</sup> See Drèze and Sen (fn. 9, 1995 and 1996); and Kohli (fn. 7, 1987).

<sup>34</sup> Ronald Herring, “Embedded Particularism: India’s Failed Developmental State,” in Meredith Woo-Cumings, ed., *The Developmental State* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999).

<sup>35</sup> Pranab Bardhan, “Sharing the Spoils: Group Equity, Development, and Democracy” (Manuscript, Department of Economics, University of California, Berkeley, 1997), 16.

<sup>36</sup> See Bardhan (fn. 28); Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, *In Pursuit of Lakshmi: The Political Economy of the Indian State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); and Herring (fn. 34).

by the interests of large farmers. With the reach of public legality circumscribed by the power of local elites, lower-class and lower-caste efforts to organize around economic issues (outside of Kerala and West Bengal) have invariably been defeated.<sup>37</sup> And while the past decade has witnessed an explosion in NGOs, in part as a response to failures of the developmental state, their coverage remains spotty. And outside of some well publicized cases, their capacity to scale-up and impact public policy has been limited.

In the absence of cohesive lower-class organizations, mass politics has little programmatic content. Varshney, for example, has convincingly shown that in the national election of 1996 economic reforms were a nonissue. Instead, mass political discourse was dominated by “expressions of India’s identity politics [which] have led to mass mobilization, insurgencies, riots, assassinations, desecrations and destructions of holy places. In popular perceptions, the significance of identities has been far greater than the implications of economic reforms.”<sup>38</sup> The relationship between the primacy of identity politics and the unorchestrated character of subordinate politics is captured by the rise to power of the Hindu-nationalist BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party). Against the general involution of the political party system, the relative cohesiveness of the BJP marks a post-Congress political reconsolidation of upper-caste, middle-, and lower-middle-class domination, with significant support from business interests. The BJP’s electoral appeal is rooted in a nationalist politics of order that explicitly denies deep societal cleavages of class, caste, and ethnicity through the construction of an “imagined community.” As Bose notes, the ideological potency of the BJP lies in “the majoritarian myth of Hinduvata . . . with its millenarian vision of an India which has resolved all its problems, political conflicts and social contradictions through an affirmation of the organic unity of a common ‘Hindu’ identity.”<sup>39</sup> The claim of inclusiveness is belied by the explicit exclusion of Muslims and the implicit defense of the caste-stratified status quo. As for subordinate classes, they remain splintered between Muslim, dalit (untouchable), and backward caste political formations, in which the centrality of demands for reservation

<sup>37</sup> Paul R. Brass, *The Politics of India since Independence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 334.

<sup>38</sup> Ashutosh Varshney, “Mass Politics or Elite Politics? India’s Economic Reforms in Comparative Perspective” (Paper presented at the Conference on India’s Economic Reforms, Center for International Affairs and Harvard Institute of International Development, Harvard University, Cambridge, December 13–14, 1996), 3.

<sup>39</sup> Sumantra Bose, “‘Hindu Nationalism’ and the Crisis of the Indian State,” in Bose and Jalal (fn. 5), 109.

of government and educational positions serves the narrow interests of the upwardly mobile elites of these communities. Against this backdrop of political fragmentation, the capacity of democratic institutions to aggregate interests and in particular to address pressing distributional dilemmas is more in doubt than ever. The politics of social citizenship, as Mehta has remarked, are conspicuous by their absence.<sup>40</sup> Thus, much as in the case of Brazil, political fragmentation has frustrated the equity-enhancing potential (and promise) of democracy.<sup>41</sup>

This failure of Indian democracy to give effective voice to substantive demands has locked in a vicious cycle that is eroding the very legitimacy of democratic governance. With the state's failure to provide basic services and a modicum of protection from market swings, ordinary citizens are seeking security in traditional networks and have become increasingly susceptible to the politics of scapegoating. Much as O'Donnell has noted for Latin America, in a climate of insecurity and uncertainty, politics becomes a desolidarizing affair.<sup>42</sup> The increasing prevalence of privatized strategies and the politics of "sauve qui peut" is reflected in the widely documented "criminalization"<sup>43</sup> of politics, the proliferation of large-scale corruption scandals that have tarnished most parties, and the upsurge of sectarian and castist violence. To complete the vicious circle, a state that has failed to secure stable and workable ties to society has come to rely increasingly on administrative power and coercion rather than on democratic participation.<sup>44</sup> Describing this erosion of public legality, one of the most seasoned scholars of Indian politics writes of "an increasingly pervasive Hobbesian state of disorder, unpredictability and fear of violence among ordinary people in the rural areas of India."<sup>45</sup>

### DEMOCRACY IN KERALA

Kerala shares the same formal democratic institutions that are found in the rest of the nation. Most of its fiscal resources and much of its economic health depend on the central government. Its administrative

<sup>40</sup> Mehta (fn. 5), 64.

<sup>41</sup> Weyland (fn. 19).

<sup>42</sup> O'Donnell (fn. 3), 1365–67.

<sup>43</sup> To cite one example: "According to the Chief Election Commissioner, 180 of Uttar Pradesh's [India's most populous state] Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) have criminal cases pending against them, at least 52 of which involve 'heinous crimes' such as rape and murder." Jean Drèze and Haris Gazdar, "Uttar Pradesh: The Burden of Inertia," in Drèze and Sen (fn. 9, 1996), 108.

<sup>44</sup> See Rajni Kothari, *State against Democracy: In Search of Humane Governance* (Delhi: Ajanta Books, 1988).

<sup>45</sup> Brass (fn. 37), 60.

structures are those of the center, and many of its highest ranking bureaucrats are recruited from a national pool. Yet on all key qualitative measures of democracy, Kerala clearly stands apart from the center and from all other Indian states. The effectiveness of its democratic institutions is reflected in the degree and scope of public legality. In Weberian terms, rational-legal authority has displaced traditional authority in the regulation of public life. Not only have individuals achieved greater autonomy and capacity in exercising their democratic rights, but subordinate groups have been successfully integrated into public politics. Moreover, democracy in Kerala has produced significant and measurable substantive outcomes, most notably important redistributive reforms and the expansion of the welfare state. These substantive outcomes are the result of the inclusionary and encompassing character of democratic life, but they have also helped reinforce the effectiveness of state authority and levels of political participation.

If democracy in Kerala works better than in the rest of India, it is in large part because individuals have been equipped with the basic human capabilities required of citizenship. Literacy in Kerala has reached 91 percent, compared with 49 percent for India as a whole. Not only have successive governments maintained the highest rates of educational expenditure in India, but in contrast to the national pattern they have pursued a strategy of mass education by prioritizing primary universal schooling over secondary education.<sup>46</sup> As a direct result, traditionally marginalized groups, most notably women and dalits, have acquired the basic social skills necessary for informed participation. This is concretely reflected in the highest per capita circulation of newspapers in India<sup>47</sup> and rates of electoral participation that run 15 to 20 percent higher than the national average. Associational life has been further strengthened by the provision of basic public goods. The provision of basic health care and subsidized food staples and the regulation of the labor market have reduced material dependencies and eroded traditional clientelistic networks. Increased associational autonomy, most notably for subordinate groups, is in turn reflected in the sheer density of civic organizations and the vigor of associational life. Keralites of all walks of life, it would seem, have an irresistible inclination to combine, associate, and organize.<sup>48</sup> There are a large number of

<sup>46</sup> See Ramachandran (fn. 9).

