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What Theory
to Grasp Complexities?**

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TRANSITIONS TO DEMOCRACY. WHAT THEORY TO GRASP COMPLEXITIES?

Leonardo Morlino*

Abstract

When analysing transitions toward democracy during the last three decades of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century, it is readily apparent that the variety of empirical processes is so wide that achieving meaningful theoretical results is extremely difficult, as shown very explicitly by the existing literature on the topic. This paper addresses the key theoretical questions that need to be dealt with by the empirical analysis of the transitional process: Are there key, recurring actors and factors that we should take into account when analysing all cases in depth?; Why is a focus on installation salient?; Are there recurring patterns of successful transitions?; Is or are there key recurring mechanism/s that critically explain successful transitions?; And are there obstacles that make it impossible to achieve a successful transition and doom such a process to failure? On the basis of existing knowledge in the subfield an attempt is made to reply to these questions, and in this way to single out the main theoretical results achieved in the field.

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Within the comparative analysis of democratizations the transition toward democracy is still challenging scholars and practitioners in search of more meaningful theoretical results. In fact, the process displays such a great variety of modes, aspects and sheer events as to make it really impervious to every attempt at systematic description and explanation. If we consider the most recent time span from the early 1970s through until 2015, when, relatively speaking, the largest number of transitions occurred, successful or otherwise, the empirical universe to include covers all areas of the world: Southern Europe, Latin and Central America, Eastern Europe, South East Asia, Southern Africa and, very partially, Northern Africa, only to mention the main areas. Overall, there have been some 45 cases: the number of liberal democracies in 2014 is 88, whereas forty years earlier they were 43.¹ The main questions we should address in these cases include: 1. Are there key, recurring actors and factors we should take into account when analysing all these cases in depth? 2. Are there recurring patterns of successful or unsuccessful transitions? 3. Are there one or more key recurring mechanisms that critically explain successful transitions? and, finally, 4. Are there obstacles the existence of which makes it impossible to achieve a successful transition and which destine such a process to failure?²

Before devoting a specific section to each question, some basic preliminary definitions and related considerations are required. First, the phenomenon to be scrutinized is a process that unfolds over a span of time that: a. is impossible to anticipate or predict; b. implies several interactions among actors and external conditions, again almost impossible to spell out explicitly. Second, the definition of the process can be simplified for the purposes of research feasibility by considering only the set of events starting with the crisis and collapse of a non democratic regime and ending with at least the installation of a minimalist democracy.³ This means that I take into consideration successful transitions if a minimalist democracy is achieved and failed transitions if not. Possible critical remarks regarding a kind of teleological definition and research would be off the mark as the aspects relating to changes toward democracy are explicitly and consciously singled out. Of course, the kind of analysis suggested here is necessarily an ex post one. If it had pretensions to being an ex ante analysis, then the critique of maintaining a teleological, biased perspective would be appropriate. Third, the literature that inserts transitions toward democracy into so-called waves (see esp. Huntington 1991) is largely misleading as it

inappropriately lumps together several factors that need to be differentiated and highlighted, such as the role and impact of external actors as well as that of internal, domestic factors and actors in the different cases, which may be different from case to case in what is supposedly the same wave (see below). Fourth, in reconstructing the process, domestic and external actors sometimes cannot be adequately distinguished because of the dense interactions among them, but also because the very distinction between external and internal may be impossible to draw neatly on some occasions.

Are there recurring actors and factors?

Once all the cases have been analysed, the most obvious and simple reply to the question contained in the title of this section is 'no'. But we do not need here to support a radical position, such as the one expressed by Whitehead (2002), who views transition as a long-term, non-linear, open-ended process and consistently develops an 'interpretivist' approach, which 'avoids spurious rigour and untenable claims of causal necessity' (Whitehead 2002: 34).⁴ With the experience of these years of research, I believe Linz and Stepan (1996) were right when in their analysis of transitions (and consolidations) in the three main areas of the world (Southern Europe, Latin America and Eastern Europe) touched by this phenomenon they chose a more methodologically moderate approach by adopting the well-known strategy of 'multidimensional specific configurations'. That is, in each case a set of factors and actors should be explored, always the same ones, but in the end only a few of them will prove to be the key aspects, which are also differently combined and characterize each transition. If this methodological approach is accepted as the one that best understands and explains the analysed cases, then the most important step is – of course, with a number of hypotheses in mind – to check all the cases and see which specific configurations of factors and actors, taken all together, best describe and explain each case. This implies the development of theoretical frameworks, as Linz and Stepan do.

Alternative choices provide meagre results. First, when an accurate overview of the literature is carried out, one of the best examples still being the overview by Valerie Bunce (2000: 715), the author reaches fairly obvious conclusions, though distinguishing between theoretical propositions at a high level of generalization and regional propositions. In fact, at a higher level of abstraction Bunce singles out five broad propositions, which basically recall previous classic

analyses. The first proposition regards how a high level of economic development is a guarantee of democratic continuity; the second concerns the centrality of political leaders in the founding and designing of democracy; the third stresses the assets of parliamentary rather than presidential systems for 'the continuation of democratic governance'; the fourth considers the salience of the settlements of 'national and state questions' for 'the quality and survival of democracy'; and the fifth concerns the key importance of the rule of law for a fully fledged democracy. In addition, regional generalizations relate to the salience of 'pacting', that is, of reaching agreements and accommodation in the democratic transitions of Southern Europe and Latin America; the advantages of breaking with the past in Eastern Europe; the high correlation between democratization and economic reform in a capitalist direction in Eastern Europe; and the threat to democracy in Latin America and post-socialist Europe because of the weakness of the rule of law. And, to strengthen the conclusion that 'pacting' is salient only in a few cases pertaining to Southern Europe and Latin America, Geddes (1999: 140) 'found little evidence in a set of 163 regime transitions for the claim that pacts increase the likelihood of democracy'; and McFaul (2002: 213, 243) shows that in Eastern European countries 'successful democratic transition did not follow the pacted path' and, consequently, 'in the long stretch of history, the successful transitions from communism to democracy may look like the norm, while the pacted transitions and transitions from above in Latin America and Southern Europe may look like the aberration'.

