



The Politics of Game of Thrones Revisited

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The imminent start of the final season of *Game of Thrones* is a good time to consider the series' political message, and reprise some of my work on that subject. Plus, a discussion of the political economy portrayed in George R.R. Martin's recently published prequel to the series.

The final season of the hit TV series *Game of Thrones* begins this weekend, on April 14, ending a long wait that began when Season 7 ended in 2017. One of the many interesting aspects of the series and the books by George R.R. Martin on which it is based, is the attempt to address a variety of political issues. While some might consider it frivolous to assess the political message of a fantasy show, it's worth remembering that far more people consume science fiction and fantasy media than read serious nonfiction analyses of political issues. And social science research indicates that science fiction and fantasy, such as the Harry Potter series, can even have a significant influence on fans' political views. At the very least, discussing the politics of *Game of Thrones* is less painful than analyzing the much grimmer politics of the real world! Valar morghulis - "all men must die" - is all too true. But at least we can have some fun with fictional political economy first!

Over the last several years, I have written a good deal about the politics of *Game of Thrones*. My most extensive analysis is a 2017 article focusing on what it might take to fulfill Daenerys Targaryen's vow to "break the wheel" of Westeros' awful political system:

In a famous scene in Season 5 of Game of Thrones, Daenerys Targaryen compares the struggle for power in Westeros to a spinning wheel that elevates one great noble house and then another. She vows that she does not merely intend to turn the wheel in her own favor: "I'm not going to stop the wheel. I'm going to break the wheel."

In the world of the show, Daenerys's statement resonates because the rulers of Westeros have made a terrible mess of the continent...

Daenerys's desire to "break the wheel" suggests the possibility of a better approach. But, what exactly, does breaking the wheel entail?...

Even in the late stages of... Season 7, Daenerys seems to have little notion of what it means beyond defeating her enemies and installing herself as Queen on Westeros's Iron Throne....

Unlike most of the other rulers we see in the series, Daenerys has at least some genuine interest in improving the lot of ordinary people. Before coming to Westeros, she and her army freed tens of thousands of slaves on the continent of Essos. She delayed her departure from Essos long enough to try to establish a new government in the liberated areas that would — hopefully — prevent backsliding into slavery.

Nonetheless, it is not clear whether Daenerys has any plan to prevent future oppression and injustice other than to replace the current set of evil rulers with a better one: herself. The idea of "breaking the wheel" implies systemic institutional reform, not just replacing the person who has the dubious honor of planting his or her rear end on the Iron Throne in King's Landing. If Daenerys has any such reforms in mind, it is hard to say what they are....

Daenerys's failure to give serious consideration to institutional problems is shared by the other great leader beloved by fans of the show: Jon Snow, the newly enthroned King in the North. Perhaps even more than Daenerys, Jon has a genuine concern for ordinary people....

Perhaps to an even greater extent than Daenerys, however, Jon does not have any real notion of institutional reform....

But in Medieval Europe, on which Westeros is roughly based, parliaments, merchants' guilds, autonomous cities, and other institutions eventually emerged to challenge and curb the power of kings and nobles. These developments gradually helped lead to the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the economic growth that led to modern liberal democracy. Few if any such developments are in evidence in Westeros, which seems to have had thousands of years of economic, technological, and intellectual stagnation.

The characters in the books and the TV show are not the only ones who largely ignore the need for institutional change. We the fans are often guilty of the same sin.....

Most of us read fantasy literature and watch TV shows to be entertained, not to get a lesson in political theory. And it is much easier to develop an entertaining show focused on the need to replace a villainous evil ruler with a good, heroic, and virtuous one, than to produce an exciting story focused on institutional questions..... Game of Thrones/Song of Ice and Fire is comparatively unusual in even raising the possibility that institutional reform is the real solution to its fictional world's problems, and in making this idea one of the central themes of the story.

However understandable, the pop culture fixation on heroic leaders rather than institutions reinforces a dangerous tendency of real-world politics. The benighted people of Westeros are not the only ones who hope that their problems might go away if only we concentrate vast power in the hands of the right ruler. The same pathology has been exploited by dictators throughout history, both left and right.

