

HISTORY OF CIVILIZATIONS
LECTURE III
ORIGINS OF DEMOCRACY IN THE WEST

Last week we observed how between the 18th and the 20th centuries three great Islamic empires had collapsed. So, a thousand year old conflict has ended with a western victory.

What is the secret of the West?

Statistics show that the richest countries in terms of GNP per capita are western countries.

Again, what is the secret of the west?

A closer look at these countries shows that these countries have three things in common: economic freedom, democracy and capitalism.

Since we focus in these lectures on Islam and Christianity (the West) it makes sense to compare these civilizations from this perspective.

First let us consider economic freedoms:

These freedoms can be demanded by peoples and assuming there is democracy, governments would then respond and provide these freedoms if they want to stay in power.

Or,

these freedoms can be given by undemocratic states as a matter of policy. This is the case of countries such as China, Singapore and Hong Kong. But we do not know if these cases will prove to be stable in the long run.

So, let us focus on the better and in the long term more stable alternative: democracy.

What were the origins of democracy? I will now provide a brief history of western democracy.

Let us start with the church.

The church,

As an institution,

Evolved in opposite directions in Rome and Constantinople.

In Constantinople,

The church was dominated by the imperial army and the emperor.
In Rome,
it flourished in the vacuum that had emerged after 330 C.E.

(Remember how Constantine had intervened in the Arian/Athanasian debate!)

The difficult boundaries between the state and the church
Were drawn through the conflict between
the Roman church (Pope) and the Byzantine Emperor.

The emperor tried to subjugate the Pope to his will.
The Pope responded:
“palaces belong to the emperor, the churches to the Pope”, or;
“the emperor is within the church, not above it”.
Most importantly,
The Pope claimed that the power to judge in religious matters,
Belongs to the Pope not to the emperor.
The Pope also did not hesitate to exercise his power:
He excommunicated Emperor Teodosius.
(Teodosius had to apologize)

But Rome was the only great apostolic city in the West.
(No empire in the West between 476 – 800 C.E.
thus, no central power to subjugate the Pope)
All the other apostolic cities remained in the East,
And they were all subjugated to the Emperor in Constantinople.

Moreover,
Popes exploited history as well.
They claimed that since St. Peter and St. Paul
Had been crucified in Rome,
They were their legitimate successors.

By contrast,
The Patriarch of Constantinople could not make such claims.
(Because St. Andrews, who did preach in Byzantium, was crucified not in
Byzantium but in Patras)
And yet,
The Patriarch of Constantinople did not
recognize the claims of the Pope.

The Patriarch of Constantinople argued that
The Pope was not above the Patriarch of the imperial capital.

Two outcomes of this rivalry:

The Patriarch of Constantinople was excommunicated by the Pope (1054)

The Fourth Crusade was directed to Constantinople and not to Jerusalem (1204).

In short,

The Pope emerged as a powerful figure in medieval European power politics.

And yet,

This was a difficult situation.

A situation that was not legally sanctioned.

Rome claimed independent authority,

But,

It was legally subjugated to Istanbul.

Since Constantinople

And the Patriarch of Constantinople

Did not recognize papal authority,

A state friendly to the pope in the West was needed.

In short,

A new Western Roman Empire

That was to be controlled by the pope was needed.

Such an Empire was established in 800 C.E.

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Such an Empire was established in 800 C.E.
This meant that the emperor of the Western Romans
Was legitimized by the Pope.
Yet,
The Emperor could appoint the Pope.

1059 A.D.: Emperor no more able to select the Pope.
This power was now given to the cardinals. Elections !

1075 A. D.: Pope now has the power to dismiss an emperor !

In short,
An endless struggle for power and rivalry
between the state (emperor/kings) and the Pope.

The church gained further power
kings' power eroded further:
1215 A.D., Magna Carta in England.¹
Magna Carta: An agreement between the King, aristocracy and the church.
(*An elite settlement*).

The terms of Magna Carta:
a. The Church was given its independence.
The head of the church was to be elected – not appointed by the King.

b. Feudal lords were also given certain rights.
They were declared *Guardians of the Charter*.
Their function:
To control the King (whether he complies with the charter).

If the King fails to comply with the conditions;
The feudal lords (barons) were supposed
to declare war against the King
and lead the people in this war.

Such a war would be legitimate
And to declare it would be the duty of the *Guardians*.

Another contribution of Magna Carta
Was that it constituted the origin of *habeas corpus*.²

With Magna Carta,

¹ The rest of this chapter has been borrowed from Murat Çizakça, *Demokrasi Arayışında Türkiye* (Ankara: Yeni Türkiye Yayınları, 2002).