<sup>47</sup> Robin Jeffrey, *Politics, Women and Well-Being: How Kerala Became a "Model"* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 1992), 3.

<sup>48</sup> These observations are based on my own fieldwork conducted in 1991–92 and in the summers of 1997 and 1999. Heller, *The Labor of Development: Workers in the Transformation of Capitalism in Kerala*,

NGOs operating in the state, including the mass-based KSSP (Kerala Sastra Sahithya Parishad), which has achieved world renown for its efforts to “bring science to the people.” Kerala’s caste self-help and social uplift societies have a long history of active civil engagement. Overlapping an extensive public school network is a network of private and semiprivate schools sponsored by communal and caste organizations. The result is a school in every village and nearly universal primary school enrollment.<sup>49</sup> The same pattern is found in the health sector.

It is not sufficient to positively correlate associational life with democratic deepening, however. Just as a vibrant civil society can promote trust and cooperation, it can also promote particularism that fosters rent-seeking lobbies and exclusionary identities. In a context of pervasive social inequality and highly skewed distribution of political resources and influence, the openness of Indian democracy has produced highly differentiated associative capacities and has given full play to oligarchical coalitions or, in the Rudolphs’ phrase, demand-group politics.<sup>50</sup> The narrowness of interest aggregation has in turn subverted the public good, and the Indian state has become an instrument for creating and reproducing a “network of advantage distribution.”<sup>51</sup> And while India’s caste system and religious communities, evolving as they have in a pluralist political system, have promoted popular involvement in public life and spawned a dense configuration of self-help, cultural, educational, youth, and women’s organizations, they have done so on the strength of parochial (and often exclusionary) identities and organizational structures that retain important elements of patriarchal authority and hierarchy. This pattern of associational life has in turn shaped the logic of political society. The dominant political formations in most Indian states are increasingly either communal parties (the BJP), regionalist parties (the AIADMK in Tamil Nadu and the Telugu Desam in Andhra Pradesh), or loosely organized coalitions of caste-based factions (the Janata Dal).

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*India* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999); and idem, “Social Capital as Product of Class Mobilization and State Intervention: Industrial Workers in Kerala, India,” *World Development* 24, no. 6 (1996). In a detailed study that focuses on the North Kerala city of Calicut, Varshney concludes that “[m]uch like Tocqueville’s America, Calicut is a place of ‘joiners.’ Associations of all kinds—business, labor, professional, social, theater, film, sports, art, reading—abound.” Ashutosh Varshney, *Civic Life and Ethnic Conflict: Hindus and Muslims in India* (New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming), manuscript pp. 130–31.

<sup>49</sup> The retention rate in primary schools—the percentage of children having entered primary school who complete the fifth grade—is 82 percent in Kerala as against 26 percent for India as a whole. Myron Weiner, *The Child and the State in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 174.

<sup>50</sup> Rudolph and Rudolph (fn. 36).

<sup>51</sup> Sudipta Kaviraj, “A Critique of the Passive Revolution,” in Partha Chatterjee, ed., *State and Politics in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 46.

Caste and community in Kerala continue to be a powerful basis of social identity and civic engagement. But in the realm of politics and in the expression of public authority, these forms of association have been subordinated to broader aggregations, in particular, class-based organizations. By all accounts Kerala has the highest levels of unionization in the country, and unlike the national pattern, the presence of unions is not limited to the formal sector of the economy. In addition, large numbers of workers in the informal sector—including in the beedi, construction, coir, and cashew industries—are organized.<sup>52</sup> Most notably, the largest union in the state is the CPM-affiliated KSKTU, the one-million-member union of predominantly lower-caste agricultural workers. Kerala's mass organizations of women, students, and youth—sponsored by all the political parties—also play an active role in the state's political life. The CPM's mass organizations alone claim a membership of over 4.7 million. The state's network of cooperative societies, which are controlled by political parties not communities, is the most extensive in the country. And in the political arena the basic cleavage has been along class lines, opposing a coalition of right-wing parties organized around the Congress against a coalition of left-wing parties organized around the Communist Party of India, Marxist.<sup>53</sup> These two coalitions have more or less alternated in power, and consistently thin margins of victory point to a relatively stable distribution of political support.

The effectiveness of Kerala's democratic institutions is best measured by the extent to which they have successfully managed social and economic tensions. To a much greater degree than in any other Indian state, Kerala's political history has been shaped by open and organized class conflict. Because Kerala is one of India's poorer states and until recently its most densely populated, distributional conflicts have been especially acute. Recurrent waves of organized agitation have moreover been orchestrated by a Communist Party that for much of its history was wedded to a strategic line of extraparliamentary mass struggle. During the highly conflictual 1960s and 1970s governments were short-lived, rural protest was endemic, and rates of industrial unrest (as measured in strikes) were the highest in India. Kerala's social structure is moreover marked by significant cleavages. Its caste system was historically among the most rigidly stratified in India, and it has the

<sup>52</sup> For an extended discussion, see Heller (fn. 48, 1999), chap. 6.

<sup>53</sup> The Communist Party of India (CPI) was unified until 1965 when it split into the CPI and the CPI(M), or as it is more simply known the CPM. The CPM has emerged as the dominant Communist Party in both West Bengal and Kerala.



largest minority concentrations of Christians and Muslims of any Indian state, with each group constituting roughly 20 percent of the population. The major caste and communal groups have powerful and active associations, and Christian and Muslim political parties have played key roles in Kerala's coalition politics. In Huntingtonian models of order such high levels of interest organization and political conflict are associated with problems of governance and/or civic disorder.<sup>54</sup> At no time, however, have Kerala's social and economic cleavages and its extraparliamentary politics threatened democratic governance. Class conflict in Kerala has not produced the armed Naxalite and other revolutionary groups that dot the Indian countryside, and Kerala's militant unions, while confrontational, have not become embroiled in the kind of organized violence and criminal networks that increasingly characterize organized labor in the rest of the country. Moreover, having institutionalized lower-class interests, the CPM abandoned the politics of class struggle in the 1980s in favor of a social democratic strategy of class compromise, and labor militancy fell dramatically.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, though Kerala's castes and communities are well organized, instances of sectarian violence and caste violence have been rare.<sup>56</sup> The question of reservations (quotas) for "other backward castes" that has repeatedly triggered violence and commanded the political spotlight since the Mandel Commission report of 1990 has had virtually no impact in Kerala. Most notably, the resurgence of Hindu majoritarianism in Indian national politics has had a negligible impact in Kerala.<sup>57</sup>

That civic harmony has been maintained in a climate of highly organized and politicized social forces and against a backdrop of low economic development points to the efficacy of Kerala's democratic institutions in mediating and absorbing conflict. At the macrolevel, a highly competitive electoral arena, the alternation in power of two bipolar political fronts, and the mobilizational capacity of opposition groups have all contributed to heightening the accountability of the state. At the meso and microlevels, a dense network of democratic in-

<sup>54</sup> Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).

