Chapter 14

Who Has a Say? The Conditions for the Emergence and Maintenance of Political Participation in Europe before 1800

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In his masterly book on parliamentarism in medieval Western Europe, Michel Hébert pointed to three major shortcomings of the abundant literature on the subject: the constitutionalist and often formalistic point of view, the teleological perspective looking forward to modern parliamentary democracy, and the framing within the existing national states.1 A more comparative approach with an open eye for the variety in the settings of political participation might help to overcome these “deadlocks”. The present volume aims at advancing research by providing a decidedly comparative viewpoint, by presenting new thematic approaches, and by resolutely dismissing the ideal type of a dualistic system in which benevolent monarchs confronted with a representation of the subjects through a standard model of assemblies of Three Estates. Moreover, some polities discussed here are seldom mentioned in textbooks, and the period covered, from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century, shows the emergence as well as the consolidation of political systems without artificially splitting their institutional development into a medieval and an early modern section.

Tim Neu stresses in his chapter the need for an overarching framework beyond the great diversity of institutional constructs on which previous generations of researchers may have been overly focused. In 1998, I summarily proposed an analytical framework focusing on five factors: the strength of the dynasty, the physical scale of the political system, its social and economic characteristics, geopolitical location, and institutional traditions.2 In an attempt to meet the praiseworthy aim of formulating an overarching framework by reconsidering and elaborating on these five factors, let us start with accepting that the systems of participation varied over time and space, just as the societies in which they functioned did. Since more factors have an impact, the variation

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between a society and its political system should not be interpreted in a mechanical way. For example, political events connected with the discontinuity of efficient leadership, the intervention of external contenders, and institutional inertia could all influence the way political representation was organized in the long term.

It is therefore important to identify the common denominators on a theoretical level, and to define the circumstances under which particular levels of political participation could emerge and could be sustained over time. That is, in brief, the purpose of this contribution. A systematic appraisal of the various forms of political participation in particular times and places in light of a systematic set of potentially relevant variables should help to come to a more coherent understanding of the causes of the variation. An all-encompassing framework of political participation should take into account the key variables of the social, economic and cultural characteristics of the societies under consideration, not only in the sense of structural data, but also in their dynamics, including lasting effects of contiguous events. In a similar way, political systems have to be analysed as interactive processes in which institutions can emerge as the unplanned effects of the strife of multiple actors. Once practices have become usual and proved to be efficient for the most influential actors, they start to have a life of their own and tend to turn into formalized structures. Then they become less dependent on—and less responsive to—changes in society. Institutions tend to expand their sphere of influence for their own purpose, and to shift their goals away from their initial aims. The established elites are then inclined to give preference to personal honours and profits derived from their position and raise obstacles to further changes. At the same time, formal and ritual aspects prevail in the political debates, rather than conflicting interests or the ideal of the “common good”.

To understand these processes of institutionalization, it is helpful to distinguish the political systems and the societies in which these emerged and functioned. Institutions that function well in one type of society cannot simply be transferred to a society that has developed in a different way. Experiments with the introduction of constitutional parliamentary systems in post-colonial societies in Latin America and Africa demonstrated the necessity of mutual affinities, summarized by Barrington Moore in his sweeping statement “no bourgeois, no democracy”. Tensions between a political system and its societal basis tend to become evident in the more dynamic societies. Conditions which led to the emergence of a particular political system may develop in a

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