Second, when considering 'the state of art' in a more systematic way, as Berg-Schlosser (2007) or also Munck (2007) do,⁵ they present and discuss a set of concepts and the main empirical findings in the field, such as: research concerning social classes as 'prime agents' of democratization is inconclusive; the explanations of democratic transitions are extremely varied; the old proposition about the association between the level of economic development and democratic stability is still very solid; the influence of international factors can be strong.⁶ Moreover, when switching the focus onto international factors, they became a core feature of Eastern European transitions, through authors such as Whitehead (1996), who points to the three mechanisms of 'contagion', 'control', and 'consent', or again Linz and Stepan (1996: 72–81), who discuss the salience of the foreign policies of other countries – the USA for one – together with 'zeitgeist' and 'diffusion', or those who have been doing research into the enlargement of the

European Union (see Pridham et al. 1994; but also Pevehouse 2002; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005; Magen and Morlino 2008, and others). Thus, on the whole, old generalizations are recalled or restated, but no theory emerges.

Finally, third, when including other contributions and research,⁷ the analyses proposed by those who have worked on several cases in Southern Europe and Latin America focus on the following: the main characteristics of the previous regime; the important role performed by 'pacts' or elite agreement on the institutions to build (see also above); the role or 'resurrection' of civil society; the limited role of political parties; the salience of contingent consensus on the institutions to be set up; the enormous uncertainties of the entire process of transition; and the importance of the first, founding elections. Put differently, what all these authors actually propose is a *theoretical framework* that points to key factors to look at when conducting an analysis of one or a small number of cases. In such a framework, *actors, institutions, timing and the very notion of process play a central role in the analysis* of countries in two geopolitical areas, i.e. Southern Europe and Latin America. Pridham (2000: esp. ch. 1) also pursues a similar design by suggesting an appropriate framework for analysing mainly Southern and Eastern European changes as an overall phenomenon comprising historical determinants, modes of authoritarian breakdown, formal regime transition, the role of elite actors, economic transformations, the mutual influence of elite and civil society, the possible role of statehood and national identity in the transition, and the impact of international factors. All of these are aspects that should be considered together in the 'dynamics of transition' when analysing specific cases. Schmitter (2013) ultimately seems to support this position when, to analyze transitions, he suggests taking into consideration: the immediate and revised situation, the possible outcomes and eventual outcomes, the available agents and 'real-existing' agents, the potential and actual modes of transition, the prevailing international context, the unit of government. On the whole, then, the approach of Linz and Stepan actually is the dominant path in analysing transitions to democracy.

When more specifically the focus is on explanation (see Morlino 2012), the political traditions of the country stand out as a key factor. More precisely, the key variables are: the organization and control of civil society by a hegemonic party and the consequent manipulated participation through which the regime was able to destroy the social structure and the previous political and social identifications; the consequent socialization and re-socialization carried out by party

organizations and other ancillary organizations to create new loyalties and identifications; and the suppression of the opposition. These variables were relevant because during transition they heavily conditioned the subsequent activation of a democratic civil society together with its social and political structures. In other words, an authoritarian regime that has been able to carry out effective policies of socialization and suppression may leave a passive, weak, fragmented, poorly organized civil society during the subsequent transition.

As stressed above in recalling McFaul, within the transitions to democracy that have occurred in the different areas of the world spatial and time differences were also characterized by additional aspects, such as the change of polity boundaries and, consequently, of territory and population, as happened in several Eastern European cases, but not in the Southern European and Latin American transitions. Moreover, in the Southern European and Latin American cases the salience of economic factors has been totally ignored. These were highly relevant in Eastern Europe, while in Southern Europe there was no problem of changing the economy from a collectivist to a capitalist system with market and private property. But the considerable attention devoted to the relationships between economic and political aspects in Eastern Europe has led some scholars to consider similar relationships in Southern Europe, as it was considered a mistake to think that there are no differences between an economy coexisting with an authoritarian regime and an economy coexisting with a democracy. With some exceptions, (see especially Ethier 1990), most analyses of Southern European transitions simply overlook those important aspects, and, to mention one feature, they largely glossed over the reshaping of the relationships between more or less organized interests and parties and between those interests and the bureaucracy with or without a large public sector in the economy.

How did it happen that, with the additional aspects illustrated above, the dominant approach became the one proposed by Linz and Stepan? The first reason stems from a serious, methodologically conscious reflection on the failure of functionalist theories, systems analysis, formal rational choice and other general theories, which were in 'fashion' from the early 1950s until the early 1970s. When submitted to empirical tests, those empirical theories displayed all their analytic and explanatory flaws, and were practically abandoned or subjected to a major overhaul with much better results, as happened for rational choice theory.⁸ This has led to an evident search for different, maybe less ambitious, but empirically more solid, theoretical choices

and consequently better results. The awareness of this failure and the new directions has been thoroughly charted by several scholars, especially by Ostrom (1982: 13, 26), when she stresses the need for 'the development of theory' in political science and at the same time the fact that what 'we do achieve will be limited in scope to specific types of theoretically defined situations rather than sweeping theories of society as a whole'.

The second reason derives from the achieved awareness of the complexities and major differences between various cases around the world. Such differences extend to the temporal plane as well, even in the arc of a limited forty-year period (1974–2014) during which several profound social and economic changes have taken place internationally.⁹ Such awareness is additionally strengthened by the evident fact that in most comparative political research conducted in recent decades, democratization has been the dominant leitmotiv, following in this respect the spectacular developments of reality: when the world's five main geographic areas are considered, what immediately stands out is that hundreds of articles and books have been written on the topic in English alone, not to mention the ones in Spanish and various other languages.