<sup>55</sup> See Heller (fn. 48, 1999), chaps. 5, 6, and 7.

<sup>56</sup> Varshney (fn. 48) found that out of seventeen states, Kerala ranked the fourth lowest in the number of per capita deaths in urban communal riots (manuscript p. 112); this is based on a large-N data set on Hindu-Muslim violence—1950–95—jointly produced with Steve Wilkinson. Of the three states ranking below Kerala, the Punjab has been the site of sustained rural violence and neither Haryana nor Tamil Nadu has a sizable Muslim population.

<sup>57</sup> In Kerala's 1995 local government elections, the BJP captured only 3 out of 1,200 panchayats, and only 1 out of 26 municipalities. Kerala remains the only major state in India in which the BJP has never secured a seat in the national parliament.

stitutions and authorities is readily identifiable. In contrast to the general Indian picture in which district and village-level institutions are deeply enmeshed in local power configurations and often in the hands of landed elites or dominant castes, in Kerala a wide range of institutions including district councils, panchayats (local governments), student councils, and cooperative societies are hotly contested by the major political formations. Representative institutions have also directly penetrated economic life. Thus, one of the unique features of Kerala's economic scene is the role that voluntary tripartite bodies (industrial relations committees) representing labor, capital, and the state play in actively shaping and coordinating labor relations, industrial policy, and welfare programs across a wide range of industries, including agriculture.

Finally, there is a clear correspondence between high levels of political participation and government performance. Across virtually every public policy arena the effectiveness of state intervention in Kerala far surpasses the performance of any other Indian state and can be tied to demand-side pressures.<sup>58</sup> The provision of education, health care, and subsidized food has been characterized by universal coverage and comparatively corruption-free delivery and is a direct response to broad-based support (across all major political parties) for the extension of social rights. Redistributive measures, in particular, land reforms, labor-market regulation, and the extension of social protection schemes to informal sectors, have dramatically reduced levels of poverty, and can all be tied to specific episodes of sustained mobilization.<sup>59</sup> Most recently, the literacy campaign of 1991—the most successful in India—as well as a decentralization campaign initiated in 1996 (more below) were both the result of pressure exerted by left-leaning NGOs.

If democracy works better today in Kerala, it is because its citizens are active and organized and because horizontal forms of association prevail over vertical (clientelistic) forms of association. The resulting patterns of political participation have in turn favored encompassing demands that promote the public interest over narrow and fragmented demands for state patronage (rents). If civil society in most of India remains deeply embedded in social cleavages, why has civil society in Kerala been so decisively differentiated from predemocratic social structures?

Explanations for the growth of civil society generally fall into two camps. The most conventional is to see civil society as the expression of

<sup>58</sup> See Drèze and Sen (fn. 9, 1995).

<sup>59</sup> See fn. 9. For an extended comparative assessment of the success of Kerala's land reforms, see Ronald Herring, *Land to the Tiller: The Political Economy of Agrarian Reform in South Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

autonomous private interests arising from the growth of a market economy. Alternatively, the quality of civic engagement has been interpreted as a cultural phenomenon of mutual respect and trust, its roots located in civic practices dating back, as in Putnam's influential argument about northern Italy, to the "mist of the dark ages."<sup>60</sup> Neither explanation fits the case of Kerala. Nineteenth-century Kerala was characterized by what is generally considered to have been the most rigid and severe caste system in the subcontinent<sup>61</sup> and an agrarian economy that, while exposed to early commercialization, was deeply rooted in labor-repressive institutions. A social system marked by an ascribed division of labor, ritualized and elaborate codes of degradation (untouchables were considered to be "unseeable" and lower-caste women forbidden to cover their breasts), and acute material dependencies was anything but fertile soil for civic republicanism. And despite significant commercialization of agriculture in the first half of the twentieth century, land in northern Kerala (Malabar) remained the monopoly of a parasitic class of Brahmin landlords, and capitalist agriculture in the South (Cochin and Travancore) relied heavily on bonded labor. Civil society in Kerala arose neither from deep civic traditions nor from the associational and gentlemanly impulses that Montesquieu attributed to commercial life. Instead, the birth of a vibrant and effective democracy in Kerala must be located in its political history of conflict and social mobilization, the interplay of these dynamics with the process of state building, and the resulting transformation of social structure.

#### THE SOCIAL ORIGINS OF DEMOCRACY IN INDIA AND KERALA

The divergent paths that democracy in Kerala and India has taken can be grasped only through a historical and configurational analysis. In untangling the processes at work I draw specifically on two related but discrete analytical clusters developed in Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens's comparative study of democratization.<sup>62</sup> Following in the tradition of Barrington Moore, Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens begin by highlighting the causal significance of class configurations. Specifically, they confirm the relationship between landed power and authoritarian rule and acknowledge the critical role of the bourgeoisie in promoting democratic reforms. They depart from Moore, however,

<sup>60</sup> Putnam (fn. 31), 180.

<sup>61</sup> Robin Jeffrey, *The Decline of Nair Dominance: Society and Politics in Travancore, 1947–1908* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1976).

<sup>62</sup> Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens (fn. 12).

in emphasizing that the role of the bourgeoisie is a necessary but not sufficient condition of democratic consolidation. While the bourgeoisie has generally “been supportive of the installation of constitutional and representative government,” it has been opposed to “extending political inclusion to the lower classes.”<sup>63</sup> Constitutional rights and representative government served to protect private economic activity from the exactions and arbitrary interferences of absolutist states and monarchs. But private property represents both the basis and the limits of the bourgeoisie’s affinity with democracy. Extending political power to nonpropertied classes poses a potential threat to the concentration of economic wealth. It is instead “the growth of a counter-hegemony of subordinate classes and especially the working class—developed and sustained by the organization and growth of trade unions, working-class parties and similar groups that is critical for the promotion of democracy.”<sup>64</sup>

The second analytical cluster Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens draw attention to is the balance between civil society and the state, which in the developing world is critically shaped by the specific institutional legacies of colonial rule. A balance that effectively limits the state’s repressive or co-optive capacity is favorable to the emergence of prodemocratic forces. Taken alone, this argument could readily be confused with the institutional determinism of conventional interpretations of the roots of Indian democracy. Indian democracy in this perspective is largely viewed as an extension of the bureaucratic structures, rule of constitutional law, and representative institutions bequeathed by the British.<sup>65</sup> That other British colonies proved much less propitious for democracy—the most notable of which is of course Pakistan—underscores the inadequacy of this explanation. Existing institutional configurations certainly do matter, but not in their own right. Instead, the balance between state and civil society—as Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens argue—becomes critical to the prospects of democratization only insofar as it affects the balance of class forces. Specifically, the density and robustness of civil society is critical on two counts: it creates spaces and organizations through which subordinate groups can mobi-

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>65</sup> See Myron Weiner, *The Indian Paradox: Essays in Indian Politics*, ed. Ashutosh Varshney (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1989). Alternatively, Jalal has argued that there is in fact little difference between Pakistan and India in that both have inherited state forms that she describes as “bureaucratic authoritarianism”; Ayesha Jalal, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in South Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

lize independently of the influence of dominant groups, and its curtails the repressive capacity of the state.

