Beyond the Transitology—Area Studies Debate

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A combination of area studies and comparative social science approaches leads to rich studies of the transition to democracy.

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Union have left their mark on comparative democratization studies. Academic research on transitions to democracy first became a growth industry after the democratizations in southern Europe in the 1970s and Latin America in the 1980s. The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s induced comparativists who had specialized in the earlier transition processes to turn their attention to Central and Eastern Europe. Excited by the possibilities for testing their theoretical findings, experts on the transitions in Southern Europe and Latin America suddenly became interested in a region that had until then been the near-exclusive domain of Sovietologists and area specialists. Comparativists and transitologists were eager to incorporate the post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe into their models of democratic transition and consolidation. Although Eastern Europe had for centuries been of only marginal interest to Western scholars, it suddenly became one of the more popular research topics. The plethora of new cases of democratization expanded the possibilities for systematic cross-national comparisons.1

As the comparativists Philippe C. Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl noted in 1994:

Indeed, by adding post-communist regimes to their already expanded case base, transitologists and consolidologists might even be able to bring the powerful instrumentation of social statistics to bear on the study of democratization. For the first time, they could manipulate equations where the variables did not outnumber the cases and they could test their tentative con-
The newfound interest in Central and Eastern Europe met some opposition from area specialists and former Sovietologists. Several area specialists, arguing that the processes in Central and Eastern Europe were unique, stressed the cultural, ideological, and national peculiarities of the countries in these regions. According to this view, the post-communist countries were special cases that could not be incorporated into a broad, generalizing comparative perspective. The fundamental difference between the two camps comes from their different scientific approaches. Transitologists usually employ a nomothetic (universal law) approach, in contrast to the idiographic (unique circumstances) approach that characterizes area studies.

As will be argued below, the transitology versus area studies debate misses some important points. Many theorists are unable to explain the differences between the processes of democratization even in a single region, such as Eastern Europe. The typology presented in this article suggests a more productive methodological approach that would be able to demonstrate, among other things, how the dynamics of the democratic revolution in the Philippines differs from the “pacted,” negotiated transitions in Chile. The discussion that follows will be limited to the literature on transitions to democracy. Issues of democratic consolidation are beyond the scope of this study.

**Comparative Studies of Democratic Transition: Transitology**

The collapse of communism in Europe and the Soviet Union dramatically increased the appeal of the region for comparativists, for they saw it as an opportunity to extend their analysis and findings from the study of regime change in southern Europe and Latin America. Somewhat simplified, they set out to explain and, with any luck, guide the transitions from dictatorship to democracy by “applying a universal set of assumptions, concepts, and hypotheses” derived from the study of earlier democratizations. Adherents of the transitology school argued that lessons from the earlier transitions should be used to understand more clearly the process of regime change from communism that began in 1989–90. Thus the Soviet bloc, which for decades had been the exclusive preserve of Sovietology, now suddenly became open to wider comparative analysis.

Although structuralist approaches dominated the discourse on democratization in the 1970s, authors like Rustow and Linz began to emphasize the role of actors. For example, a major argument in the project on the breakdown of democratic regimes is that collapse is not structurally predetermined but depends on the behavior of political elites. Although the project was concerned with transitions from rather than to democracy, it had great influence on later studies of democratization. With the appearance nearly a decade later of O’Donnell and Schmitter’s *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*, the focus of democratization research definitely shifted from the structural to the actor level. Over the next decade, with a few notable exceptions, transitologists focused on political leaders, strategic elites, and the roles they played or should have played in democratic transitions. This more actor-centered perspective saw democratization as a product of strategic interaction, political crafting, and arrangements made by political elites, alternative types of constitutional arrangements, and party systems.

Theorists abandoned their former approaches and now saw democracy as a kind of “superstructure” or as an outcome of particular economic and cultural conditions. For a time, it was commonly assumed that if elites were skillful enough in designing new institutional arrangements, they would be able to overcome all historical legacies. Since certain structural conditions need not be present in a society for democratization to occur, this perspective is more optimistic than the structural approach. Its optimism was clearly manifested in the title of Di Palma’s 1990 book, *To Craft Democracies*. When the *Transitions* project began, successful transitions to democracy had already taken place in southern Europe, and a far-reaching democratization process had begun in Latin America. Consequently, the project’s theoretical findings and conclusions reflected developments in these regions. Nonetheless, some transitologists have attempted to present the results in a more generalized form. They have also attempted to apply the theoretical conclusions to Central and Eastern Europe and other parts of the world. This project became the foundation of the transitology approach. Its advocates apply theoretical frameworks drawn from southern European and Latin American examples to the transitions to democracy in Central and Eastern Europe. Universality is thus one of the starting points for the majority of transitologists. Although they do not deny historical differences and the different non-democratic legacies of post-communist and post-authoritarian countries, they believe that contemporary political and economic conditions and attributes are much more important factors. By focusing on universal factors, such as political craft-
ing, institutional design, and economic policies and conditions, they have been able to include post-communist countries in a broader comparative framework.12