Thus, on the whole, the variety of processes is so wide that the strategy of developing a broad theoretical framework is the only appropriate one, and any attempt to establish general patterns of transitions in connection with definite explanatory factors is bound to fail, if we also wish to avoid platitudes. The dominance of the 'theoretical framework' approach, for the reasons illustrated above, had a strong focus on transition and at the same time overlooked the related and partially overlapping process of democratic installation. I suspect that the simple reason for this is that in Latin American cases the installation process is short and very difficult to distinguish from transition, whereas in several European cases the constitutional sub-process, the building of parties and the reshaping of interest groups, allowed scholars to single out the process of installation more clearly. But O'Donnell and other specialists of Latin America (see O'Donnell et al. 1986) were the most influential group of scholars when this subfield took off in terms of theory frame and research. A second possible reason for not breaking the analysis into two processes, which empirically overlap, stems from the fact that such a distinction would bring additional difficulties and unwanted confusion into already empirically complex analyses. Here, a different opinion is supported, although admittedly a minority one in the literature. Going back

to O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986), their focus is on 'transitions from authoritarianism', that is, the point of departure is relatively well known (authoritarian regime) and nothing can be anticipated about the developments of the process. Consistently, in addition to the empirical aspects on Latin American cases, their focus has to be on transitions. When the phenomenon became more widespread with Eastern European, South Asian and African cases, the focus gradually switched toward 'transitions toward democracy', where the point of arrival should be better known, but the one of departure became uncertain (see also Di Palma 1990). It could be an authoritarian regime, but also a traditional, sultanistic, post-colonial one. If the logical consequences of such a switching are consistently accepted, then there has to be also an analytic switch with attention also being devoted to installation specifically. Thus, the distinction between the two processes became more appropriate. If then the approach in terms of theoretical framework is maintained, the next question is what key aspects should be explored when analysing installation.

An excursus on democratic installation

Let's clarify, first, that the installation of democracy refers to a different, alternative or sometimes subsequent process with respect to liberalization.¹⁰ It involves the complete expansion and genuine recognition of civil and political rights; where necessary, the full civilianizing of society; the emergence of a number of parties and a party system, but also of collective interest groups such as unions and other organizations; the drawing up and adoption of the principal democratic procedures and institutions that will characterize the regime, starting with the electoral law, specification of the relations between legislative and executive bodies, and other aspects pertinent to the functioning of the regime.

Moreover, democracy can be said to have been fully installed when the main structures of the regime are in place. In a number of cases, the process is not completed. Indeed, attempts may be made to stop it almost immediately, that is, during the liberalization phase, and other directions may be taken, with a return towards authoritarian solutions. In any case, the two central issues for understanding democratic installation concern the ways in which and the reasons why it comes about in a particular fashion. It thus seems more fruitful to try to single out the main dimensions of variation in the installation of democracy.

The first two aspects are the duration and role of violence, where, however, the installation phase is hard to distinguish from the transition as such. The key element requiring close attention in the installation of democracy are the actors. Here, it is important to be clear on the distinction between transition, and the key actors involved, and installation, which may be characterized and conducted by actors that are in some measure different. So, for example, transition – and the collapse of the previous regime – might be brought about by external actors, while installation may involve internal ones or indeed both. International pressures may also be significant in activating actors within the preexisting authoritarian regime, pushing them to begin transition and then, in some cases, to install a democracy. In the installations that took place especially in Eastern Europe and other non-European areas, an important role was sometimes played by *external international actors*, that is, international institutions and other governments. The coalition of these international actors with the internal ones – opposition included – is a necessary aspect if they have some role during the installation. In different modes, such as economic aid, institutional cooperation, different forms of socialization (see Morlino and Magen 2008), the relationships between domestic actors and international actors are an essential requisite for them to have some sort of actual role in the installation.

The internal institutional actors are the armed forces, the government elite, the top-ranking bureaucracy of the authoritarian regime and, more generally, the authoritarian political forces which, for various reasons, are induced to embark upon, and seek to guide, the democratization process. The institutional actors are the ones that most frequently and recurrently play a central and dynamic role in different instances of democratization. In fact, they have a monopoly on the coercive resources and on the possibilities stemming from their control of governmental decision-making bodies. In the course of democratization, however, these forces, for example, the monarchy, are not always able to maintain control over change. It is useful to distinguish between instances of transition and installation carried out by governmental institutional actors and those conducted by non-governmental institutional actors, such as sections of the military, or political forces that initially supported the authoritarian regime and then parted company with it.

Another, fairly frequent case is when moderate actors of the authoritarian regime, governmental or otherwise, and sections of the opposition come to share an effective interest in change. Both groups guide the process with the inevitable problems that arise between them, and

respectively with the other authoritarian forces and the more radical opposition. The forging of an alliance of this kind can create the conditions for transition and then for the installation of democracy. Subsequently, however, once democratization has begun and after the first elections are held, even elements of the previous authoritarian regime will have to start operating within the democratic framework and obtain representation through the electoral laws of the new regime.

One final, but rare scenario is when the political forces making up the opposition in the authoritarian period become the protagonists of the political mutation. If the opposition is a protagonist during transition, it is usually an armed opposition, and the outcome of the process is not democratic. If the opposition has no coercive potential, it can seek to apply pressure and make threats, which may often be effective and important, but rarely involve taking the initiative. The opposition can be a protagonist of democratization in the various cases in which transition has been set in motion by foreign actors or by internal institutional actors. Besides the first four possibilities outlined above, there may also be combinations thereof. But probably the most interesting further combination is that between foreign actors and the opposition, both in triggering transition and then during installation (see also Przeworski 1986 and O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986).