How then can Moore and Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens shed light on our understanding of the degrees of democracy across India? The consolidation of democracy in India combined elements of both a favorable institutional context and a successful, but limited mobilization of subordinate groups. The rise of the Indian National Congress as the agent of democratic transformation was clearly facilitated by the truncated but not insignificant rights of association and representation afforded by British colonial rule. Up until the 1920s the INC was very much a creature of colonial liberalism—a reformist party of urban professionals and progressive elements of the economic elite. It was only with the advent of Gandhi that the Congress struck roots in the countryside and was transformed into a legitimate national organization with a mass base. As Moore argues, this class coalition of peasants and urban elites bolstered the political power of what was otherwise a weak bourgeoisie and marginalized the colonial class of feudal landlords.<sup>66</sup> Because Gandhi's Congress did shift the balance of power against landlords and did draw the masses into the political arena, it put India firmly on the road to democracy.

But the “peasant masses” that were mobilized as part of the anticolonial coalition were in fact deeply divided along class and caste lines. Agrarian tensions (which had given rise to a wave of peasant rebellions in the early part of the century) were subordinated to the nationalist logic of class conciliation.<sup>67</sup> Subordinate classes, specifically landless laborers, tenants, and poor peasants, whose class position generally coincided with untouchable or lower-caste status, were as such never mobilized on their own terms as an independent political force with interests and strategies of their own. Thus, although India's transition to democracy was impelled by mass mobilizations, in the final analysis it represented an elite-dominated pact that was subsequently institutionalized by the electoral domination of Congress. During the Nehru period Congress secured its position by mobilizing a wide range of interests through an elaborate network of local notables (mostly dominant landed castes) who controlled and delivered votebanks in exchange for state patronage.<sup>68</sup> In this manner Congress—and hence

<sup>66</sup> Moore (fn. 11), 354–77.

<sup>67</sup> Gyan Pandey, “Peasant Revolt and Indian Nationalism: The Peasant Movement in Awadh, 1921–22,” in Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Spivak, eds., *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>68</sup> For a seminal analysis, see Francine Frankel, *India's Political Economy, 1947–1977* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

democracy—embedded itself in rural areas (winning five consecutive and openly contested national elections) without challenging existing forms of social domination. There was in effect no rupture with the ancien régime, which, as Moore argues, has historically been the precondition for the successful consolidation of democracy. Beyond removing the larger parasitic landlords, land reforms were carried out indifferently, and though the size of the propertied class expanded, land ownership remained largely confined to local dominant castes. Efforts to develop and democratize local institutions for community development and democratization, such as village councils and cooperatives, were defeated by elite capture. In sum, the state enmeshed itself in a matrix of accommodations and patronage networks and thus undermined its ability to pursue transformative projects, including the extension of public legality to rural areas. While this mode of engagement of society did provide a basic framework for political order, it failed to build institutionally robust arenas of civic associationalism and severely curtailed both the instrumental and the authoritative efficacy of the state. To borrow a phrase from Gramsci, the state-cum-Congress could rule, but it could not lead.

Democracy was born under very different conditions in Kerala and has accordingly traveled a very different path. In understanding the divergence from the national pattern, one has to begin with Kerala's history of social mobilization and specifically the early predominance of class mobilization. In the first part of this century social mobilization in Kerala coalesced around three distinct axes. A social reform movement led by caste-based associations directly challenged the social and institutional inequities of the caste system but stopped short of attacking its socioeconomic base. The nationalist movement, led initially by the Congress, followed the class conciliatory pattern of the national movement. Finally, there were significant but mostly inchoate instances of agrarian rebellion, most notably the Mapilla uprising of 1921, as well as some grassroots efforts to organize support for land reform.

The turning point came in the 1930s. Disillusioned with the accommodationist line of the National Congress, socialist elements within the Kerala Congress began to link—both organizationally and ideologically—the nationalist and social reform movements to agrarian discontents. Within a decade the struggle against British rule and the autocratic princely states of south Kerala had become a broad-based lower-class movement, linking agricultural laborers, poor peasants, and urban workers in a struggle against the colonial-feudal nexus of state and landed elites. The Congress Socialists—who broke away to form

the CPI in 1941—played a catalytic role, forming a politically unified class movement from what were otherwise geographically and economically very different groups. In the northern part of the state, Malabar, agrarian conflict pitted a class of rack-rented tenants, many of whom were Muslim, against a powerful class of upper-caste Hindu landlords. In Travancore and Cochin incipient class mobilization had taken the form of trade unionism among both factory workers in British coir factories and lower-caste laborers in the rice fields of Kuttanad.

Classes are not given structurally. They are, in Przeworski's succinct formulation, "formed in the course of struggles."<sup>69</sup> Those struggles take shape on multiple fronts and affect the process of class formation only inasmuch as they come to define new identities. Building on existing repertoires of contention (to use Tilly's term),<sup>70</sup> the communists wove together the themes of social dignity and justice of the caste reform movement, the demands for economic redress of the agrarian movement, and the democratic aspirations of the nationalist movement into a coherent and sustained ideological attack against colonialism and the feudal class/caste structure. In portraying excessive rents, labor servitude, wage exploitation, caste indignities, poverty, and colonial subordination as part of the same of system of domination, the communists recast a world of complex overlapping social positions and identities into "a new world populated only by the working masses and the exploiting classes."<sup>71</sup>

The CPI's early successes were more those of a social movement than those of a political party. Internally, the success of social movements relies on the capacity for creating what Tarrow calls "collective action frames."<sup>72</sup> "Ideology," as David Apter writes, "dignifies discontent, identifies a target for grievances and forms an umbrella over the discrete grievances of overlapping groups."<sup>73</sup> Driven more by events and concrete struggles than by theoretical insight,<sup>74</sup> the party actively translated the fragments of subaltern identities articulated in the social justice discourses of existing movements into a cohesive class agenda of

<sup>69</sup> Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 69.

<sup>70</sup> Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1978).

<sup>71</sup> Dilip Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India: Malabar 1900–1948* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 146.

<sup>72</sup> Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), chap. 7.

<sup>73</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, 22.

