Should Transitologists Be Grounded?

Valerie Bunce

The collapse of state socialism in eastern Europe[1] has led to a proliferation of studies analyzing aspects of democratization throughout the region. Central to many of these studies (particularly those by nonspecialists) is an assumption that postcommunism is but a variation on a larger theme, that is, recent transitions from authoritarian to democratic rule.

In a recent issue of *Slavic Review*, Philippe C. Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl provide a spirited defense of this assumption by arguing that democratization in eastern Europe can and should be compared with democratization in southern Europe and Latin America.[2] Their case rests on three points. First, they resurrect the old debate about comparative analysis versus area studies and argue in support of the former and against the latter. This is relevant to the question at hand, in their view, because: 1) many of the objections to comparing democratization in the east with democratization in the south are made on traditional area studies grounds; and 2) transitology, as a branch of comparative politics, features all the methodological advantages of comparative inquiry. They then turn to the "difference debate." Here, they argue that, while there are some differences between south and east, the differences do not by any means rule out a comparison among countries in Latin America, southern Europe and eastern Europe. Diversity is welcome, they contend, especially when, as with these cases, it involves variation around a common and unifying theme, that is, recent transitions from authoritarian rule. Finally, Schmitter and Karl argue that there is much to be learned from comparing democratization in Latin America, southern and eastern Europe. Such comparisons, they contend, help us define more clearly what is similar and

This commentary is based upon a larger study investigating methodological issues in the comparative study of democratization. I would like to thank the National Endowment for the Humanities for support of this project. I would also like to thank Bela Greskovits for his comments on this paper.

1. In this commentary, the term "eastern Europe" will be used to refer to all the postcommunist countries that during the cold-war era made up the Soviet Union and eastern Europe.

2. "The Conceptual Travels of Transitologists and Consolidologists: How Far to the East Should They Attempt to Go?" *Slavic Review* 53, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 173–85. Their article is a response to criticisms not just by specialists in eastern Europe, but also by specialists in southern Europe and Latin America. However, this commentary will focus primarily on eastern Europe.

what is different in recent transitions to democracy, sensitize us to new factors and new relationships, and allow us to test a wide range of hypotheses. As I shall argue below, their first claim is wrongheaded and irrelevant to the issue at hand; the second is debatable; and the third, while valid in some respects, nevertheless misrepresents both the costs and the benefits of adding eastern Europe to comparative studies of democratization.

Is the debate about the validity of comparing democratization, east and south, really a debate between area specialists and comparativists... I think not, since those who question such comparisons do *not* do so on grounds of traditional area studies but rather on grounds familiar to any comparativist.

Is the debate about the validity of comparing democratization, east and south, really a debate between area specialists and comparativists as Schmitter and Karl contend? I think not, since those who question such comparisons do *not* do so on grounds of traditional area studies but rather on grounds familiar to any comparativist.[3] What is primarily at issue is comparability. For example, when Sally Terry catalogues the many differences between transitions to democracy in the south versus exits from state socialism in the east, she is *not* adopting what Schmitter and Karl have termed an area studies perspective. Instead, she is engaging *the* central question of comparative analysis. Are we comparing apples with apples, apples with oranges (which are at least varieties of fruit) or apples with, say, kangaroos? What Terry is arguing is that the many differences between eastern and southern transitions suggest that com-

3. This, at least, is how I read the literature questioning the validity of comparing east and south. See, for example, M. Steven Fish, *Democracy From Scratch: Opposition and Regime in the New Russian Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); David Bartlett and Wendy Hunter, "Comparing Transitions from Authoritarian Rule in Latin America and Eastern Europe: What Have We Learned and Where Are We Going?" paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, 2–5 September 1993, Washington, DC; Piotr Sztompka, "Dilemmas of the Great Transition," *Sisyphus* 2 (1992): 9–27; Sarah Meiklejohn Terry, "Thinking About Post-Communist Transitions: How Different Are They?" *Slavic Review* 52, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 333–37; Grzegorz Ekiert, "Democratization Processes in East Central Europe: A Theoretical Reconsideration," *British Journal of Political Science* 21 (July 1991): 285–313; David Ost, "Shaping a New Politics in Poland: Interests and Politics in Post-Communist Eastern Europe," Program on Central and Eastern Europe Working Paper Series no. 8, Minde de Gunzburg Center, Harvard University, 1993; David Ost, "Labor and Societal Transition," *Problems of Communism* 41, no. 3 (May-June 1992): 22–24; Ken Jowitt, "The New World Disorder," *Journal of Democracy* 2, no. 2 (Winter 1991): 11–20; Valerie Bunce and Maria Csanadi, "Uncertainty and the Transition: Post-Communism in Hungary," *East European Politics and Societies* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 240–75; Valerie Bunce and Maria Csanadi, "Uncertainty and the Transition: Post-Communism in Hungary," *East European Politics and Societies* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 240–275; Valerie Bunce, "Can We Compare Democratization in the East Versus the South?" *Journal of Democracy*, forthcoming.

parisons between the two involve at best apples and oranges (which would place important limits on comparison), and, at worst, apples and kangeroos (which would call the entire enterprise of comparison into question). Thus, Schmitter and Karl (and other transitologists) have a burden of proof. They cannot justify their comparisons of east and south by simply stating that these cases meet "certain definitional requirements" (178) or by arguing that we should compare first and worry about comparability second.[4]

