

UC Berkeley

UC Berkeley Previously Published Works

Title

Democratic Transition

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/09k690f1>

Author

Collier, Ruth Berins

Publication Date

2001

Peer reviewed

Ruth Berins Collier, "Democratic Transition." In Paul Barry Clarke and Joe Foweraker, eds., *Encyclopedia of Democratic Thought*. London: Routledge, 2001.

democratic transition

The current interest in democratic transition and indeed the widespread use of the term stem

from an analytic engagement with what has come to be known as the third wave of democratisation, from the mid-1970s to the opening years of the 1990s (see WAVES OF DEMOCRACY). Democratic transition is seen quite straightforwardly as the movement from a non-democratic regime to the introduction of a democratic regime, with substantial consensus in the literature on defining a democratic regime as a set of institutions (rather than as a type of SOVEREIGNTY, popular sovereignty or rule by the people) and on democratic transitions as the adoption of a set of 'minimum' institutional components, referring to provisions for free and fair ELECTIONS, civil rights and legislative governing authority. As such, a democratic transition is distinct from DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION.

The democratisation literature of the 1960s and 1970s

Prior to the recent 'transitions literature', the prevailing analytic tradition had focused on earlier episodes, particularly on the historical cases of Western Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and on the attempt to introduce democratic regimes as part of the post-Second World War process of decolonisation. Two broad strands can be distinguished: MODERNISATION theory and historical sociological analysis. While the latter was sometimes viewed as inspired by Marxist class analysis and the former as pluralist, both advanced explanations that saw democracy as an outcome of social structure. For analysts like Moore (1966), democracy was an outcome of the balance or weight of different classes (particularly a weak, labour-repressive landed class and a strong bourgeoisie) and hence was rooted in class interest. For modernisation theory, democracy was not an outcome of class interest, but almost precisely the opposite: it was associated with a large middle class, a social group that was unlikely to act as a CLASS but instead formed shifting COALITIONS reflecting multiple interests and affiliations.

Both these analytic strands emphasised the impact of economic change on social structure,

the key causal variable. Agency was primarily implied: actors were read off the structural argument and almost epiphenomenal. Actors were sometimes explicitly analysed in the process-tracing case studies that provided the evidence for the structural arguments, but these were not voluntaristic arguments. The social science goal was to find causal regularities, not contingency.

The transitions literature: phase I

The style of analysis changed quite dramatically in the mid-1980s in response to events in southern Europe and South America. An initial phase emphasised a process-oriented analysis that explored the transition as a specific, delimited step in a sequence that started with splits inside the authoritarian regime and ended with the installation of a new government elected under the rules that defined a democratic 'minimum'. This approach was introduced by scholars who attempted to escape the determinism of structural approaches and who adopted a 'possibilistic' rather than a probabilistic stance.

In the dominant analytic framework, actors were no longer epiphenomenal but central decision-makers, making efficacious, consequential choices. Two kinds of choice models represented somewhat conflicting approaches. Neither was sufficiently elaborated, nor was the tension between them made explicit or resolved. The first emphasised contingency, individual LEADERSHIP, personal qualities and crafting (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986: 4-5; Di Palma 1990; Burton *et al.* 1992). The second sought to characterise the strategic situation that conditioned actor choices. It described strategic games, such as 'coup poker' (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986: 24-5), in which rational courses of action were embedded in the structure of the strategic context. Another departure from the earlier literature was the way actors were defined: no longer by class or social group, but by strategic posture; not by features or interests that would 'cause' them to favour or oppose democracy (with the exception that authoritarian incumbents were seen

as opponents), but by their actual position regarding democracy and whether they were willing to compromise to achieve or resist it. The framework thus posited a four-player transition game of incumbents and opponents with standpatters and compromisers among each.

