

Balgat and Boix: Locating a Critique Within a Small Turkish Village

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In a series of articles along with a path-breaking book, Carles Boix offers a persuasive, multi-methodological account of what causes democratization and democratic stability following a democratic transition. Repeatedly, the variables highlighted by Boix are economic: capital mobility, economic equality, and asset specificity (in his book, *Democracy and Redistribution*¹); per capita income (in his article “Endogenous Democratization,”² co-authored with Susan Stokes); the presence of agglomeration economies with increasing returns to scale (in his article “The Roots of the Industrial Revolution,”³ co-authored with Scott Abramson). Political variables are also considered, but they are shown to have little effect on the process of democratization. Economic variables are prior and enjoy causal priority (perhaps even causal dominance), thus while political institutions and political regimes are a function of economic variables, the reverse relationship is discounted and disproven. Yet this conclusion would be big news to the village of Balgat, located eight kilometers outside the Turkish capital of Ankara, and to Daniel Lerner, who began and ended his insightful study of the modernization of the Middle East, *The Passing of Traditional Society*,⁴ in that small community. The purpose of this critical review is to leverage the modernization of Balgat between 1950 and 1954 recounted by Lerner to offer a critique of Boix’s narrative or, at the very least, to demand that some scope conditions be introduced to limit the territorial reach of his conclusions.

The central point of contention concerns the supposedly negligible effect played by political institutions generally, and democratic institutions specifically, on economic development and the sustainability of democratic regimes. In “Endogenous Democratization,” Boix and Stokes argue that “economic development makes democratization more likely” (pg. 535) and that economic equality “increases both the chances of a democratic transition and the stability of democratic regimes” (pg. 543). Their data shows that as the level of per capita income in a state increases, the probability of democratic breakdown is drastically reduced,⁵

¹ Boix, Carles. 2003. *Democracy and Redistribution*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

² Boix, Carles, and Susan C. Stokes. 2003. “Endogenous Democratization.” *World Politics*, 55: 517-549.

³ Boix, Carles, and Scott F. Abramson. 2012. “The Roots of the Industrial Revolution: Political Institutions or (Socially Embedded) Know-How?” Unpublished manuscript. Princeton, NJ.

⁴ Lerner, Daniel. 1958. *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East*. New York, NY: The Free Press.

⁵ Falling from approximately 0.7 at an income level of \$2,000 to less than 0.05 for an income level of \$6,000.

while the probability of a democratic transition slowly but steadily rises⁶ (pg. 537; Figure 5). Conversely, Boix and Stokes discount the potential that development may be endogenous to the type of political regime.⁷ They find that “the theoretical literature on the impact of democratic institutions on growth is split on the issue,” and that from “an empirical point of view, the evidence that the type of political regime matters for growth is rather scant” (pg. 538). A similar argument is presented in Boix’s *Democracy and Redistribution*, where Boix underplays the role of political institutions, arguing that “constitutions do not sustain democratic equilibria because the latter result simply from the fact that no actor has any incentive to deviate from a democracy-compliance strategy” (pg. 15) – an equilibrium, we might add, determined almost exclusively by the interaction of economic variables. In “The Roots of Industrialization,” Boix partners with Abramson to place further nails in the coffin of the explanatory power of political variables by finding that “contrary to the existing institutionalist literature, the fortunes of parliamentary institutions seemed to have played no small part in the success of the industrial revolution and the level of development across the continent” (pg. 23).

Methodologically, Boix’s conclusions are supported by large and innovative datasets, by game-theoretic models, and by sophisticated statistical analysis. So where is the chink in the armor? The first weakness is a product of the methodology: the focus of Boix is on trends and general relationships, not on individual cases. But individual cases, and particularly outlier cases, tell important stories of their own. From a pragmatic point of view, outliers still implicate the lives of real people, and it would be a shame if their story should dissipate into the mist at the hands of the drive to generalize and to abstract. The second chink in the armor is that the main crux of Boix’s data, and thus the scope of his conclusions, is territorially bound to Europe.⁸ Yet scope conditions are either assumed by Boix or are otherwise ignored. Both of these limitations are highlighted if we contrast Boix’s theory with Daniel Lerner’s account of the remarkable transformation that took place in the Turkish village of Balgat between 1950 and 1954.

Seeking to study the modernization of the Middle East, in 1950 Daniel Lerner dispatched a team of fieldworkers throughout hundreds of villages in the Middle East. The account of one

⁶ Rising from less than 0.1 for an income of \$2000 to approximately 0.3 for an income of \$12,000. Note that this approach excludes both Soviet-dominated countries (where exogenous Soviet influence repressed democratization) and oil-producing countries (where, according to Boix (2003)’s model of capital mobility, authoritarian regimes should prove more resilient in lieu of rising income per capita).

⁷ In other words, Boix and Stokes deny the plausibility that democratic institutions may themselves spur economic development, and thus a self-reinforcing cycle that induces both democratization and democratic regime stability.