If issues of comparability are a common theme in critiques of transitology, then so are other issues that lie at the heart of comparative inquiry—in particular, problems involving case selection, coding decisions and concept-indicator linkages. For example, in their investigations Schmitter and Karl include—for unspecified reasons—some postcommunist cases and exclude others. This is a problem. As every social scientist knows, sample selection determines which hypotheses can be tested and the kinds (as well as the quality) of the conclusions that can be drawn. To take another issue: on what grounds do Schmitter and Karl distinguish between pacted versus mass mobilization transitions (a distinction crucial to their investigations), given the considerable blurring between the two in the eastern European experience?[5] Finally, if the communists—now ex-communists—continue to occupy important posts in eastern Europe and if the media in most of these countries is still subject to undue control by the government in office, then is it accurate to argue, as Schmitter and Karl do, that these regimes have moved from the transition period to a period of democratic consolidation?[6]

All of this suggests, Schmitter and Karl to the contrary, that the debate about transitology is in fact a debate among comparativists about comparative methodology. To label critics area specialists, then, is to misrepresent the concerns that have been voiced about comparative studies of democratization, east and south. It is also, perhaps not accidentally, to skirt responsibility for answering some tough questions.

More generally, one can observe that it is a familiar rhetorical technique to reduce the issue at hand to a choice between positive and

4. This is the thrust of their discussion of sample selection in "Modes of Transition in Latin America, Southern and Eastern Europe," *International Social Science Journal* 128 (May 1991): 269–84.

5. This problem also emerges in some of the Latin American cases, where pacts were a consequence of mass mobilization. My thanks to Cynthia McLintock, Bela Greskovits and Hector Schamis for pointing this out.

6. This is not to argue that state socialism is still fully intact. Rather it is to argue that what we have seen in eastern Europe since 1989 is the end of communist party hegemony. Whether that is equal to what has been understood in theory and practice as a transition to democracy is, however, quite another question. See, for example, Lilia Shevtsova, "Postkommunisticheskaia Rossiia: Muki i lobyshkoi transformatsii," unpublished ms., Institute for International Economics and Politics, Moscow, September 1993; and Gail Kligman and Katherine Verdery, "Romania after Ceausescu: Post-Communist Communism?" *Eastern Europe in Revolution*, ed. Ivo Banac (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

negative stereotypes. This is precisely what Schmitter and Karl do by juxtaposing comparative analysis to its "other," that is, area studies. In their rendition, comparativists emerge as "the good gals." They know what constitutes important questions and the data necessary to answer them, they strike the right balance between theory and empirics, and they are in the mainstream of their social science disciplines. Because transitology is a branch of comparative politics, moreover, it is innocent by association, that is, it features all of the positive traits of comparative study. By contrast, those who object to transitology are not comparativists—by definition. Instead, they are area scholars. This is a category which combines a number of undesirable characteristics. In their view, for example, area specialists take "refuge in 'empirie'"(184); they are allergic to theory; they only know one case and presume it to be unique;[7] they are isolated from their disciplines and "clannish" in their behavior (177, note 6);[8] and they automatically privilege explanations that are "particularistic," "cultural" and "ideational" over explanations that are generic and structural.

Thus, one emerges from Schmitter and Karl's account with a sense that one can be no more "for" area studies, "against" comparative and, thus, "against" transitology than be "for," say, crime, polio and war, or "against" fatherhood and apple pie. In drawing a sharp and value-laden contrast between area studies and comparative analysis, they have tried to reduce the question at hand to a valence issue. However, it is not a valence issue. Some comparative studies are good and some are bad. Similarly, work by area specialists can be good or bad. The *quality* of the specific study in question, then, and not the genus to which it belongs, is what matters.

It is also important to recognize that the distinction between comparative and area studies, especially as drawn in sharp relief by Schmitter and Karl, is to a certain extent a false dichotomy. In practice, comparativists and area specialists often work hand in hand. For example, comparative studies can only be as good as their data bases and area specialists (by most definitions) are the ones that provide much of the

7. Schmitter and Karl seem to have misunderstood what their critics mean when they claim that state socialism and "post-state socialism" are unique. The argument is *not* that each eastern European country is unique or that these unique characteristics are derived from, say, distinct national cultures. Rather the argument is a *structural* one. The focus is on the distinctive political, economic and social characteristics that all of these countries share as a consequence of state socialism.

8. The use of the term "clan" is reminiscent of the linguistic games the western imperial powers played when they decided in the nineteenth century to draw a clear line between the "civilized" west—which had nations—and backward Africa—which no longer had nations, but, instead, had tribes, clans and the like (see Philip D. Curtin, *The Image of Africa* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964]). Similar linguistic games—which allocate power, modernity and responsibility—characterize many of the recent western analyses of the former Yugoslavia and, more generally, the Balkans (see Maria Todorova, "The Balkans: From Discovery to Invention," *Slavic Review* 53 [Summer 1994]: 453–82).