Whatever its role in the installation of democracy, the position of the military is significant for reasons that are not hard to understand: the armed forces have a monopoly on coercion. From this point of view, the simplest cases are those in which the armed forces have been defeated, and are internally riven with a disorganized, collapsing structure. The most difficult cases are those where the armed forces remain intact during the change, even in terms of status and social prestige. What may be an initial passive neutrality can sometimes give way to partial or full-scale politicization in opposition to the democratic regime. Even if the military supports such a regime, it remains potentially dangerous, in that it can always decide to try to maintain partial control of political power, especially in the face of recurrent crises (see also Stepan 1988).

Another key aspect for the process under consideration is the formation of the regime-founding coalition. This stems from a convergence of different effective interests and of similar choices on the part of the different political and socio-political actors active during transition. The term 'coalition' is used here in a broad sense, in that the agreement underpinning it can only

be tacit, implicit, essentially accepted with varying degrees of willingness by the political forces. The broader the founding coalition, that is, the more the existing and politically active forces in the country participate in the process, the greater the probability that democracy will be successfully installed and that consolidation will take place. Schmitter [1984, 366] stresses the main features of such agreements or “pacts”: they are the result of negotiations between representatives of elites and institutions; they tend initially to reduce competitiveness and conflict; they represent an attempt to control the agenda of the substantive issues to be tackled; they produce a distortion of the democratic principle of equality between citizens; they modify prospective power relations; they set new political processes in motion; they produce different outcomes that are sometimes far removed from those envisaged by the promoters. In addition to these conditions, one might add that the agreement, implicit or otherwise, first of all constitutes recognition of the possibility and legitimacy of different political (and ideological) positions; it is the nexus for the requesting and granting of the reciprocal guarantees discussed by Dahl [1989], and which lie at the heart of the democratic compromise (see also Di Palma 1990).¹¹ The agreement, which is embodied above all in the electoral rules, may be formalized to varying degrees depending on whether or not there is a constitutional process – and if there is, how long, wide-ranging and comprehensive it is – involving all the different political forces and concluding with a unanimously accepted charter. Both the founding charter and other less formalized nexuses are an opportunity to stipulate the institutional compromise, but also to affirm a series of values that may be more or less ambiguous and developed, and with which the different actors identify. The most formal nexus – the constituent process – or other less official ones may provide the occasion to reach consensus on substantive political issues regarding the partial settlement of class conflict through particular economic policies (monetary, wage-related, fiscal), or resolutions of the centre-peripheral conflict in the various forms of regional autonomy.

There are two other significant elements in installation, which are closely linked to each other and to the previous dimension. First, it is essential to see what political forces are more or less present and organized when the installation of the democracy takes place. If the right-left class conflict is the most significant political division and prevails over all the others, then it is necessary to see which actors in the political spectrum are present and active as protagonists or partners in the agreements mentioned above. It may be, for instance, that only left-wing actors

are present, or only right-wing ones, or both. For the successful installation of democracy this last eventuality is the most favourable.

Second, during the process under discussion, the central role is played by the elites, both those of the old regime that existed prior to the advent of opposition, and the new elites that enter the political arena. At any rate the “contest” is restricted to a small number of leaders whose choices count enormously for the future of the country. However, in the initial installation of democracy or in the subsequent stage, there is often a degree of mass participation, which may be more or less extensive and intense. Participation may manifest itself in classic forms, such as demonstrations, strikes and, sometimes, in expressions of collective violence like riots and so on. These manifestations offer a relatively simple means of measuring the trajectories or waves of participation. Mass participation offers opportunities for exerting pressure or influence, which will be used by the elite actors in the negotiation and conflict (latent or otherwise) that takes place between the parties involved, possibly running counter to pre-existing agreements. The preparation of the ground for the first elections is the best occasion for such demonstrations of force, especially when the real scale of support for one or other of the actors involved is not yet clear.

The final aspect distinguishing installations is the degree of continuity or discontinuity, in normative terms and as regards the occupation of key posts, in the administrative and judicial structures of the new regime. Closely linked to the way in which the crisis and the regime change take place, and the form taken by the transition, this continuity is of great significance. It concerns the problem of purging in particular the upper echelons of administrative and judicial bodies, but also repressive apparatuses such as the secret police and police, and the armed forces. The aim of such moves is to place people who are more loyal to the new institutional arrangement in key roles in the regime. The chief problem is that of legitimating the regime, and it is an extremely delicate one. On the one hand, greater continuity may help to facilitate acceptance of the new regime by those who were also part of the previous institutional structures, and by at least some of the social strata linked to them. On the other hand, greater discontinuity, also at a normative level, enhances the legitimacy of the new institutions in the eyes of social strata associated with the former opposition or at any rate excluded by the previous regime. The preferred solution is often a non-solution, that is, a tempering of the two

needs or the maintenance of continuity. The other, rarer solution only tends to be adopted when the regime change involves a strong break with the past.

Fig. 1: Significant dimensions in the installation of democracy

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- ◆ Duration: brief (1 year) → long (three years)
 - ◆ Violence: low → high
 - ◆ Civil actors:
 - Internal to power
 - Internal to power + internal to opposition
 - Opposition
 - External international + internal or opposition
 - ◆ Armed forces:
 - Absent
 - Neutral
 - Politicized in a democratic way
 - Politicized in an authoritarian way
 - ◆ Pact:
 - implicit → explicit
 - formalized → non formalized
 - about procedures → about procedures and policies
 - ◆ Participation: low → high
 - ◆ Spectrum of emerging political organizations:
 - broad and complete → partial and incomplete
 - ◆ Structure and staff in bureaucracies and magistracy
 - continuity → discontinuity
-

Figure 1 sums up the dimensions that have been examined, highlighting the main alternatives and the continuums existing in certain dimensions. The question at this point is whether, in addition to the general indications expressed in Figure 1, there are also other more specific and recurrent features, at least in the transition towards and installation of democracies since the 1970s in Southern Europe, Latin America and Eastern Europe, about which there is a fairly substantial body of literature (see, for example, Bartole and Grilli 1998, Dobry 2000 and Zielonka 2001). Huntington (1991, 192ff.), for instance, shows how these changes, irrespective of the degree of continuity/discontinuity and of what kind of democratic institutions are set up, have taken place with a relatively limited use of violence. However, the only possible way of developing this observation is to remain at a very general level. In fact, when individual cases are

analysed in detail, all the differences in the various dimensions emerge with great clarity, even within areas that are usually considered together, as mentioned above.