<sup>74</sup> Speaking of the early days of the KCSP in Malabar, K. P. Gopalan noted that "we had socialist aims without knowing anything about socialism"; cited in Menon (fn. 71), 147.

sociopolitical transformation. It was Leninist party discipline and mass organizations that leveraged movement demands, but as Menon has so convincingly shown, it was the party's cultural activities that exposed the inequities and indignities of the traditional social order.<sup>75</sup> Temple festivals became venues for political meetings. Theatrical troops toured the countryside, presenting plays that popularized Marxist ideas, exposed caste injustices, and celebrated revolutionary heroism. Village-level "reading rooms" became incubators for a new secular culture that transcended caste and religion. A new literary movement produced popular socialist novels, and the party newspaper, *Prabhatam*, launched in 1936, provided news of union activities, peasant struggles, and factory conditions. The party's active role in the revival of Malayalee culture was underscored politically by its championing of the cause of a United Kerala, a position it had first embraced in 1942, when the Congress still refused to interfere in the "internal affairs" of the princely states. In sum, the communists built a broad-based following through an integrative strategy of sponsoring mass organizations and by entrenching itself in civil society. In a pattern reminiscent of West European mass parties, the rise of secondary associations—the building blocks of civic capacity in Putnam's model—thus had distinctly political origins in Kerala.<sup>76</sup>

The strategic success with which the Communist Party situated itself at the confluence of social movement and structure is only part of the story. A key enabling factor was that the communists were operating within a favorable and really quite unique institutional and political environment. Historically, agrarian communism has been a violent affair, marked by either revolutionary violence or state violence or both, eventuating in most cases in authoritarian regimes. The CPI did not entirely eschew insurrectionary methods, and the state did not entirely resist resorting to violent repression. But in comparative terms the rise of communism in Kerala was a rather peaceful process, one that took place largely in the trenches of a colonial political order that had gradually conceded limited rights of association and opposition to its colonial subjects and whose most repressive reflexes were constrained by its own liberal pretensions. While subject to occasional censorship, the com-

<sup>75</sup> Menon (fn. 71), chap. 5.

<sup>76</sup> In a critique of Putnam's cultural and historical explanation of the sources of civicness in North Italy, Tarrow notes that in the past and the present "electorates were deliberately mobilized on the basis of networks of mass organizations and social and recreational associations; and in both, civic competence was deliberately developed after World War II as a symbol of the left-wing parties' governing capacity." Sydney Tarrow, "Making Social Science Work across Space and Time: A Critical Reflection of Robert Putnam's *Making Democracy Work*," *American Political Science Review* 90, no. 2 (1996), 394.



munists operated for the most part in public spaces, building a dense network of unions, farmer associations, schools, libraries, cultural organizations, and press organs. Their protest activities ranged from the Gandhian tactics of sit-ins, fasts, boycotts, and civil disobedience to those more typically associated with working-class movements—strikes, pickets, and marches. If a comparatively favorable (by the standards of colonial states) balance between civil society and the state extended the repertoire of contention, it also made possible the “ratchet-effect strategy” of incremental gains that sustained class mobilization.<sup>77</sup>

With independence, the state-society balance was further tipped in favor of mobilization. A formally democratic state presented an especially attractive object and venue of mobilization, and the process of class formation became inextricably linked with the process of state building. In Malabar the party pushed for land reforms and won the first district elections. In Travancore it organized large-scale strikes of agricultural and industrial workers, demanding state intervention in enforcing minimum wages and regulating work conditions. In 1956 the state was unified along linguistic lines and the following year the CPI captured a majority of seats in the legislative election, becoming the first democratically elected communist government in the world. Though short-lived (the government was illegally deposed by the center in 1959) the ministry represented a threshold in the trajectory of Kerala’s mass-based democracy. It marked the ascendancy, achieved through the ballot box, of the poor and propertyless, social groups that in a few short decades had gone from complete social and economic subordination to political power. The 1957 government set into motion a series of reforms that over the next two decades would transform the face of Kerala’s agrarian social structure. It also set a standard for state intervention and social welfare from which no subsequent government has strayed.<sup>78</sup> Most importantly, the political tide on the agrarian ques-

<sup>77</sup> Ronald Herring, “From Fanaticism to Power: Ratchet Politics and Peasant Mobilization in South India, 1836–1956” (Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association of Asian Studies, Honolulu, April 11–14, 1996).

<sup>78</sup> The demand-side dynamic for health and education in Kerala predates the democratic period and can be tied to the comparatively progressive educational and public health policies of the princely state of Travancore. See Gita Sen, “Social Needs and Public Accountability,” in Marc Wuyts, Maureen Mackintosh, and Tom Hewitt, *Development Policy and Public Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, the Open University Press, 1992). The transition from the Brahmanical paternalism of Travancore, which targeted communities (which in many ways has its contemporary counterpart in the populism of the Indian state), to the social citizenship of Kerala’s modern welfare state is the direct outcome of class politics. Moreover, it is only with the advent of the redistributive state that the gap between Malabar and Travancore, which in the nineteenth century was pronounced on all social development indicators,

tion had turned. The debate on land reform took center stage for the next two decades with all political forces eventually aligning themselves in favor of reform.

### MOBILIZATION AND DEMOCRATIC DEEPENING

The birth of democracy in Kerala was indelibly branded with the logic of social transformation. Well into the 1970s, the politics of class struggle occupied center stage. Throughout this period, the conflicts between tenants and landlords, labor and capital, upper caste and lower caste were acrimonious. The communist agenda was one of radical transformation, its methods those of large-scale agitation and labor militancy. Taking its cue from communist organizational successes, the Congress built its own mass organizations. Politics became synonymous with popular mobilization and Kerala often appeared to be teetering on the brink of ungovernability, with hypermobilization threatening to overload political institutions.

Nevertheless, because class conflicts had evolved within a framework of democratic rules of the game that were well established, enjoyed a high degree of popular legitimacy, and were accepted by all the principal players, they did not result in breakdown or disintegration. Excesses on either side were checked, moreover, by the subnational character of the playing field. Substantively modest but symbolically important successes on the parliamentary front had made "bourgeois democracy" and a reformist line acceptable pragmatically, if not ideologically, to the communists. The weakness of the CPI at the national level ruled out revolutionary tactics. Right-wing mobilization, which at times flirted with authoritarian reaction, was curbed by the commitment of national elites to electoral democracy. Finally, while agrarian communism did produce comprehensive land reform (1970) and agrarian labor legislation (1974) that virtually eradicated the material and social power of landed elites, the process was slowed and defused by constitutional procedures, guarantees of private property, and drawn-out political negotiations. Large-scale peasant mobilizations in the 1960s and 1970s provided the impetus for agrarian structural transformation. But just as significant was the process through which these reforms wended their way through public debates, courts, legislative enactments, and the bu-

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was dramatically closed in the post-1957 period. See T. N. Krishnan and M. Kabir, "Social Intermediation and Health Transition: Lessons from Kerala," Working Paper no. 251 (Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum, 1992).

reaucracy, firmly embedding the state in society. As such, class struggle could evolve and develop within boundaries that more or less precluded the resort to revolutionary violence or elite repression.

In keeping with the Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens analytical framework, then, this account of democratization points to the centrality of subordinate actors and highlights the historically contingent and institutionally bounded circumstances of class formation. The centrality of the *process of class formation* rather than the structural character of the class actor is underscored by the fact that the historical protagonist was not an industrial working class. Instead it was a broad-based and loosely configured agrarian class forged from the historical convergence of social movements, the structural congruence of social domination (caste) and economic exploitation (class), and the tactical successes of a communist party born at the intersection of agrarian radicalism and parliamentary politics.