⁸ It is true that Boix’s work with Sue Stokes, as well as in his book, is not only focused on Europe, but it is still, by explicit admission, strongly influenced by the waves of democratization that occurred in Europe before 1950 (and, in fact, incorporating said data was one of their primary innovations over the work of Przeworski et al.).

fieldworker, Tosun B., who had been assigned to the small village of Balgat just outside of Ankara, struck Lerner. The fieldworker described the village as a “colorless, shapeless dump” – a “forgotten, forsaken” place (pg. 20). The villagers, along with their Chief (*Muhtar*), were exclusively farmers preoccupied with the immediate, the literal, and the material – the health of their cows, the behavior of their wives (pg. 26). They responded awkwardly to inquiries that would require them “to imagine themselves or things to be different from what they ‘really are’” (pg. 24). They followed the lead of their Chief, who “audits his life placidly, makes no comparisons, thanks God” (pg. 24). The only radio in the village was owned by the Chief, who controlled its use (pgs. 26-27). In this portrait, the lone outcast was the village Grocer – the only non-farmer in the village – who desired “a bigger grocery shop in the city” (pg. 23), who could see himself moving to America, where “possibilities to be rich even for the simplest persons” existed (pg. 25), who would go to Ankara to watch American movies (pgs. 27-28), and who complained about being “stuck in this hole,” unable to know “what is happening in the other capitals of the world” (pg. 27). The Grocer was the modern, cosmopolitan man, and was consequently viewed by fellow villagers as “heterodox and probably infidel” (pg. 25).

But after Tosun left, another group of outsiders arrived: members of the *Demokrat* party, who were challenging the incumbent regime. According to the Chief, “the *Demokrat* men came to Balgat and asked us what was needed here and told us they would do it when they were elected. They were brave to go against the government party. We all voted for them” (pg. 31). With the help of villages like Balgat, the *Demokrats* achieved a stunning and unexpected victory, and they kept their promise. Four years later when Lerner retraced Tosun’s footsteps and returned to Balgat, the village had just been incorporated as a district of Greater Ankara (pg. 31). A road now connected the village to Ankara, a bus station had been built with regular traffic to the capital, the electric grid had been extended to its houses, 100 radio receivers had diffused throughout the community, a metropolitan police station had been erected, and water pipelines that would carry purified water were on the verge of completion (pgs. 29-30). Almost all men now worked in the factories in Ankara, and all were proud *Demokrat* men (only four farmers remained – the only remaining supporters of the old regime) (pgs. 33-34). Almost all the livestock that had previously sustained the population had been sold off (pg. 34). The Chief’s own sons, whom he hoped would become soldiers and forsake the Grocer’s ways, now operated a grocery shop and a clothing store within the village. The Grocer had since passed away, yet his “dream-house [a modern grocery store] had been built in Balgat – in less time than even he

might have forecast – and by none other than the Chief!” (pg. 39). The Chief, who represented the old guard and the old way, had now “reincarnated the Grocer in the flesh of his sons” (pg. 42). And the Grocer himself, once seen as a heretic and an outcast, had been rebaptized by one of the villagers as “the cleverest of us all [...] he was a prophet” (pg. 41). And prophet he had been, for the villagers were now aware of the abstract world around them – even of the basic principles of democracy. During a discussion at the newly-constructed local coffee-house, the villagers discussed politics, and in Lerner’s presence, came to “general agreement, at least among the older men,” that despite their staunch support for the *Demokrat* party, “it would be better to have a small margin between the major parties [in the upcoming election]. When the parties are competing and need our votes, they heed our voices” (pg. 41). “The villagers,” wrote Lerner in his notebook, “have learned the basic lesson of democratic politics” (pg. 41).

The tale of Balgat recounted by Lerner is as insightful as it is common – Lerner writes that “the story of the Middle East today is encapsulated in the recent career of Balgat” (pg. 19). And the career of Balgat was constructed by the quintessential political institution of democratic regimes – the political party – which between 1950 and 1954 manufactured economic development in the village. It is a career founded on the resulting ideological transformation of the villagers – villagers who once conceived themselves as farmers whose world extended no farther than their cattle but soon came to imagine themselves *Demokrat* men, men who would debate national politics and democratic principles at the local coffee house and commuted daily to the capital city. If we recounted the story of Balgat by focusing on economic variables – on capital mobility, on per capita income, on asset specificity – we would miss almost everything that mattered and focus instead on almost everything that did not. The story is one of democracy spurring economic development and, in so doing, deepening democratization by further entrenching democratic institutions and ideals. Economic development is but a secondary effect – the garnish on the plate. At its very base, the story is one of politics, not economics.

If Lerner is right that the story of Balgat is, in many ways, the story of the Middle East, then Boix’s theory hits an invisible wall as it travels south somewhere in the open waters of the Mediterranean Sea. And if Lerner’s approach can tell us something about the broader processes of democratization and economic development, it is that to forego the in-depth study of individual communities in favor of cross-national studies of states, to focus on general trends instead of individual outcomes, and to focus on universality rather than difference, can only tell part of the story. If one takes this approach too far, it risks obfuscating more than it illuminates.