The analysis conducted thus far has ignored all the economic factors and relative variables. Even though it is a mistake to think that there are no differences between an economy that coexists with a democratic regime and one that coexists with an authoritarian one, because of the inevitable and dense strands of interdependence, almost all scholars who have dealt with Southern Europe and Latin America have neglected these aspects. As far as Eastern Europe is concerned, the transformation of the economic structures from prevalently collectivist economies and their failure to capitalist economies with varying degrees of space for free enterprise and private property, has evidently been too wide-ranging and profound to ignore. Some authors (for example, Offe 1991) identify three transitions regarding many Eastern European countries between the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 90s, not only from authoritarianism to democracy, but also from a statist economy to one in which the market and enterprise play a central role, and, in some cases (Slovakia, the Czech Republic and even the former East Germany), from a certain territory and population to another territory and hence to another state entity. The present analysis limits itself to illustrating the transition towards and installation of democratic regimes, leaving to one side the economic aspects, which, however, reappear in the analysis when they impinge on the structures of the political regime.¹²

Are there recurring patterns?

The approach of singling out a framework is not the only existing and possible theoretical choice. If a more limited time span and a more precise area is accepted, then more ambitious theoretical achievements are actually possible. In this vein, the main path has been the development of models or patterns of transition for a defined, usually small, number of cases. Over the years Stepan (1986), Karl and Schmitter (1991), Higley and Gunther (1992), Munck and Skalník Leff (1997), Berins Collier (1999) and Bunce and Wolchik (2006) are some of the main authors who have proposed such models. Some of the differences between them can be explained simply in terms of the different cases considered. For example, Stepan and Berins Collier also include the classic Western European cases of the past in addition to Southern and Eastern

European ones; Karl and Schmitter and also Munck and Skalnik Leff encompass the Latin American transitions as well as the Eastern European ones of the early 1990s. The similarities between these attempts lie in the fact that all the authors quoted above mainly focus on two macro-variables: the actors of transition, whether authoritarian incumbent elites or those of the opposition, even at a mass level, and the strategies they pursued, either accommodating or conflictive.

Thus, for example, Munck and Skalnik Leff (1997) come up with four models: 'revolution from above', if the actors of transition are the authoritarian elites who pursued a conflictive strategy of confrontation; 'conservative reform', if those elites chose agreements and compromises; 'social revolution', if counter-elites were at the heart of transition and pursued a conflictive strategy; and 'reform from below', if counter-elites at the heart of transition adopted an accommodating strategy. The advantages and limits of such models are fairly evident and connected. One of the main points is that the more immediate understanding of a country is counterbalanced by a strong simplification of many relevant aspects. In addition, the adoption of mixed models is very common. Consequently, strong simplification is accompanied by a loss of theoretical efficacy that would have been to some extent rescued with the 'pure' models.

From their perspective, which focuses on a few postcommunist countries, Bunce and Wolchik (2006, 5-18) developed a pattern of 'electoral revolution', which is characterized by four key features: 'conscious deployment of an electoral model of democratization'; 'upsurge in mass participation also in the streets before and sometimes after the elections'; 'turnover in governments'; 'improvement of democratic performance after the election'. The electoral model had a few favorable political conditions in the institutional legacy of the communist regimes (for example, the non politicized army) and was facilitated by the intervention of the international democracy-promotion community, who helped the local activists. Bunce and Wolchik (2006, 14-15) explicitly stress how "the electoral revolutions that have swept away illiberal governments in the postcommunist region since 1996 reflect two sets of factors which are as important as they are difficult to disentangle: the favorable domestic conditions for such revolutions and the role of the international democracy-promotion community."

In the search for recurring patterns, an alternative to focusing on a limited span of time and a small number of cases belonging to the same or a similar area is to pick one salient theoretical

dimension and build a few related patterns of change or, here in this analysis, of transition. The most recent, relevant example is that by Della Porta (2014), who proposed three patterns of transition on the basis of the role of social movements in it. Thus, there can be: an 'eventful democratization', when a key role is played by social movements and protest in bringing about regime change; 'participatory' or 'participated pacts', when social movements are able to get reforms also through a bargaining process; 'participated coups d'état' or 'troubled democratization', if élites manipulate mass protest to defeat other groups, even with a role of nationalist social movements. In the three patterns the democratic result is not taken for granted. However, what is analytically salient are the 'attribution of political opportunities', principally with regard to splitting within the élites, and the resource mobilization, where the role and strength of civil society is crucial. The democratic or non democratic outcomes are much less relevant.

Other examples could be given (see again Morlino 2012, ch. 4). Here, to conclude this section, the different theoretical purposes of the two kinds of patterns or ideal type can again be stressed. On the one hand, there are patterns that propose a comprehensive view of each whole case where the result is the focus on a different set of factors and/or actors to explain the resulting pattern. Those patterns are circumscribed in terms of time and space. On the other hand, there are patterns or ideal types where one or more than one actor or factor is assumed as the most important one and the impact of it/them on the process or on the result is assessed and consequent patterns built. These patterns are much less delimited in terms of time and space.

Is there a key recurring mechanism?