data for comparative work (even for Schmitter and Karl).[9] In addition, any list of the most influential theories in the social sciences reveals that a good number of them were authored by area specialists and were based for the most part on extended field work in their particular countries, if not counties of expertise.[10] Here, I am thinking, for instance, of work by Benedict Anderson, James Scott and Clifford Geertz, as well as by Guillermo O'Donnell, Robert Putnam and Philippe Schmitter.[11] Finally, it is by now well established that among the best studies in political science and sociology are those that combine comparative methodology with area studies expertise. Indeed, this is the strength of the recent volumes on transitions from authoritarian rule, edited by Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe Schmitter and Laurence Whitehead.[12]

A final concern I have with framing the debate as one between area studies and comparative analysis is the tone adopted by Schmitter and Karl. What seems to be implied in their defense of comparative analysis in general and transitology in particular, as well as their attack on "North American specialists" in eastern Europe, is that eastern European studies is a social science backwater (see 177). That is why, in

9. This does not guarantee, however, that generalists will render an accurate reading of the data. For example, James Fearon's recent formal analysis explaining the outbreak of war in Croatia rests entirely upon a particular reading of the political beliefs of the Serbian minority in Croatia. This is a problem on two grounds: first, such beliefs are extremely hard to decipher in the absence of survey data; second, his rendition of these beliefs rests entirely on a minimal and quite biased sampling of journalistic (not scholarly) accounts of these beliefs. See his "Ethnic War as a Commitment Problem," presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, 2–5 September 1994, New York. Moreover, Schmitter and Karl regularly miscode Bulgaria in their investigations. See, for example, "Modes of Transition"; and "What Kinds of Democracy are Emerging in Southern and Eastern Europe, South and Central America?" (unpublished ms). Finally, by my calculation (which takes the former Soviet Union into account and recent developments in Bulgaria, Hungary and Poland, as well as measures of influence which are less obvious than formal membership in a governing coalition), the ex-communists emerge as a far more dominant political force in eastern Europe than Schmitter and Karl seem to recognize (see "The Conceptual Travels").

10. My thanks to Michael Kennedy for making this point in another context.

11. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991); James Scott, *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance in Southeast Asia* (London: Frank Cass, 1986); Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Guillermo O'Donnell, *Modernization and Bureaucratic Authoritarianism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973); Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Philippe C. Schmitter, "Still the Century of Corporatism?" *The Review of Politics* 36 (January 1974).

12. See Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter and Laurence Whitehead, eds., *Transitions From Authoritarian Rule: Southern Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); *idem., Transitions From Authoritarian Rule: Latin America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); *idem., Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Comparative Perspectives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, eds., *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

their view, specialists in the region object to transitology and, just as importantly, why Schmitter and Karl feel it necessary to take on the burden of propagating the comparative message to the unconverted readers of *Slavic Review*. Their arrogance in this regard parallels the attitudes some western economists have taken when holding forth on the transition to capitalism in eastern Europe. Just as they have advocated "designer capitalism,"[13] so Schmitter and Karl, and other transitologists, seem to be advocating "designer democracy"—if not "designer social science."[14] What Schmitter and Karl do not seem to know is that the wall separating eastern European studies from comparative politics came down long before the collapse of the wall separating eastern from western Europe[15]—and, thus, considerably before the arrival of "democracy," let alone transitology and consolidology, to the region.[16] Schmitter and Karl are unaware of this because they are new

13. David Stark, "A Sociologist's Perspective: Can Designer Capitalism Work in Central and Eastern Europe?" *Transition: The Newsletter about Reforming Economies* 3 (May 1992): 1–4.

14. Is this response to Schmitter and Karl just a matter of turf defense? There is an element of truth to their implied point that some eastern European area specialists are quite resentful of the recent reduced-entry costs to claiming expertise in eastern European studies. These feelings sometimes surface, for example, in discussions behind closed doors with rakija on the table. Just as obscurity had its costs, it appears, so does notoriety. However, by "designer social science" I mean something quite different and, I think, less contentious. First, empirical grounding is a necessary condition for conducting sound research and for offering sound advice. Second, social science is not so developed that it can predict what will happen in the future, let alone dictate what should happen. Third, postcommunist transitions are without historical precedent yet social science theories are based in large measure on historical precedents. This, plus their multiple and interactive character, suggests that there are clear limits on the ability of social scientists to speak confidently about these transitions. Finally, there is a certain irony in the notion that, having rejected scientific socialism and thus the orchestration of social, political and economic developments "from above," the new regimes in the region are now being told by some from the west that there is "scientific capitalism" and "scientific democracy," and that they can be imposed "from above." This is despite the purported virtues of regulation through the hidden hand in liberal orders. Humility, in short, and not arrogance should be the order of the day.

15. It is interesting to note in this regard that, prior to 1989, comparative analyses were more common in the eastern European field than in, say, Latin American studies. This is because of the homogenizing effects of state socialism and, thus, the extent to which eastern Europe—far more than Latin America—provided a natural laboratory for comparative study.