The historic conjunction of social forces and political organization provided the critical wedge that pried open the ancien régime and opened up new possibilities for democratic politics. If this foundational moment transformed the playing field by shifting the balance of power, it did not inexorably set Kerala down the path of democratization. Given that class interests and alignments constantly shift and must compete with other bases of mobilization, the sustained effectiveness of subordinate class politics has to be explained. The temptation here is to follow Kohli's seminal work on the CPM in West Bengal and argue that a programmatic and disciplined political party has played the critical role in aggregating and sustaining lower-class interests.<sup>79</sup> Much as in the case of the West Bengal CPM, an ideologically cohesive party governed internally by "democratic centralism" has kept factionalism in check, institutionalized lower-class interests, and increased the effectiveness of government policies, especially in the area of poverty alleviation.

A party-centered argument that emphasizes the centrality of organizational capacity in channeling mobilizational dynamics provides only one side of the equation, however. In contrast to its twenty-three consecutive years in power in West Bengal, the CPM in Kerala has ruled only intermittently and never for even two consecutive terms. The Kerala CPM's critical role has been less a function of its governance capacity than of its mobilizational capacity. Having found itself periodically in the opposition, the CPM has retained much of the social movement dy-

<sup>79</sup> Kohli (fn. 7, 1990), chap. 10.

dynamic from which it was born by having to continually reinvigorate its mobilizational base and reinvent its political agenda. As a *social movement party*, the communists have thus busied themselves with the task of occupying the trenches of civil society, building mass-based organizations, ratcheting up demands, and cultivating a noisy but effective politics of contention. This has provided a continuous presence and effectiveness for subordinate groups even when out of power.<sup>80</sup> And much as the party has helped sustain movement politics, conversely, its immersion in civil society has kept oligarchal tendencies in check and has allowed for an uncommon degree of political learning, as witnessed by the party's recent embrace of the "new" social movement project of grassroots empowerment (see discussion of decentralization campaign below).

Adding to the general assertiveness of civil society in Kerala has been the bandwagon effect of other political parties embracing mass-mobilizational politics. With two equally balanced, if not equally effective, political fronts actively nurturing and courting support from civic associations, political parties in Kerala have had a crowding-in effect on civil society. Nowhere in India have the contentious repertoires of social movements become such an intrinsic part of routine politics. In sum, though there has been little regime continuity in Kerala, there has been continuity of political participation and access. Effective democratic governance has in other words had less to do with the institutional character of the political party system than with the dynamic interaction of political and civil society.<sup>81</sup>

### THE AFFINITIES OF CLASS AND DEMOCRACY

If there is, as I have argued, a positive relationship between the articulation of class demands and the deepening of democracy in Kerala, how do we come to terms with this theoretically, especially in light of assertions by some transition theorists that the conflictual nature of class-based politics is inherently destabilizing?<sup>82</sup> In ideal-typical terms,

<sup>80</sup> In contrast, the CPM in West Bengal, having enjoyed the fruits and resources of state power for twenty-three years, has become far more bureaucratic and clientelistic. See John Echeverri-Gent, "Public Participation and Poverty Alleviation: The Experience of Reform Communists in India's West Bengal," *World Development* 29 (October 1992).

<sup>81</sup> Linz and Stepan (fn. 1) write that "properly understood, democracy is more than a regime; it is an interacting system" (p. 13). A key dynamic in the system derives from the distinct but complementary roles that political and civil society play in shaping and representing values and interests. See Linz and Stepan (fn. 1), 8–9.

<sup>82</sup> To quote Huntington: "Democratic regimes *that last* have seldom, if ever, been instituted by mass popular action." Samuel Huntington, "Will More Countries Become Democratic?" *Political Science Quarterly* 99, no. 2 (1984), 212, emphasis added.

democracy is an exchange relationship that binds state authorities and citizens to each other. The glue of that relationship is both utilitarian and normative: utilitarian in the sense that states provide public goods in exchange for compliance and resources from their citizens, normative in the sense that the strength of the relationship (the quality and scope of public goods, the degree of citizen compliance) is born of trust, which in complex and differentiated societies can be secured only through processes of consultation that are sufficiently inclusive and sustained to be broadly perceived as fair. As Tilly has recently observed:

In the course of democratization, the bulk of a government's subject population acquires binding, protected, relatively equal claims on a government's agents, activities and resources. In a related process, categorical inequality declines in those areas of social life that either constitute or immediately support participation in public politics. Finally, a significant shift occurs in the locus of interpersonal networks on which people rely when undertaking risky long-term enterprises such as marriage, long-distance trade, membership in crafts, and investment of savings; such networks move from evasion of governmental detection and control to involvement of government agents and presumption that such agents will meet their long-term commitments. Only where the three sets of changes intersect does effective, durable democracy emerge.<sup>83</sup>

To understand why these processes became reinforcing in Kerala, the analytical key lies in carefully untangling the relationship between state intervention and actual patterns of demand aggregation. Subordinate class movements make encompassing demands, usually framed by calls for social leveling and protection from the injustices of purely market-based resource distributions.<sup>84</sup> In a poor and deeply hierarchical society such demands are in effect public goods and lend themselves to the instrumentalities of the modern, bureaucratic state. In contrast, factional or community-based movements make particularistic demands that tend to be mutually exclusive. While the form of such demands can be democratically managed, the substance is secured through clientelism, which has well-known corrosive effects on state capacity and by definition compromises the associational autonomy of subordinate groups.<sup>85</sup>

The demands that emanated from class mobilization in Kerala fall into three broad categories. The first was for land reform, which sought not only to redistribute property but, just as importantly, to eradicate the social and economic basis of landlordism. The second was for the

<sup>83</sup> Charles Tilly, "Processes and Mechanisms of Democratization," *Sociological Theory* 18 (March 2000), 8.

<sup>84</sup> Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers, "Secondary Associations and Democratic Governance," *Politics and Society* 20, no. 4 (1992).

<sup>85</sup> See Fox (fn. 18).

formalization and protection of the rights of waged workers. This aimed to dismantle the forms of labor-tying that prevailed in agriculture and to empower workers with collective-bargaining rights. The third was for the extension of basic social services, especially health and education, demands that in fact predated the CPI and enjoyed widespread support across all classes. Now in their intrinsic character, all these demands amounted to expanding the scope and the prerogatives of the welfare state. The practical effect of this was to extend the reach of public legality into arenas (for example, caste relations, the informal sector) that in the rest of the country continue to be governed by extrademocratic authority.