A rational choice approach has also been applied (e.g. Przeworski 1986; Colomer 1995) to transition, especially to pacted transitions or transitions by agreement (see Colomer 2000), again with close attention to elites and their choice and strategies. The building of democratic institutions is basically the product of those strategies and choices. The analyses by Colomer (1995 and 2000) can be mentioned, as, starting from the analysis of a specific case, that of Spain, he develops a theoretical proposal to apply to all cases of transition by agreement, such as Brazil and Chile, or also to other cases, such as the dissolution of the USSR and the transition to democracy in Poland and other Eastern European countries.

From a theoretical perspective, the key characterizing aspect of the 'rational choice' authors is the focus on and the search for 'explanatory mechanisms'. For example, Elster (1989: esp. 9–10) explicitly states that the key theoretical goal should be singling out explanatory mechanisms of 'human action and interaction' as recurring 'ways in which things happen'. But this is also a path undertaken by other comparativists working in areas other than democratization, such as Pearson (2004), who explicitly shares Elster's point, or Tsebelis, with his analyses of nested games (1990) and veto players (2002). The appropriateness of such a proposal is that it may enable theoretical advances while at the same time not being at so high a level of generality that our statements become platitudes or pompous affirmations of the obvious, a trap which – as is well known – a number of rational choice contributions were unable to avoid. The non rational choice scholar who has most systematically and perceptively adopted this perspective, applying it to the phenomenon of democratization, is Tilly (see esp. 2001), who envisages the possibility of singling out different sorts of mechanisms (environmental, cognitive and relational).

If the 'solution' suggested by rational choice is accepted with its stress on theoretical priorities, looking for causal or explanatory 'mechanisms' still leaves open some important issues. First, despite the broader formulation by Elster, the core meaning of 'mechanism' always brings to mind some combination of cams, gears, belts, and chains or at least a set of links or connections designed to achieve a certain outcome. In other words, a sort of determinism comes with the term, and this is unacceptable in our topic due to everything that empirical research has shown in these years, if not for another methodological reason, namely that attaching some sort of determinism to this term mutes a basic feature of democratization phenomena: they are 'open-ended' changes. Second, in all phenomena of democratization, *time, timing, sequences, and identification of time-bound windows of opportunity* are key aspects to analyse (see especially, Linz 1998; Schedler and Santiso 1998; Schmitter and Santiso 1998) and, although possibly present within the notion of mechanism, time does not lie at the core of this notion. Despite what Pearson affirms about mechanisms that are or should be 'temporally oriented' (2004: 7, but also 1–16 and 54–78), the same author adopts the term 'process' when the time to be considered is a long one (Pearson 2004: 79–102). Third, however, when conducting empirical field research it is not always possible and is often difficult to gather consistent (fairly) complete data that are time bound. Thus, all considered, singling out empirical mechanisms is a potentially important

theoretical step. But in addition we should embed the mechanism/s we are able to find into a meaningful 'process', where time, timing, and sequencing, when singled out, are essential components.

Accordingly, at the core of empirical research there is the singling out of a 'process' as a 'set of recurring interactions among individual and collective actors within changing structures, which is spread out over time, may or may not unfold in an expected result, is on occasion unilinear, but is always open ended'. Inside this definition of process there is room for mechanisms minimally defined as 'recurrent links or connections'. These definitions help to overcome a possible objection by Vanhanen (1997: 26) and other scholars, who stress how 'process-oriented analysis resorting to various proximate factors cannot lead to any general theoretical explanations, although they may produce useful descriptions of democratization': as a general theoretical explanation is actually impossible, as shown by empirical research in these years, singling out key processes and related mechanisms, conceived as above, may be the best theoretical achievement to obtain.

Moreover, such an issue helps to clarify how the oft-proposed distinction between 'structure' driven and 'process' driven explanations (e.g. Kitschelt 1992), which usually focus on transition to democracy only, can be overcome: different interactions among actors and structures, to be considered as salient contextual variables, are recurring elements of analysis within transition or consolidation processes.¹³ There is also no doubt that not only is there a random component in the actual unfolding of those macro-processes, but they can be open-ended, often convoluted, and never teleological, as Whitehead (2002: 238ff.) rightly stresses. To better understand this point it suffices to recall that an individual or collective action or set of actions, for example, an implemented political strategy, can be teleologically driven, but a process by itself cannot be such because it unfolds through several, often unexpected or unwanted interactions, even among different strategies, within a given or changing context with again sometimes unexpected, unwanted results.¹⁴ In a different perspective, a simple point can be added: when analysing empirically the modes of transitions and installation, the best way of doing it is to focus on the actors, but when switching to explanations of behaviour and results with regards to the democracies that are effectively established, the role of structures, whether socio-economic or of some other kind, can become a predominant aspect (see also Morlino and Magen 2008a).

With this in mind, if the search for a recurring mechanism is at the core of research on transitions and installation, although it has received no explicit, direct attention within the literature on transition the key question becomes: what ultimately is the mechanism or the key reason accounting for all those political changes that so greatly affected the lives of millions of people during and after the last decades of the twentieth century. If, despite what has been stated up to now, we have to try to suggest an effective reply, pointing to the 'waves' (e.g. Huntington 1991; Markoff 1996; and others) can be mainly relevant for an analysis of imitation or demonstration effects, that is, on the one hand, it can be considered a partial reply for a few cases only and, on the other hand, it does not grasp the key, domestic mechanism to which the question is referring. Moreover, such a hypothesis has never been – and very likely cannot be – precisely supported by accurate empirical analyses: instead, it is an interesting persuasive hypothesis bound to remain as such and which complements other more relevant aspects.

The best reply seems very simple and, at the same time, difficult to detect precisely, but has to be mentioned as the main theoretical lesson to draw from the existing literature, our own research included. During recent decades, an effective *learning process* can be detected at the elite and mass levels; this has been gradually spreading due to the failures of alternative regimes, such as military authoritarianisms in Latin America and Communist mobilizational regimes in Eastern Europe, or even other civil-military authoritarianisms and traditional regimes in other areas.¹⁵ Despite specific events and unavoidable ups and downs, there has been a gradual legitimation of democracy as the most flexible and adaptable of all institutional arrangements, which is at the same time able to change the governing elites and to avoid the suppression and suffering of the people. Amartya Sen on democracy as a universal value (1999) and Sartori (1995) on the reasons why democracy can 'travel' by setting up a 'demo-protection', resulting in a free people not bound to suppression, and 'demo-power', which leads to a relatively more self-assertive people, point in the same direction.