16. This was less true for Soviet studies, where single-case analysis was more the norm, where comparative theories were not widely employed and where the assumption of studying a unique case was more widespread. This seems to have reflected the confluence of several factors: the sheer size and thus complexity of the former Soviet Union (which, after all, occupied nearly one fifth of the world's land mass); the difficulties of procuring data; the absence of a strong social science tradition within the Soviet Union (in contrast to, say, Poland, Hungary and the former Yugoslavia); and the academic politics of studying a super power (which led American studies in the same direction). At the same time, some Soviet specialists identified with the country they studied and thereby dismissed as irrelevant to their research all those little colonies to the west of the Soviet Union. However, these generalizations are less relevant

to this field. Moreover, their approach to democratization—which concentrates on elites and on the liberalized present and ignores other players, processes and the socialist past—automatically excludes from their purview most of the literature in eastern European studies. All of this testifies, more generally (if we may turn a common observation on its head), to the long and unfortunate isolation of many comparativists from the rich research tradition of eastern European studies.[17] Thus, by preaching the comparative message to eastern European specialists, Schmitter and Karl appear to be generals fighting the last war. Is it accidental, one might ask, that the academic battle they are waging happens to take place in a bipolar world?

Much more relevant to the question of democratization, east and south, is Schmitter and Karl's response to the "difference" debate. Here, they do an excellent job of reviewing many of the differences between democratization in eastern Europe versus southern Europe and Latin America. They conclude that these differences do not rule out the incorporation of eastern Europe into comparative studies of recent democratization because: 1) the temporal clustering of these cases argues for cross-regional processes at work, which, in turn, suggest some commonalities across these regions; 2) comparative study benefits from variance; 3) the differences between east and south have been exaggerated (as have the similarities among the southern cases) and represent, in fact, variations on a common process of transition and consolidation; and, therefore 4) comparison among these countries is valid and valuable.

I have several responses to the first point. Let us accept for the moment the assumption that democratizations in the south and east occupy roughly the same temporal space and that this speaks to the presence of similar dynamics of change. If this is so, then why should we employ approaches to the analysis of democratization (such as those offered by O'Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead, as well as by Schmitter and Karl) that *ignore* the very explanatory factors that would seem to follow logically from these assumptions? Here, I refer to both international and economic variables that would appear to operate in virtually all these cases—for example, the development from the early

---

to contemporary scholarship on Russia and the successor states. Comparative studies, expressed either as comparison of cases or utilization of comparative theory in single-case analysis, are now becoming the norm in post-Soviet studies.

17. This isolation was expressed in many ways—some of which were imperial. Witness, for example, the pervasive practice during the cold-war period of western European specialists using the term "Europe" in the titles of their books, articles, courses and even institutes, when the focus in virtually every case was only on the western half of Europe. To take another example: it has been common practice for courses surveying comparative politics to be not just Euro-centric (which is enough of a problem) but also western Euro-centric. This reflected the widespread assumptions within the discipline of political science that: 1) the only Europe that counted was western Europe and 2) western Europeanists were more scientific and more comparative in their analyses than their counterparts in other area studies.

1970s onward of international norms supporting human rights and democracy,[18] the destabilizing consequences of the global debt crisis and structural adjustment policies,[19] and the political fallout from long-term pursuit in the second and third worlds of import substitution policies. What I am suggesting, then, is that there is a contradiction between the rationale offered for comparing democratization, east and south, and the approaches transitologists take when carrying out their studies.

What I am suggesting, then, is that there is a contradiction between the rationale offered for comparing democratization, east and south, and the approaches transitologists take when carrying out their studies.

Second, did these transitions actually occur at roughly the same time and thus in roughly the same context? It is true that they are closer in time to each other than, say, democratization after Franco and democratization in Great Britain. However, it is also true that a few years can make a big difference in the causes and context of democratization. Let us take the examples of Spain and Hungary, two countries which share some similarities in the mode of transition. The transition in Spain occurred in a stable, bipolar international environment and Spain reaped enormous benefits from this (as well as its geographical location). In particular, the new regime had massive infusions of international economic aid, which allowed Spain to delay by ten years painful economic reforms. Moreover, Spain was assured of eventual entry into the European Community and NATO; the only question was whether Spanish political leaders and Spanish publics would support such actions. By contrast, Hungary has received far less international economic support and has had to deal immediately with destabilizing economic reforms. In addition, the end of the cold war, the Warsaw Pact and Comecon have created for Hungary (and its neighbors) a very uncertain international environment. Solutions to this problem, moreover, are slow in coming, given the many difficulties involved today in expanding membership of NATO and the European Union to include Hungary and other members of the former socialist world. What I am suggesting, then, is that the decade or so separating these two transitions made a significant difference in their international contexts. These differences, moreover, had direct domestic repercussions, creating very different processes of democratization in Spain and Hungary.

18. See Dan Thomas, "Norms, Politics and Human Rights: The Helsinki Process and the Decline of Communism in Eastern Europe," Ph.D. dissertation in progress, Cornell University.

19. For an insightful analysis of how international economic pressures prefigured the outbreak of war in the former Yugoslavia, see Susan L. Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution after the Cold War* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1995).

Schmitter and Karl's second point is more compelling. They are quite right in arguing that variety is the spice of comparative inquiry. Without variation, we cannot develop robust concepts, identify key explanatory factors or construct good explanations. However, there is a catch. Meaningful comparative study requires that differences be joined with similarities; otherwise, too much is in motion to trace relationships and to draw meaningful conclusions. Moreover, we can no longer assume in such circumstances that what we are analyzing in one context is the same as what we are analyzing in another. The key question, then, is whether the differences constitute variations on a common process—that is, transitions from dictatorship to democracy—or altogether different processes—that is, democratization versus what could be termed postcommunism. Schmitter and Karl take the first position and their critics the second.