² **habeas corpus**. Latin. "you have the body" Prisoners often seek release by filing a petition for a writ of habeas corpus. A writ of habeas corpus is a judicial mandate issued by a judge to a prison official ordering that an inmate be brought to the court so it can be determined whether or not that person is imprisoned lawfully and whether or not he should be released from custody. A habeas corpus petition is a petition filed with a court by a person who objects to his own or another's detention or imprisonment. The petition must show that the court ordering the detention or imprisonment made a legal or factual error. Habeas corpus petitions are usually filed by persons serving prison sentences. This system implemented particularly by the common law countries.

The idea of separation of powers gained strength:
The King is now controlled
Not only by the church but also by the aristocracy.

Also the idea of the independence of judiciary was introduced.

These developments in England
Were doubtless very important
for the future evolution of democracy and human rights.

But continental Europe
Also witnessed some very important developments:
The conflict of three popes.

Towards the end of the 14th century,
Three candidates emerged for the office of Pope (continental Europe).

When, different nations came to support each candidate,
A horrible prospect surfaced: a Europe-wide civil war!

Europe that had lost about a third of its population
(black death, 1348),
faced the danger of losing another third in a massive civil war!

DISCUSSION:

Such a demographic collapse would've paved the way
for an Ottoman/Islamic conquest of Europe!

Europe avoided the civil war
Thanks to an idea.
This idea also constitutes the essence of modern democracy.

The idea was simple enough:
That a general council representing the Christians,
Should have the authority
To dismiss a King as well as a Pope.

It was then decided to convene a universal (oecumenic) council
Representing the Christians.
This council was then empowered
To dismiss all the three candidates, if necessary.

At the beginning of the 15th century
A council met in Constance,

decided to dismiss all the three candidates
and appointed a new Pope.

Thus, the idea of appointing a leader
Through the votes of the whole community
Found application in Western Europe
for the first time.

Another major development in the history of democracy:
English civil war
and the Glorious Revolution (1688).
William lands in England, supported by the Church and Parliament.
James II has to escape.

William marries James II's daughter Mary,
Together they ascend the throne (1689).
But, one condition: They must accept the Bill of Rights.

What did the Bill of Rights entail?

King and the Queen agreed to obey the laws passed by the Parliament → the
Rule of Law.

They agreed to be guided in their actions by the decisions of the Parliament
End of the concept of Divine Rights of kings.

These concessions by the royal family, which were achieved without warfare
and blood, are called the "Glorious Revolution".

The Glorious Revolution represents
One of the most successful "elite settlements" in history:
The Protestant clergy "the immortal seven" + the Parliament invited the King.
The King agreed to obey the laws of the Parliament.
The new King also agreed not to persecute the Catholics.

With these developments:
Definitive separation of powers achieved.
Legislation > executive ,
What about judiciary?
(an independent judiciary was already established
at the beginning of the Civil War,
when the Star Chamber was abolished)

The modern Anglo-Saxon democracy was borne.
These principles were exactly repeated in the American Constitution as well.

Moreover,

With the Bank of England (1694) ,
The King was now forced to borrow funds from the public
By observing tight rules
imposed by the bank.
Fiscal arbitrariness disappeared.

Result→ English state able to borrow huge sums at low interest rates.
Before 1688 the state was able to borrow only 1 million sterlin at 6-30%.
In 1697, 17 million sterlin at 3%.

Able to borrow from the public such huge funds,
England emerged during the 18th century
as the leading power of the world.

Thus,
A state that's controlled by its populace through the separation of powers,
A state that's democratic and observes the rule of law,
That state has the real power.

Thus,
The birth of democracy in Western Europe
Has been painful and coincidental.
Democracy is not a normal state of events.
It has emerged out of the very special circumstances of the medieval West.

Modern Western democracy is the achievement of
Medieval European civilization,
Primarily of the medieval church which had its own corporate structure,
Magna Carta and the Three Popes Controversy,
Of the 17th century English Parliament and the Glorious Revolution,
Of the 18th century American Revolution.

Another importance of the Glorious Revolution:
It saved England from the 17th century absolutism.
Continental Europe had constitutional/democratic characteristics in medieval
times. For instance, emperors of the Holy Roman Empire were elected by the
electors (limited number of nobles).
We have also observed the Council of Constance.
But such democratic elements were wiped out by the 17th century absolutism,
which mainly emerged as a result of the Thirty Years' War.

What saved England and eventually Europe from totally being subjugated by
absolutism, was the Glorious Revolution.

Next: Lecture Four, Why Democracy Has Failed in the Eastern Mediterranean?