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**TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY: WHAT WE KNOW  
AND WHAT WE SHOULD KNOW**

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# ABSTRACT

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When considering transitions and installations during the last decades of the 20th century and the first decade of XXI century, the variety of processes is so wide that to achieve meaningful theoretical results is very difficult, as shown very explicitly by the existing literature on the topic. In this paper we cope with three key issues in the research on transition. First, what are the theoretical results of the studies on the topic and why there is a ‘retreat from theory’? Second, what is the best approach in analysing transitions: the actor oriented approach or the structure oriented approach? And how is this issue related to the analysis of democratic installation, which has been neglected as an autonomous process and usually not distinguished by the transition. A third issue we address, which has received no strong, direct attention within the literature on transition, is: 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 20th century?

*Keywords:* Democratization; Transition; Legacy; Learning; Political actors; Mechanisms

*This paper develops some of the topics I’ve already discussed in chs. 1 and 4 of my book **Changes for Democracy** (2012).*

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## 1. A RETREAT FROM THEORY?

When we consider the group of scholars who have focused more specifically on Southern European transitions to democracy in the early 1970s and on other changes of regime in the subsequent decades, the picture appears to be: there are questions, but not theoretical results. To start with, one of the most authoritative statements is that 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.' This statement was echoed several years later by McFaul (2002: 244): '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* autocratization will be a long one.'

Consideration of the contributions made in the field reveals a wide range of empirical research. A first, still meaningful overview of democratization literature is the article by Valerie Bunce (2000: 715), who distinguished between theoretical propositions at a high level of generalization and regional propositions. At the higher level of abstraction Bunce singles out five broad propositions, some of which also go back to previous classic analyses. The first regards a high level of economic development as 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. Even if we overlook the studies by Geddes (1999: 140), who 'found little evidence in a set of 163 regime transitions . . . for the claim that pacts increase the likelihood of democracy', and by McFaul (2002: 213, 243), who shows how 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', we can readily agree that these propositions cannot build any theory of democratic transition, either general or regional.

The picture becomes much richer when ‘the state of art’, as delineated by Berg-Schlosser (2007) and Berg-Schlosser and Mitchell (2000), is added.<sup>1</sup> First of all, both Berg-Schlosser and Munck (2007) present and discuss the adopted concepts, the quantitative and qualitative analyses carried out, as well as the main empirical findings in the field. The main findings of the very full account of democratization provided by Berg-Schlosser are as follows: research concerning social classes as ‘prime agents’ of democratization is inconclusive; the analysis of consolidation should be substituted by an analysis of stability for more focused and clearly formulated questions; 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; and, above all, there is a lack of a theory of democratization.<sup>2</sup> On international factors, specifically, they became a core feature of other analyses of transitions, especially Eastern European transitions, through authors such as Whitehead (1996), who points to the three mechanisms of ‘contagion’, ‘control’, and ‘consent’, or 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 on 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).

Several other subsequent contributions basically confirm the key point I wish to make here. Thus, for example, Whitehead (2002) establishes the background for an analysis of democratization as a long-term, non-linear, open-ended process, but by setting up an original ‘interpretivist’ approach in which he also states that ‘it avoids spurious rigour and untenable claims of causal necessity’ (Whitehead 2002: 34), he displays scepticism about the possible merits of such a theory.<sup>3</sup> O’Donnell et al. (1986) seem to have been aware of this since the beginning, as already said above, and McFaul (2002) echoed them by developing a contrasting hypothesis to the one on pacts. Linz and Stepan (1996) demonstrate a similar awareness.

I might add here that the analyses proposed by these and other authors who have worked on several cases in Southern Europe and Latin America focus in particular on the following: the main characteristics of the previous regime; the important role performed by ‘pacts’ or elite agreement on

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> For an analysis of the sensitive definition of democracy discussed by Whitehead (2002: Ch. 1) see Morlino (2012, ch. 3).

the institutions to build (see also above); the ‘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.

With reference to democratization, Pridham (2000: esp. Chapter 1) effectively 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.

Apparently, Huntington (1991: 30) follows a different path by setting a temporally and spatially defined explanatory goal (‘explain why, how and with what consequences a group of roughly contemporaneous transitions to democracy occurred in the 1970s and the 1980s’) for transitions to democracy only. In his work, which can be paralleled to the quantitative analysis in terms of the search for explanation if not for theory, he explicitly mentions five changes as the main causes of transitions in about 30 countries in those decades: the legitimacy problems of previous authoritarian regimes, closely connected to poor domestic performance; global economic growth during the 1960s; basic changes in the doctrine and activity of the Catholic Church; the new policies of external actors (the EU, the USA, and the breakdown of the USSR); and ‘snowballing’ or demonstration effects (Huntington 1991: 45–6). That is, within a multi-causal explanation,<sup>4</sup> a few cultural, economic, and international aspects are considered the key factors and there is no theory built on the results.

When a systematic explanation of Southern European and Latin American cases is attempted (see Morlino 2003), 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

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<sup>4</sup> This is characterized by the fact that the combination of causes varies from country to country (Huntington 1991: 38).