It is not easy to reach a decision on this matter. Social science lacks the sophistication needed to distinguish between differences in degree and differences in kind. One analyst's democratization is another's postcommunism—and a third might question whether postcommunism is so "post." However, what can be concluded is that the differences between postcommunism and the transitions in the south are *far* more substantial than Schmitter and Karl's discussion seems to imply. Let me highlight just the most important of them.

However, what can be concluded is that the differences between postcommunism and the transitions in the south are *far* more substantial than Schmitter and Karl's discussion seems to imply.

First is the nature of authoritarian rule. What distinguished state socialism from bureaucratic authoritarianism and other forms of dictatorship in Latin America and southern Europe were its social structure, its ideology and ideological spectrum, its political economy, its configuration of political and economic elites, its pattern of civil-military relations and its position in the international hierarchy of power and privilege. Thus, state socialism was different along virtually every dimension that economists, sociologists and political scientists recognize as important.[20] If we reach further back in time, we find two more important contrasts: long-established states in southern Europe and Latin America versus ever-changing states in eastern Europe, and a

20. This was even true for "deviant" Yugoslavia. See, for example, Vesna Pušić, "Dictatorships with Democratic Legitimacy: Democracy Versus Nation," *East European Politics and Societies* 8 (Fall 1994): 383–401. Contrary to Schmitter and Karl, the distinctions between state socialism and other forms of dictatorship did not wither away when state socialism "softened" (see, for instance, Maria Csanadi, *From Where to Where? The Party-State and the Transformation* [Budapest: T-Twins and Institute of Economics, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 1995]).

historical tradition of democracy in Latin America and southern Europe versus the absence (save for Czechoslovakia) of any such tradition in the east. Nor can we assume—as is the tendency of many transitologists—that these factors are "ancient history" insofar as democratization is concerned.[21] It is not just that they structure the agenda of transition, the interests and resources of major actors and, thus, the balance of forces supporting and opposing democratization, the transition to capitalism and the like. It is also that the boundary separating the authoritarian past from the liberalized present is a very porous one in eastern Europe.

There are also significant differences in the mode of transition. For instance, there is no equivalent in the southern cases either to the diffusion processes we saw in eastern Europe in 1989 or thus to the role of international factors in ending the Communist Party's political monopoly.[22] It is crucial as well to understand the end of state socialism as a process of national liberation—whether that was a consequence of the end of the Soviet bloc or the end of an internal empire (as with the federal states of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia). In this sense, state, nation and identity were—and are—at the very center of these processes of change in eastern Europe.

Another difference is in the international context of transition. To summarize an earlier point: the eastern European transitions are taking place in an international system which is itself in transition. What needs to be added to this is the very different economic and strategic position in the international system of eastern Europe versus southern Europe and Latin America. At the time of transition, eastern European countries were not full members by any means of the international capitalist economy, and they were not allied in any institutional sense with the west.

The most striking contrast, and the one that bears most directly on the question of democracy, is in the transitional agenda. In southern Europe and Latin America, *the* issue was democratization; that is, a change in political regime.[23] Indeed, the circumscribed character of

21. See, especially, Csanadi, *From Where to Where*. The key article giving rise to the "proto-science" of transitology (aside from earlier works by Machiavelli, according to Schmitter and Karl) emphasized the importance of *historical context* in the process of democratization. See Dankwart Rustow, "Transitions to Democracy," *Comparative Politics* 2 (1970): 337–63. However, transitologists such as Schmitter and Karl have tended to delete the adjective "historical" from this argument and concentrated, as a result, simply on current context.

22. This is not to reduce the events of 1989 to the "Gorbachev effect." Rather it is to argue that the Gorbachev reforms were a necessary but not sufficient condition for the end of state socialism in eastern Europe. For an explanation—before the fact—of both the Gorbachev reforms and the collapse of state socialism in eastern Europe, see Valerie Bunce, "The Empire Strikes Back: The Evolution of the Eastern Bloc From a Soviet Asset to a Soviet Liability," *International Organization* 39 (Winter 1984/1985): 1–46.

23. See, especially, Robert Fishman, "Rethinking State and Regime: Southern Europe's Transition to Democracy," *World Politics* 42 (April 1990): 422–40.

political change in southern Europe and Latin America is one reason why students of comparative democratization could reduce democratic transitions to a process involving interactions among a handful of political elites. By contrast, what is at stake in eastern Europe is nothing less than the creation of the very building blocks of the social order. What is open for negotiation is not just the character of the regime but also the very nature of the state itself,[24] not just citizenship but also identity, not just economic liberalization but also the foundations of a capitalist economy.[25] What is also at stake is not just amendment of the existing class structure but the creation of a new class system; not just a shift in the balance of interests, therefore, but something much more fundamental: the very creation of a range of new interests. Finally, what is involved in the eastern European transitions is not just modification of the state's foreign policies, but also a profound redefinition of the role of the state in the international system.

We can draw two conclusions from this brief summary. First, if we are interested in balancing similarities and differences, and in maintaining at the same time a reasonable number of cases, then we would not engage in comparisons between east and south. Rather, we would compare all or some of the 27 eastern European cases with each other. Second, we must be very cautious when comparing democratization, east and south: at best, such comparisons would produce a limited range of benefits; at worst, we could be placing ourselves in the unenviable and unviable position of sampling simultaneously on the independent and dependent variables.