It is also evident, in less extreme form, in many democratic societies.....

For all its serious flaws, our situation is not as bad as that of Westeros. But we too could benefit from more serious consideration of ways to break the wheel, as opposed to merely spin it in another direction. And our popular culture could benefit from having more stories that highlight

the value of institutions, as well as heroic leaders. However much we love Daenerys and Jon, they and their real-world counterparts are unlikely to give us a better wheel on their own.

Back in 2016, I discussed Game of Thrones/Song of Ice and Fire in [an article on the politics of several science fiction and fantasy series](#) where I highlighted the series' skeptical view of political elites. In [this 2013 post](#), I discussed the significance of the "Red Wedding," one of the most shocking and controversial episodes in the history of the series. Back in 2011, when the series first began, I [commented on some of the political issues raised by the struggle for the Iron Throne](#), building on [an Atlantic symposium](#) about the series.

In August 2017, I participated in [a panel on the politics of Game of Thrones](#), sponsored by the R Street Institute and the Cato Institute, along with Alyssa Rosenberg (Washington Post), Peter Suderman (Reason), and Matthew Yglesias (Vox). We are hoping to reprise our discussion during the final season.

During the long interregnum between the end of Season 7 and the start of Season 8, George R.R. Martin published the first volume of *Fire and Blood*, the history of House Targaryen's rule over the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros. The book predictably divided fans, many of whom would have preferred that Martin finish the long-awaited *Winds of Winter* instead. But I thought it was fascinating. At the very least, it did provide a lot of information about Westeros' political system. Here are a few examples (with spoilers largely avoided):

1. Even when the king is both competent and relatively well-intentioned, the political system doesn't function all that well. When he is either malevolent or incompetent, all kinds of disasters happen. And badly flawed kings seem to be more common than good ones. The high frequency of bad kings and the inability of good ones to make much progress is a strong sign that the monarchy's flaws are mostly systemic, rather than the fault of a few flawed individual rulers.
2. Like the Roman Empire, Westeros under the Targaryen kings never developed any generally accepted rules of succession. Thus, civil war breaks out over such issues as whether male relatives of the king take precedence over female ones who are older and/or more closely related. It is also not clear whether the king has the right to designate his own heir, or whether there are laws of succession that he cannot set aside (and if so, what they are).
3. Despite the above, *Fire and Blood* actually deepens the mystery of why Westeros has had so many centuries of economic stagnation. It shows that the kings invested in useful infrastructure (e.g. - ports and roads) and that there are many sources of investment capital other than the Iron Bank of Braavos. Plus, several of the great houses engage in extensive trade with other parts of the world. All of this should stimulate considerable innovation, growth, and technological progress. Yet very little seems to occur.
4. *Fire and Blood* makes clear that the stagnation probably is *not* caused by dragons, despite [speculation to the contrary](#) by commentators on the earlier books and TV show. There are never more than about 10-15 domesticated dragons in Westeros at any one time, and they don't seem to be used for anything but warfare and transportation for their riders (mostly members of the royal family). They clearly do not substitute for labor-saving devices or provide

transportation for trade. And, while they are powerful battlefield weapons, they are clearly not invincible and their presence should stimulate military innovation, not stifle it.

5. Based on what we see, it is far from clear that Targaryen blood is actually necessary to become a dragonrider. If it is, only a tiny bit seems to be enough. This suggests that the number of domesticated dragons and dragonriders could be greatly expanded. If so, dragons could actually help jumpstart the economy! There is a lot they could do to increase Westerosi productivity, if they started to take on jobs other than killing people and transporting VIPs.

6. Women are undeniably second-class citizens in Westeros. But they seem to have higher social status and more autonomy than their real-world medieval equivalents. We even see a number of cases of them entering male-dominated professions, including warfare. This further deepens the mystery of Westerosi stagnation, as relatively freer Westerosi women should be more productive than those of medieval Europe, yet this does not seem to result in much increased growth.

Perhaps we will get more insights on the politics of Westeros from Season 8, and George R.R. Martin's long-awaited *Winds of Winter*. Until then, don't forget that political chaos is a ladder!

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