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 parts 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.

A rational choice approach has also been applied (e.g. Przeworski 1986; Colomer 1995) to transition, especially to pacted transitions or transition 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, 2000) should be emphasized, not only for the theoretical approach he applies, but also because, 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. He referred in particular to Brazil and Chile, but also tested his proposal on other cases such as the dissolution of the USSR and the transition to democracy in Poland and other Eastern European countries. Although limited to the phenomenon of transition only, and in this case to a specific kind of transition: that by pact or agreement, the suggested theoretical perspective is worthy of consideration.

It should also be added that Spain is a case that has attracted considerable attention from a number of scholars who have developed other theoretical proposals on the basis of just that case.

Share (1987), Fishman (1990), and Gunther (see especially Gunther et al. 2004) are just some of the authors who have focused on Spain in particular. Moreover, some of the theoretical frameworks or propositions formulated for Spain have also influenced the analysis of Latin American and even Eastern European cases investigated by other authors, including Colomer (2000). The recurring references to pacts, the moderation of elites, the resurrection of civil society, the salience of memory of the past, and even some of the regional propositions mentioned by Bunce emerge from the closer attention paid to Spain. But this is really a country-specific analysis that cannot be extended far beyond that case, as a cursory overview of other, different situations in the same and other areas would immediately suggest.

In addition to theoretical frameworks, able to cover more than one area and time or applicable to country-specific mechanisms, there has been a sort of intermediate set of proposals involving the development of models or patterns of transition for a definite, usually small, number of cases. Over the years Stepan (1986), Karl and Schmitter (1991), Higley and Gunther (1992), Munck and Skalnik Leff (1997), and Berins Collier (1999) 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, and the strategies they pursued, either accommodating or conflictive.

Thus, 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 most 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. On the whole, despite a number of attempts, the 'impossibility' of a general or regional theory for dealing with the transition to democracy or to some other regime is confirmed.

It seems, then, that a theory of regime change or democratization, even one that is temporally bound, will not suffice if we really want to analyse and explain the cases on which we are working. When focusing more specifically on the theoretical choices made by a large number of authors, a retreat from theory or the fear of developing a theory seems the dominant mood. This is not only a retreat from orthodox, predictive kinds of theories, reminiscent of the 1960s (e.g. Kaplan [1964](#)), but also from explanatory, comparative theory, and the actual explanation comes with a reconstruction of every case as a whole with its uniqueness. Within this choice, of course, there are various more specific solutions and positions, from utter scepticism about the possibility or even the desirability of theory, to a more self-conscious choice of a theoretical framework by a few distinguished senior scholars in the field, so as to reconstruct patterns that encompass one or a very few cases, through to proposals of country-specific models. Overall, this retreat from theory appears to stem from two different factors, which ultimately move in the same direction.

The first is the result of a conscious reflection on the failure of general functionalist theories, systems analysis, formal rational choice and other general theories, which were in ‘fashion’ in the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s, but, when submitted to empirical tests, 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.<sup>5</sup> This has led to an evident search for different, maybe less ambitious, but more empirically solid, theoretical choices and the consequent results. The consciousness of this failure and the new direction 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 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 factor derives from an 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 (1970–2010) during which several profound social and economic changes have taken place internationally.<sup>6</sup> 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

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<sup>5</sup> For an additional analysis of this matter, see Morlino ([2000](#)).

<sup>6</sup> 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 capitalist economy and different markets, and the reshaping of the middle classes.

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.

## 2. WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENTS?

If the analysis above is correct, are no theoretical advances possible? How long will the ‘long search for a general theory of democratization’, mentioned by McFaul (2002: 244), last? To begin with, the search for a general theory of democratization can indeed effectively be seen as the search for the ‘philosopher’s stone’. This is the case because within the broad phenomenon of democratization there are several more definite phenomena to be singled out. Minimally, they include: *transition to democracy and democratic installation, democratic consolidation and crisis, and democratic qualities’ deepening or worsening*.<sup>7</sup> That is, there are at least three more precise, complex phenomena (transition to and installation of a democracy, consolidation, and deepening), and their contrary (transition from democracy to authoritarianism or other regime, crisis, and worsening), each one requiring its own empirical analysis with different possible theoretical results. Thus, transition to democracy requires a different analysis than consolidation, as in this second macro-phenomenon the range of variation is unavoidably smaller because of the already existing institutional constraints; research into qualities’ deepening or worsening, where the implementation of democratic values—yet another aspect—is on the spot entails a different analysis vis-à-vis transition and consolidation. This enables us to better understand why the authors working on democratic transitions were more sceptical about the possibility for theory development than those studying consolidation, even when the same areas and the same or similar spans of time are considered. The key consequence of these considerations is that the different and more specific phenomena requiring analysis may have different theoretical goals. Such theoretical pluralism emerges simultaneously from the literature and from direct research experience.<sup>8</sup> Although the problem of how to achieve theoretical advances may still be considered unsolved, at least it becomes more empirically accessible.