The transitological paradigm is designed to indicate similarities and differences across diverse processes. Methodologically, it comes close to what Theda Skocpol and Margaret Somers term the “parallel demonstration of theory.” This strategy applies a theory to a wide range of cases in time and space (including various sub-groups) to demonstrate its effectiveness for all conceivable outcomes and systems.13 In other words, these theorists expect their paradigms to be able to explain transitions to democracy, failed transitions, and all the variations in between, regardless of geographical location. Russell Bova is one of the firmest advocates of this strategy. Although acknowledging the many differences between the transitions in Central and Eastern Europe and those in southern Europe, he argued for a single set of theoretical tools:

However unique these developments [in Central and Eastern Europe] have been on one level, nevertheless, the transition from communism may be usefully viewed as a subcategory of a more generic phenomenon of transition from authoritarian rule. Students of communist and post-communist regimes can learn a great deal from those cases and from the efforts that have been made to generalize about the transition process and the dilemmas and choices to which it gives rise.14

Other comparativists are more cautious. Geoffrey Pridham, for example, has noted that despite some basic similarities, there are important differences between post-communist and post-authoritarian transitions. The double nature of the more recent transition processes must be taken into account with the importance of the international context.15 Nonetheless, the scientific foundation of the comparative, or transitology, paradigm remains the belief that the generality and universality of theories in social science is more important than the unique features of different countries or regions. Indeed, although the post-communist transitions have some unique features, they can still be incorporated into a broader category of comparative studies of democratization. Transitologists argue that transitology, as a part of comparative politics, has all the methodological and theoretical advantages of comparative politics.

The Uniqueness of the Communist Experience

Area specialists question the comparativist approach to the post-communist transformation. They argue that the transitions from communist rule should be treated as unique cases without precedents, and therefore should not be included in the general discourse of transitions to democracy. Whereas earlier transitions from authoritarian rule were a matter of change from one political system to another, that is, from authoritarianism to democracy, the post-communist societies face double (political and economic) or even triple (including the social dimension) transition processes.16 In some cases this difficult task is complicated by the fact that the very foundation of the political community—the territorial boundaries of the state—is contested.17 Taken together, these factors make post-communist transitions much more problematic than earlier transitions to democracy. This approach has been called the “uniqueness paradigm.”18

Valerie Bunce began as a typical representative of the uniqueness paradigm. In a debate with Schmitter and Karl, Bunce argued that the post-communist context is so distinct that it is extremely dubious to compare the transitions to democracy of former communist countries with previous transitions.19 This does not mean that Bunce opposed comparisons per se. She claimed, however, that they have to be kept within the restrictions determined by culture or history. Thus, Bunce advocated comparisons between post-communist countries, but not between post-communist countries and, for example, Latin America.20 Interestingly, in a later article, Bunce switched her position and noted that the East European experience has been a major test of comparativist theories of both transitions to democracy and consolidation of democracy.21 Although the special factors involved in the post-communist transition provide problems for the original transitological theories, these additional cases help us understand which aspects are universal. Thus, Bunce has moved away from the legacy of Sovietology toward a more universalistic approach.

The unwillingness of scholars in post-communist studies to incorporate “their” countries into mainstream social science antecedes 1989. During the cold war, the study of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union was the scientific property of Sovietologists and Kremlinologists. The differences between Sovietology and the social sciences were largely the result of two fundamentally different scientific approaches, one positivistic/quantitative, and the other, more hermeneutic/qualitative.