The analysis based on these choice models had certain features. First, it defined 'transition' as a delimited stage and saw authoritarian erosion and democratic consolidation as empirically and conceptually separate, requiring different frameworks of analysis. As such, the dynamics of the antecedent regime were exogenous to the proposed analytical models. Second, the emphasis was less on causal analysis than on the elaboration of a kind of 'natural history' or generalised pattern of transition. Aside from the few cases, among the original set, of authoritarian collapse, the transition was seen as a game of strategic interaction and particularly negotiation between the two compromising groups (among both incumbents and opposition), though two sub-types were often delineated according to their relative weights. Third, the main actors were seen as individual elites who made decisions, not protesting groups or social movements, though it was acknowledged that mass action could affect the relative resources of the 'bargaining' leaders.

Many features of the transition were not problematised, perhaps reflecting the commonalities among the cases in Southern Europe and South America. The shared traits included a certain type of authoritarian regime (fascist or bureaucratic-authoritarian) with anti-labour, demobilisational origins, powerful militaries (indeed most were military regimes), roughly similar social structures (at least compared to subsequent cases) and party infrastructures (even though PARTIES may have been banned). The new cases in East Asia, the Eastern bloc and Africa, however, were quite different.

The transitions literature: phase II

A second phase of the transitions literature began with the task of analysing and account-

ing for these subsequent transitions. The greater empirical variation challenged a more generalising approach, as more varied combinations of actors played a role in the transition process, and social movements and protest became more prominent features (see SOCIAL MOVEMENTS). In addition, the problems of the authoritarian regime seemed more integrally connected with the way the transition unfolded, so that it seemed inappropriate to exogenise antecedent regime dynamics. Paralleling these developments were theoretical revisions that stemmed from further analysis of the original cases in South America and Southern Europe. A more diverse contemporary literature came to include broader perspectives, endogenised the antecedent regime in analytical models, and became more structural and explanatory.

In the shift back toward causal analysis and structural variables, explanations have focused on international and/or domestic factors and socio-economic and/or political factors. Crossing these two dimensions yields four sets of explanatory factors: the global economy, international politics, the domestic economy and class, and antecedent regime. The first defines common causes and is a natural place to look in explaining a wave phenomenon characterised by temporal clustering. Yet few studies have sufficiently elaborated this argument that relates global economic transformations to the democratic wave as the two historic macro-social processes occurring simultaneously at the end of the century. Further research should explore these factors empirically on a broadly comparative, inter-regional basis. International political factors, including external opportunities, imposition and political conditionality, have received attention, as has the change from a bipolar to a unipolar world. Nevertheless, many analyses, even of those cases where external effects would seem to be particularly strong, such as the impact of changing Soviet policy toward the Eastern bloc, see them as final triggers and put greater causal weight on internal processes.

Domestic socioeconomic factors include the level of economic development, economic performance and class. The modernisation

democratic transition

hypothesis linking development to democratisation has been revisited, with some analysts suggesting a threshold effect (Huntington 1991), and others suggesting that wealth affects democratic consolidation but not attempted transitions (Przeworski and Limongi 1997). Conversely, economic stagnation or crises have been seen as disrupting the bargain, relationships or distributive networks that supported authoritarianism. The (in)capacity of regimes to respond to economic crisis, both to overcome it and to distribute its costs in a way that prevents splits, defections and societal opposition, has been seen as having an important impact on the nature of the transition in terms of its timing, the degree of incumbent control, the key actors, the decisional arenas of institutional design and the nature of those new institutions (Haggard and Kaufman 1995) (see ECONOMIC REQUIREMENTS OF DEMOCRACY)

Many of the arguments about economic factors invoke class as a central intervening variable. The association of middle-class growth and demands for democratic regimes has figured prominently in the East Asian literature. In quite a different way, Africanists have emphasised the role of the urban middle classes and the impact of economic crisis on the declining rent-seeking and patronage opportunities of what was once called the organisational bourgeoisie (Widner 1994). The analysis of Rueschemeyer *et al.* (1992) was one of the first to reinsert more classically defined classes into analysis of transitions. Looking at episodes of democratisation drawn from the advanced industrial world, Latin America and the Caribbean, they suggested the leading role of the working class. Collier (1999) also considered the role of the working class in historical and recent transitions in Western Europe and South America. Viewing transitions as outcomes of both political strategies and class-defined interests, she distinguished multiple patterns, most of which are types of multiclass projects, even those historical Northern European cases which have been most commonly identified with working-class demands or agency.