This leads us to Schmitter and Karl's final set of arguments. What do we gain when we compare democratization, east and south? I agree with them that such comparisons can enrich our understanding of democracy. In particular, they remind us of the sheer diversity of ways young democracies come into being and evolve, and they help us define the essential characteristics of democratization by alerting us to

24. The centrality of state building in postcommunism reflects not just the inextricability of state and regime in state socialism and thus the powerful effects on the state of the end of communist party hegemony, but also two other factors: the presence in the region of so many new or newly liberated states and the necessarily powerful consequences for the state of a transition to capitalism. On the latter point, see Ivo Bicanič, "The Economic Causes of New State Formation during Transition," *East European Politics and Societies* 9 (Winter 1995): 2–21.

25. It is true that economic-liberalization and structural-adjustment policies play an important role in the process of democratization, south as well as east. However, one cannot very easily equate economic reform in Latin America and southern Europe with economic transformation in the east. This is, first, because the issue in the south is amending a capitalist economy already in place, whereas the issue in the east (though Hungary provides a valuable middle case) is construction of a capitalist economy with state socialism—its virtual opposite—serving as the point of departure. There are, moreover, other key economic differences, all of which place unusual economic burdens on eastern Europe—for example, the collapse of the Soviet market, the primitive character of eastern European economies and the difficulties imposed by the process of building new national economies in so many cases.

differences, as well as to similarities, among democratic orders. Such comparisons also reveal a number of factors that were missing from prevailing theories of democratization.[26] All of these benefits flow quite naturally from a comparative project that is rich in cases and rich in diversity. What Schmitter and Karl do not mention, however, is a final advantage to such cross-regional comparisons. They can provide a powerful critique of prevailing understandings of democratization. They may not simply refine the common wisdom, they may overturn it.[27]

What Schmitter and Karl do not mention, however, is a final advantage to such cross-regional comparisons. They can provide a powerful critique of prevailing understandings of democratization.

When one looks more closely at transitology from the vantage point of eastern Europe, one is struck, first, by the fact that this is a literature rich in description but relatively poor in testable hypotheses. An example of this is constitutional design—an issue of great importance to many transitologists.[28] How can we test the relative benefits of parliamentary versus presidential systems if most of the systems in eastern Europe are in fact a combination of both, that is, a variation on the French Fifth Republic model? Moreover, how can we evaluate whether constitutional design matters if we have no measure of impact that differentiates among recent cases of democratization and if the purported consequences of constitutional developments could also be judged to be its causes? For instance, is it correct to argue that Hungarian democracy is more secure than Russian democracy because Hungary opted for a parliamentary system and Russia did not, and because the rules of the political game were formalized more clearly and earlier in Hungary than in Russia?[29] Or does it make more sense

26. This is evident, for instance, in some recent reflections on democratization by transitologists (see, for instance, Guillermo O'Donnell, "On the State, Democratization and Some Conceptual Problems [A Latin American View with Glances at Some Post-Communist Countries]," *World Development* 21 [1993]: 1355–69; *idem.*, "Delegative Democracy?" Working Paper No. 172, Helen Kellogg Institute of International Studies, Notre Dame, March 1992; Philippe Schmitter, "Dangers and Dilemmas of Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 5 [April 1994]: 57–74).

27. My thanks to the remarks made by Gail Lapidus, Shari Cohen, Carol Timko, Karen Dawisha, David Ost, Jan Kubik and Georgii Derlugian at the panel, "Shooting Cannons at the Canons" at the Annual Meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, 18 November 1994, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

28. See, for example, Juan Linz, "The Perils of Presidentialism," *Journal of Democracy* 1 (Winter 1990): 51–69; Arend Lijphart, "Democratization and Constitutional Choices in Czecho-Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland, 1989-1991" in *Flying Blind*, ed. Gyorgy Szoboszlai (Budapest: Yearbook of the Hungarian Political Science Association, 1992): 99–113; Alfred Stepan and Cindy Skach, "Constitutional Frameworks and Democratic Consolidation: Parliamentarism versus Presidentialism," *World Politics* 46 (October 1993): 1–22.

29. If the latter factor were so important, then how do we explain, for instance, the developmental trajectories of, say, Bulgaria and Romania (with their early settle-

to argue that the problems surrounding the transition in Russia are far greater than in Hungary and that it is this fact that has produced both different constitutional trajectories and differences as well in the seeming prospects for democratic consolidation?

A second problem is that what is offered in transitions literature is not, in fact, a theory of democratization—a series of "if, then" claims that can be tested—but rather an approach to the analysis of democratization—that is, a statement about what should be analyzed and how. All that this literature gives us is advice: we should look at strategic interactions among elites and treat democratization as a highly contingent process that is fraught with considerable uncertainty. What it does not give us is any explanation of why some authoritarian states democratize and others do not, why the process of democratization varies across cases, or why some democracies take root and others do not.