Some political scientists, such as Hough, Skilling, and Brzezinski, applied social scientific theories to Eastern Europe. Hough and Skilling were particularly inter-
ested in pluralist models for describing the Soviet-type societies, whereas Brzezinski elaborated the standard theory of totalitarian regimes. In fact, the debate between the totalitarian and pluralist schools became the dominant theoretical debate among Sovietologists in the 1960s and 1970s. Seymour Martin Lipset and Gyorgy Bence’s “Anticipations of the Failure of Communism,” was primarily devoted to this very debate. Walter Laqueur, an active participant in the debate, devoted two chapters in his reflections on the collapse of the Soviet Union to the debate between the totalitarian school and all others, which he grouped together as “revisionists.” His main argument is a political one: By discarding the discourse on totalitarianism, the revisionists tended to downplay the repressive nature and economic problems of the Bolshevik state. Chandler, however, blames the totalitarian framework for preventing the use of modern social science theories and methodology in Sovietology, for if the system were so unique, it could not be compared to other countries. “As totalitarianism was the antithesis of democracy, there could be no possible common ground. The USSR thus was seen as an isolated system, rather than an extreme on a continuum.”

An attempted new field of academic research, “comparative communism,” sought to bridge the divide between comparative politics and communist studies. Some headway was made in the early 1980s, but proponents of this strategy often refrained from using universal social science theories. Chandler sums up: “Despite the potential contribution of these works, it is probably fair to say that they never reached the mainstream of Sovietology and remained isolated in the field.”

Thus, area studies and Sovietology continued to exist in relative isolation from general political science. The main exception came in the mid-1980s, when theorizing about the possible emergence of a “civil society” abounded. However, this trend harmonized with the hermeneutic approach, since the debate began among East European dissidents, such as Adam Michnik and Jacek Kuron in Poland. Western area specialists built on the ideas of the East Europeans they were trying to understand. Several of the leading authors on this topic were themselves exiles from communist regimes (e.g., Andrew Arato and Vladimir Tismaneanu). The civil society debate also inspired some important works on the Solidarity movement and the attempt to create a “self-limiting revolution.” The term comes from a book of the same title by the Polish sociologist Jadwiga Staniszkis. David Ost, in his classic *Solidarity and the Politics of Anti-Politics*, shows that the Polish opposition was not able to follow the anti-politics strategy of building up a civil society independent of the state that would leave the state standing alone. Ost shows that instead of limiting their revolution and creating their own sphere beyond state control, the Polish opposition was immediately forced to confront the state. This made for a stimulating debate, but it was still basically a debate within a model specific to area studies. There were many important works on the emergence of Solidarity, but very few used modern social scientific theories of social movements, such as resource mobilization or frame analysis. Even non–area specialists, such as Alain Touraine and the other contributors to *Solidarity: Poland 1980–81*, relied on a hermeneutic approach “sociological intervention,” which is basically a form of participatory observation. Perhaps the only debate on Solidarity was the neo-Marxian discourse as to whether workers had created the Solidarity movement or intellectuals had played a vital role.

The divide between social science and area specialists was reinforced by the absence of reliable statistical data, such as public opinion surveys, that would have allowed for the types of statistical analysis so common in mainstream political science. To be sure, not all Western social science is based on statistical studies. Nevertheless, social scientists interested in doing statistical analysis had many reasons to choose non–East European topics. This tendency manifested itself in the sudden and dramatic rise of statistical studies on the consolidation of democracy in Eastern and Central Europe. An older generation of social scientists, such as Rose and Brady, who had shown little interest in the region before 1989, began to publish studies on public opinion, voting behavior, and the like. They since have been joined by a new generation of area specialists trained in mainstream social-science methodology. Authors such as Moser have analyzed the influence of institutional rules on electoral outcomes, whereas Powers and others have written about public opinion. The lack of available quantitative data was not the only barrier. Even qualitative studies suffered from the lack of openness. Now that the borders are open and political liberties restored, area studies specialists and social scientists can conduct interviews. This has led to studies of networks during the privatization process, nominating processes in political parties, the emergence of social movements, and more.

One should not exaggerate the methodological barriers, however. The main reason Sovietology remained isolated from the general social sciences in the post-war period was that its practitioners viewed the Soviet Union
as “*sui generis*—a unique phenomenon in the history of humankind and, therefore, irrelevant to the methodology and empirical theory of the social sciences.”