Class mobilization constituted citizens in Kerala. Freed of the ideological and social dependency on corporate groups and powerful patrons, horizontally organized subordinate groups could proactively associate and openly articulate demands. The high level of demand making, itself facilitated by a favorable balance of state and civil society, drew the state in. With each successful intervention, the authority of the state and formally recognized interest groups displaced the authority of traditional power brokers, thus slowly but surely chipping away at the ties of social and economic dependency that had characterized the preindependence social order. A welfare state with its statutory entitlements replaced a caste-based moral economy with its discrete and asymmetrical reciprocities. Formal contracts and monied wages took the place of attached labor and payments in kind. A division of labor rooted in a highly stratified and rigid caste system was subjected to market dynamics bounded by the state-sanctioned bargaining capacity of associated workers. Work relations embedded in the extraeconomic power of landlords and merchant bosses were displaced, albeit unevenly, by labor legislation, labor inspectors, and formal grievance procedures. Access to education and health was made a function of citizenship rather than of social position. And increasingly, conflict resolution took the form of collective bargaining, tripartite consultations, and judicial review. In Tilly's terms,<sup>86</sup> trust in Kerala has shifted from interpersonal networks rooted in categorical social inequalities to investing in state institutions, an investment informed by iterated experiences with the state and a resulting faith that state authorities will fulfill their commitments.

Many observers of Kerala have argued that labor militancy, state intervention, and increased social expenditures have exacted a high price

<sup>86</sup> Tilly (fn. 83).

on economic growth.<sup>87</sup> The 1975–85 decade in particular was marked by economic stagnation in both industry and agriculture. The extent to which redistributive reforms directly contributed to this crisis is difficult to establish, especially given the importance of other factors (a historically weak industrial base, resource scarcity and high population density, the absence of a local entrepreneurial class). I have treated this question at length elsewhere, but three points can be made.<sup>88</sup> First, even if there is indeed a zero-sum trade-off between equity and growth, one would be hard pressed to find another Indian state where this trade-off has been managed more effectively. Despite low levels of growth, poverty in Kerala has fallen faster than in any other state and it now boasts the most extensive safety net in the country.<sup>89</sup> The high levels of basic and technical education and a well-developed public infrastructure represent critical assets for future growth. Moreover, as the market economy in India expands, there will necessarily be increased demand for primary education, access to health care, and social protection—all sectors in which Kerala has already made significant infrastructural, administrative, and fiscal investments—and Kerala will find itself at a significant comparative advantage. Second, to view the equity-growth trade-off in narrowly economic terms obscures the important political changes that have taken place. As noted earlier, the CPM and its unions responded to the economic crisis by abandoning wage militancy and embracing a strategy of class compromise that has focused on institutionalizing industrial conflict and increasing worker productivity. The state has also become much more aggressive in attracting investors and nurturing key growth sectors. How effective these political and policy shifts have been is difficult to determine (especially since Kerala is a subnational state with limited macroeconomic powers), but Kerala's economy has experienced a significant turnaround since the mid-1980s.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>87</sup> See Joseph Tharamangalam, "The Perils of Development without Economic Growth: The Development Debacle of Kerala, India," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 30, no. 1 (1998). For responses to Tharamangalam, see *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 30, no. 3 (1998).

<sup>88</sup> Heller (fn. 48, 1999).

<sup>89</sup> A recent World Bank study found that from 1957–58 to 1990–91 Kerala experienced the most rapid decline in poverty of any major state, including the Punjab and Haryana, India's capitalist growth success stories. Guarav Datt and Martin Ravallion, "Why Have Some Indian States Done Better Than Others at Reducing Poverty?" Policy Research Working Paper no. 1594 (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 1996).

<sup>90</sup> Between 1986–87 and 1993–94 the factory sector grew at an annual average of 9.8 percent, well above the national average of 5.6 percent, and agriculture grew at 5.5 percent. A recent study on new investments in Kerala found a "tremendous increase" since 1991–92. Sunil Mani, "Economic Liberalisation and Kerala's Industrial Sector: An Assessment of Investment Opportunities," *Economic and Political Weekly* (August 24–31, 1996), 2326.

Finally, if the encompassing logic of subordinate class politics has been central to Kerala's democratic trajectory, it has hardly been immune to factionalizing and rent-seeking tendencies. As the role of the state in regulating economic life and distributing resources has grown, so have distributional coalitions. Moreover, the solidaristic politics of the left have become increasingly difficult to sustain. The communists have never represented a fundamental or essential class. Classes are politically constituted and as fluid entities must constantly be reinvented. Further, the politics of class in Kerala has been played out against the backdrop of a rapidly changing social structure that has generated new cleavages and new alliances. The embourgeoisement of the poor peasantry following the transfer of property rights from landlords to tenants in the 1970 land reform eroded the structural basis of agrarian communism.<sup>91</sup> Sluggish industrial growth has limited the size of the industrial workforce. And the increase in the size of Kerala's middle class, fueled by the expansion of the welfare state and remittances from Kerala's huge out-of-state labor force, has further weakened the traditional class base of the left.

The political, institutional, and structural legacies of class mobilization in Kerala continue, however, to provide a strong foundation for democratic development. The erosion of the social and economic power of landed elites has weakened the expression of a range of fragmentary and parochial interests that continue to dominate national politics. A dense network of intermediate organizations and institutions provides multiple points of interface between autonomous associations and state agencies. Patterns of state-society engagements have produced an informed and engaged citizenry. Welfare entitlements, wage legislation, market regulation, and other forms of social protection have not only substantially insulated wage earners from the more atomizing effects of market forces but have also secured a considerable degree of institutionalized bargaining capacity for large segments of the wage-earning classes. And the provision of a wide range of public goods has underwritten a baseline solidarity, including middle-class support for the welfare state.

Despite the decline of the structural significance of class—at least as it was historically constituted in Kerala's agrarian transition—the CPM and its allies have been able to fashion a new politics of popular development, one that has been specifically articulated around a project of

<sup>91</sup> See Ronald Herring, "From Structural Conflict to Agrarian Stalemate: Agrarian Reforms in South India," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 26, no. 3-4 (1991).



further democratization and that has broadened the developmental agenda beyond redistributive issues to include questions such as the environment, administrative and political decentralization, local resource planning, and the reinvigoration of an overly bureaucratized cooperative movement.<sup>92</sup> Concretely, the CPM-led government that returned to power in 1996 launched the People's Campaign for Decentralized Planning, an initiative widely recognized to be India's most ambitious effort at comprehensive decentralization.<sup>93</sup> As part of an open attack against rent-seeking fiefdoms within the state and the top-down logic of bureaucratic planning, substantial financial and administrative resources have been devolved to local-level governments and broad-based participation in local decision making has been mobilized. If the political opening for decentralization was orchestrated by the CPM from above, it is civil society that provided the critical ideological and mobilizational resources for the campaign. The campaign's discourse of autonomy, local initiative, transparency, sustainability, and accountability is the language of social movements, not of technocrats or Leninists. Most of the techniques and favored projects of the campaign come from a repertoire of practices that NGOs and proactive local governments have been developing for years. The more than one hundred thousand volunteers who have been trained to provide organizational and technical assistance to local governments have been recruited from civil society and not from the party's traditional mass organizations. Most critically, it is through overlapping membership ties between the CPM and the independent, grassroots KSSP that CPM reformers could experiment with ideas outside the somewhat doctrinaire straitjacket of the party itself and build political support for a strategy of mobilization that reaches beyond the party's traditional base of support. While it is too early to judge the sustainability of this decentralization initiative, the very existence of a political project specifically centered on promoting new forms of democratic participation could not be more telling, given the increasing involution and divisiveness of national politics.<sup>94</sup>

<sup>92</sup> See T. M. Thomas Isaac and E. M. Shridharan, "Kerala's Development and Its Politics," *Marxist Samvadan* (Trivandrum) (October–December 1992); and Olle Tornquist, *The Next Left? Democratization and Attempts to Renew the Radical Political Development Project* (Copenhagen: NIAS reports, no. 24, 1995).