Antecedent regime has become a particu-

larly important causal factor with the advent of additional cases. It has been analysed to account for the particular kinds of problems or crises that may inaugurate a transition, the dynamics among actors or factions within the regime, and the nature and organisation of potential opposition or interlocutory groups. Antecedent regime affects the nature of 'political' society, whether or how it was organised, its resources, and the political opportunity structure afforded for kinds of collective action, from disciplined organised protest to spontaneous demonstrations of rage. Diverse processes of transition have thereby been distinguished in terms of different patterns of authoritarian erosion and different actors with distinct motivations and interests, undertaking different kinds of action for political change (Fish 1995; Linz and Stepan 1996; Bratton and van de Walle 1997; Bunce 1999). In the second phase, then, a less contextualised analysis has been supplemented by historical institutional analyses with more path-dependent models for explaining difference; the analysis of class interest and political economy has been reintroduced; and the literature has begun to incorporate social movement theory into the analysis of transitions.

Finally, the analysis of choice has been expanded in at least two ways. First, analysts have examined the varied arenas of rule making during the transitions, such as interim governments and constitutional assemblies, and have sought to explain the establishment of the innovative round tables and national conferences, which include broad societal forces, in some (but not other) countries in the Eastern bloc and Africa, respectively. Second, institutional and CONSTITUTIONAL DESIGN has received attention as part of the transition. Earlier analysis had usefully pointed to the capacity of the withdrawing military to obtain prerogatives and guarantees against human rights accusations, and the way particular authoritarian leaders (such as Pinochet) could fashion favourable constitutional provisions. Subsequent analyses have gone further in explaining the design of legislatures, executives and electoral laws.

Conclusion

The study of democratic transitions has thus gone from a rejection of earlier structural accounts and a preference for an actor-based model of choice and process to the beginnings of a more complex, multi-faceted literature that moves toward integrating structural, institutional and choice models, as well as explanatory and processual perspectives. Built primarily on case or regional studies, the more recent literature faces the challenges of parsimony and cumulation. A danger of synthesis or broader comparison is simply compiling a laundry list of factors that contribute to democratic transitions. Another is the proliferation of types of transitions and of parallel stories, in which different causal factors account for different transitional processes or outcomes. An increasingly rich literature on democratic transitions is not yet approaching theoretical closure.

Further reading

- Bratton, M. and van de Walle, N. (1997) *Democratic Experiments in Africa*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Bunce, V. (1999) *Subversive Institutions: The Design and the Destruction of Socialism and the State*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Burton, M., Gunther, R. and Higley, J. (1992) 'Introduction: Elite Transformations and Democratic Regimes', in J. Higley and R. Gunther (eds), *Elites and Democratic Consolidation in Latin America and Southern Europe*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Collier, R.B. (1999) *Paths Toward Democracy: The Working Class and Elites in Western Europe and South America*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Dahl, R. (1971) *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Di Palma, G. (1990) *To Craft Democracies*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Fish, S. (1995) *Democracy from Scratch: Opposition and Regime in the New Russian Revolution*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Haggard, S. and Kaufman, R. (1995) *The Political Economy of Democratic Transitions*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Huntington, S. (1991) *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Linz, J. and Stepan, A. (1996) *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Lipset, S.M. (1959) 'Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy', *American Political Science Review* 53(1): 69-105.
- Moore, B. (1966) *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, Boston: Beacon Press.
- O'Donnell, G. and Schmitter, P. (1986) *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Przeworski, A. (1991) *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Przeworski, A. and Limongi, F. (1997) 'Modernisation: Theories and Facts', *World Politics* 7(1): 39-55.
- Rueschemeyer, D. et al. (1992) *Capitalist Development and Democracy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Widner, J. (ed.) (1994) *Economic Change and Political Liberalization in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

RUTH B. COLLIER