Thus, East European area studies developed in isolation from the general social sciences, which meant that when the regimes fell in 1989, area studies specialists were often not familiar with the literature on democratization and tended to continue emphasizing the uniqueness of their countries. This resulted in a lack of theorizing and a hesitancy to put their cases in a larger perspective. Meanwhile, transitologists, who often possessed little area knowledge, eagerly seized the opportunity to apply their theories to new cases. The result was a large body of literature that was either rich in details but poor in theory or rich in theory but poor in details. Moreover, lack of empirical knowledge often led social scientists to dubious theoretical conclusions. These limitations caused some area specialists, such as Frederic Fleron and Erik Hoffman, to argue for the need to integrate the two approaches. Surprisingly few attempts were made to actually integrate the two approaches to studies of the transitions to democracy, although great strides have been made in this direction in later works on the consolidation of democracy.

**The Limits of Both Schools**

Comparativists offered ingenious theoretical analyses of the transition to democracy in the former Soviet bloc, but their empirical material was often weak and their conclusions were sometimes incorrect. This is not surprising, because some comparativist scholars lacked detailed knowledge of the region or the necessary language skills to read primary sources. Meanwhile, area studies specialists delivered some extremely important empirical studies with a wealth of information about the events that had taken place, but their studies, unfortunately, were often highly empirical and lacked a theoretical objective.

*Comparativists and Transitologists.* Di Palma’s description of the legitimacy crisis in the communist world is one of the most original and stimulating comparative studies. He claims that the communist regimes based their legitimacy on their perceived right to rule rather than on popular acceptance. This “legitimacy from the top” rested on two pillars: the Party’s monopoly on truth and the promise of economic performance. When the economy failed to meet expectations, Party leaders stopped believing in their right to rule, and opposition intellectuals were encouraged by the obvious falsification of the Party’s claims to have a monopoly on knowledge. Di Palma has few empirical data to substantiate his case. An area specialist would have discussed the change in the perception of opposition leaders in more detail and would have accessed public opinion surveys showing that the populace had become more critical of one-party rule. For example, surveys in Germany show the changing attitudes of youth in Leipzig, and there were several surveys in the former Czechoslovakia available at the archives of the federal statistical office (now the Czech statistical office). Furthermore, an area specialist would have read the memoirs of former communist leaders or interviewed them to obtain more evidence of this loss of belief.

Not only did comparativist studies often suffer from a lack of empirical evidence, but they reached empirically doubtful conclusions. This has occurred at the most basic levels, such as the classification of transitional types. For example, Huntington considers both Poland and Czechoslovakia to be cases of “transplacement,” which occurs when democratization is largely the product of joint action by government and opposition groups, but East Germany represents “replacement,” in which opposition groups take the lead in bringing about democracy. It is difficult to understand why Huntington believes that the opposition was more active in East Germany than in Czechoslovakia. In fact, the organized opposition played a greater role in bringing down the Czechoslovak regime than the East German one. Although the East German events began with the unorganized decisions of many citizens to escape to West Germany by way of Hungary, the “Velvet Revolution” in Czechoslovakia clearly began with the well-organized student demonstration on November 17, 1989, and the student strike declarations the next day. An increasingly strong opposition and a collapsing government forced democratization in both countries, but the process was much quicker in Czechoslovakia. It took more than five weeks for the size of the East German demonstrations to surpass 100,000 participants. In comparison, the demonstrations in Prague reached the six-figure level after four days. A few days later, from 500,000 to 750,000 people attended a demonstration that was larger than any in the East Germany during the entire transitional period. Similarly, although it took six weeks for General Secretary Erich Honecker to retire and several months for most of the other members of the old guard (including his replacement, Egon Krenz) to leave office, it took exactly one week for the members of the Czechoslovak Politburo to offer their resignations.

Sidney Tarrow is another example of an important
theorist led to questionable conclusions by his lack of area knowledge. Following Tocqueville, Tarrow claims that “revolts occur not when people are most oppressed or best represented, but when a closed system of opportunities has begun to open up.” According to Tarrow, four variables can cause such a political opening: increased access to institutional participation, fluid and confused political alignments, conflicts among political elites, and offers of help from influential allies from within or without the system.

Surprisingly, Tarrow does not cite any of these factors to describe the openings that occurred in Eastern Europe. Instead, he rightly emphasizes “Gorbachev’s well-publicized refusal to use military force.” Therefore, the real political opening did not come from action but from a refusal to act. Thus, Tarrow should either add a fifth factor to the list or should modify the fourth point to allow for the neutralization of an external power (i.e., the Soviet Union).