Since this literature is a series of claims about how we should approach the study of democratization, can we then argue at least that the approach offered is a sound one? Let me suggest one answer to this question by expanding on a point already mentioned: the addition of new variables to the equation. By joining eastern Europe with southern Europe and Latin America, we discover a number of crucial factors that are missing in the recent theories of transitologists—in particular, the interaction between economic and political transformation, the importance of the media in the process of democratization, the powerful influence of international factors, the key role of mass publics in transitions (as well as in consolidation),[30] the centrality of national identity and nationalism in the process of democratization, the importance of the left as well as the right in shaping democratic prospects and, finally, all those thorny issues having to do with the state, its boundaries, its strength and its place within the international order. This is a long list of missing variables, which focuses our attention on this question: at what point can we no longer tack on these factors to the prevailing approach to the study of democratization and should we decide instead, given the desire for parsimony and the considerable implications these additions hold for our very conception of democratization, that a completely different approach to the study of democratic transitions is required?

We can also judge the soundness of the prevailing approach by concentrating on what it includes rather than on what it lacks. Central to the approach of Schmitter, Karl, O'Donnell and their associates is the assertion that elites are central and publics peripheral. Thus, transitions to democracy are understood to be elite affairs and the more

---

ment of constitutional issues) versus Poland and the Czech Republic (given their continuing problems with resolution of the rules of the political game)?

30. See, for example, Daniel V. Friedheim, "Bringing Society Back into Democratic Transition Theory: Pact Making and Regime Collapse," *East European Politics and Societies* 7 (Fall 1993): 482–512; and Sidney Tarrow, "Social Movements and Democratic Development," forthcoming in *The Politics of Democratic Consolidation*, vol. 1, Richard Gunther, Nikiforos Diamandous and Hans-Jurgen Puhle, eds.

elitist, transitologists argue, the better. However, when we add eastern Europe to the equation, we begin to wonder about this emphasis since: 1) publics were important actors in ending communist party hegemony in many of these cases; 2) bargaining among elites is—especially before the fact—a very hard process to trace; 3) it is very difficult—again, especially before the fact—to determine elite interests and elite resources and 4) pacted versus mass mobilization modes of transition do *not* explain patterns of success in democratic consolidation in the postcommunist world. More generally, one has to wonder whether, in focusing so heavily on the machinations of elites, transitologists have not committed the very transgression they have lamented in the work of area scholars: the preference for a particularistic and voluntaristic understanding of social reality over one which is more general and structural.

Just as elites and their interactions are central to the approach developed by Schmitter, Karl and their associates, so are the core concepts of democratic transition, democratic consolidation and, finally, uncertainty. In each of these, once we add eastern Europe to the calculus we find a number of problems. Transition implies change that is circumscribed and directional, in these discussions, either towards or away from democratic governance. The first aspect does not fit the inherently revolutionary nature of postcommunism and the second leads to a misrepresentation of eastern European developments by forcing us: 1) to draw too sharp a distinction between the authoritarian past and the transitional present, 2) to privilege the democratic dimension over all other dimensions of change, 3) to assume that political change is separate from, say, economic and social change and 4) to code any and all major developments as factors necessarily affecting movement to or away from democracy.[31] Consolidation is also a problematic concept. First, it is unclear what "consolidation" means in an empirical sense, aside from a vague notion that "consolidated democracies" are those that, following transition, seem to promise longevity. Is democratic consolidation, then, just a matter of time? How do we factor in capacity to withstand crises? Is it the absence of democratic collapse or the presence of certain features, such as a democratic political culture?[32] Does consolidation entail political stability and, if so, what does this mean? Is it the absence of such factors as significant anti-system protest, the government's loss of its coercive

31. Symptomatic of the pervasiveness of these assumptions has been the tendency of scholars (primarily on the Op-Ed page of *The New York Times*) to pronounce either that Russia has turned the corner on democracy or that democracy is finished in Russia.

32. A survey of longstanding democracies would seem to suggest that: 1) there is great variety in what constitutes a democratic political culture; 2) it is very hard to distinguish between durable beliefs, values and behaviors and more short-term attitudes and the like; 3) some democracies feature by some standards a less than democratically minded public; and 4) the key to democracy might be mass culture but it also might be elite political culture. See, for example, Putnam, *Making Democracy Work*.

monopoly and sharp divisions among citizens and among political leaders, or is it the presence of such factors as relatively durable governing coalitions and widespread public support for the institutions and procedures of democracy? There is a final problem. If democracy is a process, not a result, and if the democratic project can never be completed, then how can we understand the term "consolidation" with its implication of democracy as an end state?

The final member of the conceptual triumvirate in transitions literature is uncertainty. Here, again, we encounter a certain dissonance between concept and reality. On the one hand, transitologists have made a great deal of the uncertainties surrounding democratization. Indeed, this is the foundation for much of the theorizing about transitions from authoritarian rule. On the other hand, we see a clear pattern in the many new democracies that have come into being since the 1970s: an extremely high survival rate. If the democratic enterprise is so fraught with difficulties, as transitologists repeatedly assert,[33] then how do we explain this? It is not a sufficient response to argue either that these new democracies are still in the throes of consolidation or to presume that the durability of new democracies speaks in effect to a global bounty of "heroic princes." Rather the response should be to question whether democracy (today at least) might be easier than many have thought—or, at least, whether the imposition of authoritarian rule might be more difficult than many seemed to have assumed.[34]

All of these examples suggest that the addition of eastern Europe to comparative studies of democratization has one major benefit, aside from those outlined by Schmitter and Karl. It introduces serious questions about the reigning paradigm of democratization. This leads us to the final point of this commentary. If Schmitter and Karl have been in some respects too conservative in estimating the value of comparing east and south (particularly when it involves "*samokritika*"), then they have been in other respects too liberal in their assessment of what can be learned from such comparisons. It is here that we must switch our discussion from the benefits of diversity to its costs.

