

Anthropology And Politics: Revolutions In The Sacred Grove

Is Development Uniquely Modern? Athens on the Doorstep

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Abstract

North/Wallis/Weingast (2009) define the problem of development as the transition from natural state to open access order and propose a theory of the natural state as a stable system. A small number of natural states develop by moving to "doorstep conditions" and then into the transition proper that led to open access orders in a few modern states. NWW's focus on early modern Europe gives the impression that the transition happened only once in human history and leaves the theory vulnerable to confounding variables of modernity, such as the industrial revolution, technological change, or colonialism. If the conditions predicted by the theory produced a similar result prior to modernity, the theory's robustness is supported. We consider ancient Athens as an out-of-sample test, showing that conditions similar to those NWW assert for early modern Europe held in Athens, and tests that support our claim. Changes in Athenian policy in the direction of open access are predicted and explained by reference to changing Athenian revenue demands, sources of revenue, and capacity for coercion.

1. Introduction

Is development a uniquely modern phenomenon? We know that some ancient rulers were wealthy and powerful, perhaps more so than Western European rulers at the beginning of modernity. But were their states developed? Existing economic and political approaches to development do not readily provide a way to answer this paper's question. In his influential early 20th century *Theory of Economic Development* (1934, German edition 1912) Joseph Schumpeter argued that development was a uniquely modern phenomenon, driven by the uniquely modern relationship between capital and entrepreneurs. Influential works of historical sociology (Polanyi 2001 [1944]) and ancient history

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