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<sup>7</sup> The literal opposite of ‘deepening’ is ‘shallowness’, or a similar word. But when transforming this expression into a meaningful empirical concept it becomes unacceptably slippery and murky. For this reason I prefer ‘worsening’ instead.

<sup>8</sup> This immediately suggests how other theoretical questions are also wrongly addressed. See, for example, the question of the role of actors or structure. The empirical replies are different if we analyse the transition to democracy or the consolidation.

The problem was addressed in a different way by rational choice scholars, who considered theoretical achievements as a priority and solved it by focusing on ‘explanatory mechanisms’. Elster (1989: esp. 9–10), in particular, 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’. In addition to rational choice analyses of transitions only (see esp. Colomer 2000, but also Przeworski 1986) and other analyses focusing on Spain (see Colomer 1995), 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 allow 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.

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. That is, a sort of determinism comes with the term and this is unacceptable in our topic for everything 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 first, theoretical necessary 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.

To be more precise, at the core of our theoretical 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, is the best theoretical achievement we can actually obtain.

Moreover, such a starting point helps to clarify how the oft-proposed distinction between 'structure' driven and 'process' driven explanations (e.g. Kitschelt 1992), which are usually focused 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

On the whole, these considerations suggest that advances in theory are indeed necessary. But to achieve such results, first, the whole, too-broad topic of democratization has to be broken down into more palatable, albeit still thorny, phenomena or processes. Those processes include at least: transition towards democracy, consolidation or crisis, and democratic qualities' deepening or worsening. Second, in connection with the reality that is analysed and the data we are actually able to detect and collect we have to be ready to accept different theoretical achievements. Thus, within the macro-processes mentioned above, we can come out with key, salient, and recurring more circumscribed sub-processes, with simpler theoretical frameworks, with recurrent patterns or other theoretical results when the former are not achieved just because that comes out as an impossible task.

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<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> On this issue, O'Donnell (1996) sees this flaw in the notion of democratic consolidation itself.

### **3. IS AN ADDITIONAL FOCUS ON INSTALLATION NECESSARY OR HELPFUL?**

Even when considering transitions and installations only during the last decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century, the variety of processes is so wide that the strategy of singling out relevant factors is the only appropriate one, and an attempt to establish general patterns of transitions and installation in connection with definite explanatory factors is bound to fail, if we also aim at avoiding platitudes. This can be a key consideration regarding the entire debate on transitions to democracy. In fact, it implies, first of all, that the issue about process or actor-driven change or structure-driven change is misleading (see Kitschelt 1992). The simple point is that as we try to analyse transitions empirically, the best way of doing it is to focus on the actors, but when we switch 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, is confirmed as a predominant aspect (see also Morlino and Magen 2008). Second, such a variety of cases also accounts for the attention often paid to transition rather than to installation. In fact, especially in Latin American cases that received the attention of O'Donnell and others (e.g. O'Donnell et al. 1986), 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 the scholars to single out more clearly the process of installation.

The installation of democracy refers to a different, alternative or possibly subsequent process with respect to liberalization. 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.

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, especially in the areas considered here (see above). Empirical observation of the different and numerous transitions towards, and installation of, democracies in Southern and Eastern Europe and Latin America, about thirty cases in all, suggest that there are no models or patterns of transition and installation. 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, and indeed is related to it. 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 case, to install a democracy. 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 [1980], and which lie at the heart of the democratic compromise (see also Di Palma 1978). 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 which political forces are more or less present and organized when the transition towards and then 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 and consolidation of democracy this last eventuality is the most favourable.

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 transition phase, 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.

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.

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:
    - External
    - Internal to power
    - Internal to power + internal to opposition
    - Opposition

- External + 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
- 

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.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See also Morlino (2012, ch. 1, first section).

#### 4. TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY: IS THERE A KEY MECHANISM?

As known, in the three Southern European countries the transition was the result of the ‘natural’ exhaustion of long-term established authoritarian regimes (Spain and Portugal) or of an unconsolidated military regime (Greece) in the face of new problems and the transformation of societies in that part of Europe (see Morlino [1998](#)). In Latin America the end of military regimes came about due to economic failure or even to economic success, but with unacceptable, unbearable costs—if protracted—in terms of suppression. In Eastern Europe the end of the communist regimes happened because of economic bankruptcy and the end of hegemony in the region of the USSR.

There is a final, very important question we should address, although it has received no strong, direct attention within the literature on transition: 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) is 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, does not grasp the key, domestic mechanism the question was referring to. Moreover, such a hypothesis has never been—and very likely cannot be—precisely supported by accurate empirical analyses: it is rather an interesting persuasive hypothesis bound to remain as such that complements other more relevant aspects.

Thus, 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 we can draw from a reflection on the existing literature and our own research. During the last decades, we could see the presence of an effective *learning process* at the elite and mass levels that has been gradually spreading out because of 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.<sup>12</sup> 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 suppression and sufferance of 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’,

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<sup>12</sup> 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).

resulting in a free people not bound to suppression, and 'demo-power', resulting in relatively more self-assertive people, point to 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 each other with possible different results where who learns what is largely influenced by chance.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> 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.

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