The striking contrasts between transitions to democracy in the south and postcommunism in the east suggest that certain kinds of comparative exercises are highly suspect. First, there is a danger in presuming fundamental similarities when the similarities posited are in fact superficial and highly misleading. Ethnic diversity is a case in point. To equate Peruvian, Spanish and Portuguese ethnic diversity with that of the former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union (or even contemporary Russia, for that matter) is to skim over a number

33. See, especially, Philippe C. Schmitter, "Dangers and Dilemmas of Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 5 (April 1994): 57–74.

34. See, especially, Guiseppe Di Palma, "Democratic Transitions: Puzzles and Surprises from West to East," *Research on Democracy and Society* 1 (New York: JAI Press, 1993): 27–50; Nancy Bermeo, "Democracy and the Lessons of Dictatorship," *Comparative Politics* 24 (April 1992): 273–91.

of distinctive features of ethno-politics in eastern Europe. Here, I refer, for instance, to the sheer magnitude of diversity in the region and its correlation with religious, political, socio-economic and spatial markers; the powerful historical meanings attached to ethnicity, nation, religion and state; the role played by state socialist regimes in developing national consciousness, as well as national elites, national institutions and proto-states within states; the central place of ethnicity, national identity and national movements in ending the communist experiment; the role of ethnicity in not just the process of nation and state building and democratization, but also in the transition to capitalism; the powerful impact of ethnicity on definitions and practices of citizenship; and the ways in which ethnicity in eastern Europe affects not just domestic politics and economics, but also interstate relations throughout the region. To be succinct: there is a former Yugoslavia, a former Czechoslovakia and a former Soviet Union, and there could be as well in the future a former Russia. There is, however, no "former Peru" or "former Spain."

Another danger is to transplant onto eastern European soil arguments developed in response to the very different conditions existing in Latin America and southern Europe. Take, for instance, the argument developed in the southern context that publics are demobilized during transitions to democracy and that this contributes in positive ways to the democratization process. This argument makes little sense in eastern Europe, if only because of the pronounced role of average citizens as well as intellectuals in many of these transitions. Moreover, an argument can be made for the eastern European case, at least, that mobilized publics may very well be assets, not liabilities in the process of democratization. They may exert needed pressures on elites to adhere to the democratic rules of the game and they may provide the necessary political capital for the transition to capitalism.[35]

This leaves us with a final problem. If such different contexts call into question the transfer of concepts and arguments from south to east, then they most assuredly challenge the validity of using the southern experience to *predict* developments in eastern Europe. For instance, Guillermo O'Donnell, as well as Philippe Schmitter and Terry Karl, have voiced considerable pessimism about the future of democracy in eastern Europe. In particular, they have argued that many of the democracies in the region are incomplete and superficial, that these new democracies will take a long time to consolidate and that there are grounds for expecting at least some to revert back to authoritarian rule.[36] There are ample reasons, of course, to wonder about democ-

35. See Valerie Bunce, "Sequencing Economic and Political Reforms," *East-Central European Economies in Transition* (Washington: Joint Economic Committee, 1994); Bela Greskovits, "Is the East Becoming the South? Where May Threats to Reforms Come From?" paper presented at the XVI World Congress of the International Political Science Association, Berlin, 12–15 August 1994.

36. See Guillermo O'Donnell, "On the State"; Schmitter and Karl, "The Conceptual Travels"; Schmitter, "Dangers and Dilemmas"; Schmitter and Karl, "Modes of Transition".

racy's future in eastern Europe. However, one must ask whether transitologists are engaged in a careful reading of trends in eastern Europe, or whether their pessimistic conclusions are an artifact produced by measuring the east against the southern standard. Does eastern Europe have a problem with democracy or is it simply that eastern Europe is not Latin America or southern Europe?[37]

Thus, my arguments are four: first, the debate over comparisons between east and south cannot be reduced to the old debate between area studies and comparative analysis. Second, Schmitter and Karl are wrong when they portray comparative and area studies as polar opposites. Third, there are substantial differences between the east and the south, and this creates far more problems for comparing the two than Schmitter and Karl recognize. Finally, there are nonetheless some good reasons to engage in such comparisons. The most important reason, however, is not addressed by Schmitter and Karl: the ways in which the addition of eastern Europe to comparative studies of democratization alerts us to fundamental problems in how transitologists have understood and analyzed transitions from authoritarian rule—in the east and, one could argue, in the south as well.

37. To this must be added one more point. A major problem in theories of democracy (of older, as well as of more recent vintage) is that they under-predict the incidence of democratic government. There are in effect too many democracies, whether our theoretical perspective is that of, say, Seymour Martin Lipset; Barrington Moore; Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Stephens and John Stephens; or Guillermo O'Donnell, Phillippe Schmitter and Laurence Whitehead. This suggests that: 1) our theories of democracy may be over-specified, 2) there may be no single path to a democratic order, 3) democratization may be best understood in highly voluntaristic terms and/or 4) democracy may not be as difficult a project as has been commonly assumed.