<sup>93</sup> See Richard Franke and Barbara Chasin, "Power to the Malayalee People," *Economic and Political Weekly* 31, no. 10 (1997).

<sup>94</sup> These observations are based on research conducted in summer 1997 and 1999.

## CONCLUSION

Under the conditions of late development, the challenge of democratic deepening appears to be even greater than the challenge of democratic transitions. Weak states, severe economic inequalities, and the resilience of predemocratic sources of authority have made it difficult to translate the political opportunities afforded by democratic institutions into the effective exercise of citizenship rights and substantive gains. For some authors, these obstacles appear to be insurmountable. Weyland argues that efforts by state reformers in Brazil to pursue equity-enhancing reforms have been repeatedly frustrated by entrenched oligarchical interests and the pervasive organizational fragmentation of Brazilian politics.<sup>95</sup> In South Africa economic concessions made to the white minority and to market forces and the authoritarian legacies of indirect rule under apartheid have frustrated the promise of rapid democratization.<sup>96</sup>

Yet if we peer below the national level, it is possible to find islands of democratization. In a number of Brazilian municipalities, an alliance of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (a social movement party) and civic groups has broken the hold of oligarchical elites by introducing new institutions and processes of popular participation in municipal policy-making that have had measurable redistributive effects.<sup>97</sup> In South Africa the embrace at the national level of conservative promarket policies and the centralizing tendencies of the ANC must be contrasted with the vitality of NGOs and the strength of proredistributive alliances in the country's largest metropolitan areas. The point here is that while national-level conditions in much of the developing world may not be favorable to democratization, we need to pay more attention to how the subnational reconfiguration of political forces can transform state-society relations and produce democracy-enhancing effects. Democracy, in other words, can be built from the bottom up.

The case of Kerala here is especially instructive. In a pattern that bears a strong resemblance to European social democracies, the procedural, effective, and substantive dimensions of democracy have become mutually reinforcing. That this dynamic was played out against a back-

<sup>95</sup> Weyland (fn. 19).

<sup>96</sup> For an analysis of economic concessions made during the negotiated transition, see Hein Marais, *South Africa: Limits to Change* (London: Zed Books, 1998). Mamdani (fn. 30) argues that "decentralized despotism"—the entrenched authority of chiefs—has stunted the development of civil society in post-Apartheid South Africa.

<sup>97</sup> See Rebeca Abers, "From Ideas to Practice: The Partido dos Trabalhadores and Participatory Governance in Brazil," *Latin American Perspectives* 23, no. 4 (1996).

drop of pronounced social cleavages and very low levels of development and that it accompanied, rather than succeeded, capitalist transformation only highlight the independent effect of political processes, in particular, the critical role of subordinate classes. The necessary precondition was the existence of a procedurally robust democracy that provided critical spaces in which subordinate groups could organize. But if Kerala has parted from the national pattern, the cause must be located in cycles of state-society interactions that were triggered by class-based politics and produced three broad effects.

First, in a society marked by profound social and economic inequities, the forging of a lower-class movement into a cohesive organizational force decisively shifted the balance of power in favor of subordinate groups, paving the way for redistributive reforms. These reforms in turn eroded the economic and social power of landed elites and strengthened the associational autonomy of lower classes.

Second, the logic of class mobilization—redistributive conflict—drew the state in and created the political impetus for getting the democratic state to do what it does best, that is, provide public goods. Most visible was the universal provision of basic services, as well as institutional reform. Less tangibly, but just as crucially, the intensity and sustained character of economic conflicts necessitated lasting and routinized state interventions, rather than payoffs or selective co-optation. The result has been the creation of a rich fabric of mediating institutions governed by legality and democratic authority. The state's demonstrated capacity to effectively mediate distributional conflicts has strengthened the legitimacy of democratic institutions. Another effect of state intervention has been the consolidation of a critical, but much neglected attribute of any robust democracy—a socially regulated market economy.<sup>98</sup> The affinity between democracy and markets is not functionally given, it is historically constructed. The bourgeoisie has historically supported democracy because it provides for the accountability, third-party arbitration, and rule-bound enforcement of laws and contracts that market economies need. Subordinate classes support democratic institutions because they are the means to securing a more equitable distribution of wealth and some degree of protection from economic downswings. Kerala remains a poor economy, but the extent

<sup>98</sup> This follows Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1944). See also Linz and Stepan (fn. 1), who write about a set of “socio-politically crafted and socio-politically accepted norms, institutions and regulations, which we call *economic society*, that mediate between state and market” (p. 11).

to which vast segments of the informal economy have been subjected to regulation and social protection stands in sharp contrast to the despotic labor relations and social vulnerabilities that characterize most of Indian economy. Because socially regulated capitalism benefits broader segments of the population, is it far more conducive to democratization than is laissez-faire capitalism.

Finally, the logic of class politics has strengthened civil society. It has done so not through the small group dynamic of trust and reciprocity emphasized by many civil society theorists, but rather through the emergence of broader solidarities that were forged from a history of conflict.<sup>99</sup> On the one hand, repeated cycles of mobilization have created organizations and networks that cut across traditional social cleavages, thus broadening the associational scope and quality of public life. As social movement theorists have argued, participation in movements has positive spillover effects for democracy in that it creates new solidarities and nurtures a culture of civic engagement.<sup>100</sup> On the other hand, class-based mobilization has created forms of conflict that lend themselves to compromise and encompassing solutions. Unlike many other forms of claim making, pursuing redistributive demands in a capitalist economy (in which future growth and employment depend on private investment) reveals the interdependence of class interests.<sup>101</sup> Cohesive labor movements in a private property economy can and do act strategically,<sup>102</sup> and the resulting compromises tend to emphasize cooperative and inclusionary social policies.

<sup>99</sup> Minkoff provides an excellent critique of the overemphasis of the civil society literature on community-based origins of civic behavior and the resulting neglect of the role that more aggregated forms of association that transcend local community (social movements, advocacy groups) can play in nurturing civic identities. Debra Minkoff, "Producing Social Capital: National Social Movements and Civil Society," *American Behavioral Scientist* 40, no. 5 (1997).

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 612.

<sup>101</sup> Claus Offe, "Homogeneity and Constitutional Democracy: Political Group Rights as an Answer to Identity Conflicts?" (Paper presented at the Conference for the Study of Political Thought, April 4-6, Columbia University, 1997), 6.

<sup>102</sup> See Adler and Webster (fn. 12).