In the final analysis, the thrust for political change stems from the people, who learn from their failures and change their attitudes and behaviour, with all the obstacles, distortions, and changes of direction that such a cultural transformation may involve. What we can see at work is a reaction of key actors, collective ones included, to existing, perceived legacies (see on this Costa Pinto and Morlino 2011) vis-à-vis the present problems within a context of delegitimation of

previous institutions. In this very process *learning* emerges where past experiences and present situation, also influenced by external events, interact with each other with potentially different results, and where who learns what is often influenced by chance.¹⁶ On the whole, and within Tilly's perspective, such a mechanism brings together relational and cognitive features, but also an environmental one.

What obstacles to successful transitions?

The fourth question, addressed in this section, could be worded differently: In failed transitions what are the factors, or even the actors, that have prevented transition by maintaining a non democratic regime, the previous or a different one,¹⁷ or by stalemating it in a hybrid situation? This question has almost never been explicitly discussed in depth in the literature, except in the work edited by Stoner and McFaul (2013).¹⁸ A more systematic reply to it should refer to the three theoretical possibilities we explored in the previous sections of this article.

Thus, first, if the theoretical framework approach is taken, then the explanation of the failure is in a specific multidimensional set of reasons that can partially or largely vary from one case to another. Accordingly, the simplest reply is to refer to the lack of conditions and aspects that assured the success of newly achieved democracies. In this perspective, there is not much to say except to analyse the specific cases with a reversed framework vis-à-vis the one adopted for the cases of success. Second, if singling out patterns or models is the theoretical goal, then this is what Stoner, Diamond, Girod and McFaul (2013) actually do in the introductory chapter of Stoner and McFaul's work (see above). In doing this they stress how a failed transition is usually an elite-led one, that the lack of three domestic factors, such as mass mobilization, indigenous civil society organizations and independent media and communications technology, is crucial to explain the failure and that the absence of any external international help for a number of reasons¹⁹ is also a salient aspect.

In replying to the question addressed in this section, the third theoretical possibility may be the most relevant and revealing one. In fact, if attention is devoted to the analysis of key mechanisms of change or, in this opposite perspective, continuity, then a few considerations are in order. To start with, when singling out the learning process as a key mechanism at the core of transitions, the actual question is how elites and people change their minds, or do not, and

choose the democratic path. The basic reply to this question is: through trial and error. Elites and people learn the negative effects of non democratic arrangements and, with or without the help of external institutions and governments, can come to try out democratic solutions that eventually appear more favourable and acceptable for everyone interested.

Maintaining this perspective, however, prompts a number of other important reflections. First, as is obvious, the learning process may also work the other way: elites and people may follow other lessons and accept non democratic solutions, or simply obey them. If we look back over past experience, it is very well known how, in the early 20th century and later on, Southern European or Latin American elites learned to stop changes in a democratic direction by reflecting on their own experience or that of other nearby or related countries.

Second, there are ideologies and beliefs that retain strong identities and consequently set up serious, tough obstacles to changes in the mind set of people. The two strongest obstacles of this kind that we saw effectively working are religion – in these years the Muslim religion has been especially effective in this – and ethnic identities we saw at work, especially in several African countries. Such obstacles have usually been well institutionalized for years. This implies that beliefs and identities are powerfully strengthened by vested interests that support them. Of course, there are exceptional cases where a democratic charismatic leader or small groups are able to overcome these obstacles. In South Africa Mandela founded a democracy in a situation where vengeance and conflict would have been broadly understandable and expected. With his moral authority and leadership abilities he was able to win over other elites, other leaders close to him included, and even to bring about a change in people's attitudes on the political direction to undertake. In Tunisia a democratic elite was able to find and follow a very narrow path by managing to have a mainly secular constitution approved in January 2014 and laying the foundations for a fragile, but possibly viable democracy.

Third, an unfavourable international context, such as being related to and dependent economically on a non democratic country – as may happen in 2014 in the Middle East and the Euro-Asian area with postcommunist countries – and the related existence of an apparently successful non democratic alternative, such as Russia, for example, form the basis for the failure of transition, if started.

Finally, it is difficult to forget one of the most obvious aspects. The most robust basis of a failed transition is set up by the absence of a democratic elite. In other words, even a charismatic leader or a minoritarian elite – although, of course, not strongly minoritarian – can manage to bring about a successful transition within a favourable context (see above). But the absence of that leader or elite and an unfavourable cultural and international context dooms any transition to failure. It is a platitude to recall that despite the positions of a very minoritarian elite the largest part of the elite and the people who were active during the Egyptian transition were not democratic, and their goal was a religious one, although characterized by varying degrees of fundamentalism.

A few concluding remarks

The question addressed in this article is very simple: after at least four decades of transitions toward democracy, since the early 1970s, and various different pieces of research into this phenomenon, to the extent that an entirely new subfield of comparative politics, comparative democratization, blossomed in those same years, what theoretical results have been achieved? In the early days of the development of the subfield the possibility of achieving accepted theories was very low and the overall prospects were gloomy, to say the less. In fact, one of the most authoritative statements on the issue was made by O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986: 3): 'We did not have at the beginning, nor do we have at the end . . . a "theory" to test or to apply to the case studies.' Several years later, McFaul (2002: 244) echoed this statement: 'the project of constructing a general theory of democratization may very well fail . . . The unique patterns generated by the fourth wave of regime change in the post communist world suggest that the search for a general theory of democratization *and* authocratization will be a long one.'

Here, to provide a reliable reply to the question above, the analysis was broken down into the four more specific issues to which each section was devoted. Thus, first, when asking if there are – and if so, which – recurring actors and factors we should take into account to analyse in depth every different transition, a double result was achieved: the best approach for the purpose was to develop a theoretical framework where all possible actors and factors are included and, when empirically tested, each actor and each factor turns out to be combined in specific multidimensional configurations; moreover, when over the years the focus switched more and

more onto democracy as a result of transition and consequently a stronger attention should be devoted to democratic installation and related aspects.

Second, there are recurring patterns of successful transitions, and they are of two kinds with different theoretical purposes. On the one hand, there is the proposal of comprehensive multidimensional ideal types or even typologies that characterize a small number of specific cases, usually very close in time and space, where the result is the focus on a combination of different set of factors and/or actors. On the other hand, at a higher level of abstraction and with possible regard to a broader area and a longer span of time, ideal types or typology are proposed where one or more than one actor or factor is assumed as the key aspect, and the impact of it/them on the process or on the result of it is assessed and consequent patterns built.

Third, if one shares the theoretical approach suggesting that the search for and detection of key mechanism/s is the most important theoretical result that scholars of comparative democratization can and should achieve, then, despite the problems and difficulties, at least one key mechanism emerges in the research on transition, which at least contributes to explaining critically successful transitions and indirectly suggests why other transitions are unsuccessful. This is the *learning* process, where past experiences and the present situation, also influenced by external events, interact with each other with possibly different results, where who learns what is often influenced by chance.

Fourth, especially on the basis of experience in the most recent years, singling out obstacles that make successful transition impossible can be done in connection with the different theoretical goals that can be set up. Thus, if referring to a theoretical framework, the failure is explained by the lack of conditions and aspects that assured the success of newly achieved democracies. If singling out patterns or models is the theoretical goal, then a failed transition is an elite-led one and the lack of mass mobilization, indigenous civil society organizations and independent media and communications technology as well as the absence of international help are key aspects, above all in the recent postcommunist transitions. If the focus is on key mechanisms of continuity, then, in order to better understand the basic reasons of failed transitions, four aspects should be kept in mind: 1. the learning process, which was considered the key mechanism of change, may also work in the opposite way: elites and the people can work and opt for non democratic solutions; 2. the two strongest obstacles to change are religion and

ethnic identities, powerfully strengthened by vested interests; 3. an unfavourable international context and the related existence of a successful non democratic alternative lay the basis for the failure of transition, if started; and finally, 4. the most robust basis of a failed transition is set up by the absence of a democratic elite, which may also be a minoritarian one.

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Footnotes

¹ Of course, the precise calculus is slightly more complex than a simple subtraction because the 45 cases are not exactly the same over the forty years. But the cases that change are very few, and the basis of data makes reference to those successful cases that are democracies in 2014 and were not in 1974. See www.freedomhouse.org, and for details see also Morlino (2012).

² In this paper I am developing a few reflections I started in Morlino (2012, ch. 4).

³ About the minimalist definition of democracy “a regime should be considered democratic if it has at least the following: *a*) universal male and female suffrage; *b*) free, competitive, periodic and fair elections; *c*) more than one political party; *d*) different and alternative sources of information.” (Morlino 2012, 32).

⁴ For an analysis of the sensitive definition of democracy discussed by Whitehead (2002: ch. 1), see Morlino (2012, ch. 3).

⁵ The first four chapters of the book by Gill (2000: 1–123) are also a good, balanced review of the literature, especially on transition to democracy.

⁶ When we also consider a very well-written book like the one by Larry Diamond (2008) or the exhaustive textbook edited by Haerpfer et al. (2009) or other good textbooks (e.g. Grugel 2002; Ciprut 2008; Sørensen 2008), we realize how rich the field has become in terms of research carried out and how high the level of interest is for a lot of people, including university students. The methodological and theoretical conclusions expressed in the text remain the same.

⁷ See again Morlino (2012 ch. 4) for additional details.

⁸ For an additional analysis of this matter, see Morlino (2000).

⁹ They are so well known that there is no reason to discuss here phenomena such as the oil crisis with all its consequences, the end of the Cold War, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the change of the capitalist economy and different markets, and the reshaping of the middle classes.

¹⁰ Liberalization is defined as: “the entire set of events that take place in, and usually characterize, transition and involves the concession, from above, of some degree of political and civil rights, which are never very broad or complete, but enable the controlled organization of civil society at an elite and mass level.” (Morlino, 2012, 85).

¹¹ On this see also above the reference made by Bunce (2000).

¹² See also Morlino (2012, ch. 1, first section).

¹³ Although actors have often been a dominant focus in the analysis and reality of transitions, Doorenspleet (2004) shows the salience of structural context in several transitions.

¹⁴ On this issue, O’Donnell (1996) sees this flaw in the notion of democratic consolidation itself.

¹⁵ Learning is defined by Bermeo (1992: 274) as ‘the process through which people modify their political beliefs and tactics as a result of severe crises, frustrations, and dramatic changes in environment’. See also Pridham (2000: esp. 53–7).

¹⁶ It is particularly telling what Perez Diaz (1993) recalls in terms of building a memory of the past, that it can be largely manipulated if not artificial, as this makes clear that the mechanism we are discussing is actually very difficult to grasp empirically.

¹⁷ As happened in Egypt.

¹⁸ Stoner and McFaul devoted to this question four chapters on Algeria, Iran, China, and Azerbaijan. They are also two very distinguished experts of Russia, but curiously put this country, which is a well established electoral authoritarianism in 2014, among the successful cases of transition, only considering the collapse of 1991 and the transitional phase of 1993.

¹⁹ In the cases they analyze the presence of oil altered the willingness of international actors to promote democracy (see Stoner, Diamond, Girod, McFaul, 2013, section on external influences).