Davies’s famous J-curve is also popular among comparativists as a possible explanation for the collapse of the communist-led regimes. According to this theory, revolutions are most likely to occur when a prolonged period of objective economic and social development is followed by a short period of sharp reversal. The key effect on the minds of people in any society derives, first, from their having expectations of continued satisfaction of needs that continue to increase, and then from anxiety and frustration when expectations are not met. Dix and Mason claim that this is exactly what happened in Eastern and Central Europe in 1989. Since most economists agree that the Soviet bloc countries had been facing economic decline for nearly a decade and in some cases even longer, it is odd for Dix and Mason to claim that the East Europeans took to the streets after “a short period of sharp reversal” (emphasis added). After one or, in some cases, several decades of economic decline, it is difficult to imagine that East Europeans were suffering from frustrated expectations of economic improvement, and it is even more difficult to imagine that these expectations could have been caused by a “prolonged period” of economic development.

Ironically, even comparativists of East and Central European origin often offer empirically questionable theoretical models. For example, Rasma Karklins, who was born in West Germany but has Latvian parents and Latvian citizenship, wrote an article with Roger Petersen that presents a rational-choice model for participation in uprisings. They divide the potential participants into several groups, with each group having a different threshold for participating. Dissidents are the first to join, followed by students, then workers, and finally, Party supporters. However, students were active at an early stage in the Czechoslovak uprising, when they organized the first demonstrations and took the lead in mobilizing workers. In East Germany and Romania, by contrast, students never took such initiatives. Thus the model does not apply to all communist countries and is sustained by only one country’s experience.

Similarly, Adam Przeworski, a native Pole, claims that the Polish leadership acted strategically in reaching the type of institutional compromise predicted in the Transition from Authoritarian Rule project, in which he participated. Przeworski’s emphasis on game-theory models of rational behavior led to a glaring oversight. The Polish leaders ignored their own advisers and supported an electoral system that clearly put them at a disadvantage. It is obvious to most political scientists that the communists would have done better in a proportional electoral system than in a majoritarian one, since they faced a united opposition behind Solidarity and the opposition was likely to win a large majority of the votes. If the communists had opted for a proportional system, they would have won many of the contested seats, but in the majoritarian system that they proposed, they lost all the contested seats.

Finally, a problem that existed in the earlier transitology literature became even more manifest in the analysis of the democratic transitions from communism—the tendency to downplay the role of revolutionary change and overemphasize negotiated, “pacted” transitions. Although the first modern democracy came about through a revolution in America, transitologists like O’Donnell and Schmitter, Przeworski and Haggard, and Kaufman basically discount the possibility of democratic revolutions. O’Donnell and Schmitter scarcely mention the possibility of revolutionary change in Transitions from Authoritarian Rule, except to note that revolutions usually develop, at best, into “popular democracies” that lack complete human rights. In Democracy and the Market, Przeworski, too, ignores the possibility of democratic revolutions and instead concentrates on negotiated pacts, which he entitles “democracy with guarantees.” Haggard and Kaufman’s Political Economy of Democratic Transitions also ignores revolutionary transitions. The book is devoted to Asia and Latin America, but its concluding chapter has several pages on Eastern Europe. The authors claim that the Polish and Hungarian negotiated pacts corroborate their model, but for the Czechoslovak and East German cases, rather than theorize about the causes of mass uprisings, they simply note,
[The] suddenness and totality of the political collapse in these societies at the end of 1989 revealed the fragility of the loyalties and ideological convictions that underlay party rule. Nevertheless, the fall of the Czech and German “dominoes” was closely related to earlier events in Hungary and Poland.\(^5\)

Thus, they have no new theoretical insights on democratic revolutions. Terry Lynn Karl stated it even more strongly: “To date, no stable political democracy has resulted from regimes transitions in which mass actors have gained control even momentarily over traditional ruling classes.”\(^5\)

However, many of the transitions from communism to democracy were, in fact, brought about by mass political mobilization and thus could be considered revolutions. This includes East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Romania. Michael McFaul, an authority on Russia, goes so far as to claim, in contrast to Karl’s conclusions, “It is instead revolutionary transitions—the mode of transition thought to be least likely to facilitate democratic outcomes by third-wave theorists—that have actually produced the most stable and consolidated democracies in the post-communist world.”\(^5\) Thus the post-communist transitions have different dynamics from previous transitions and represent a “fourth wave.” Whether or not one agrees, McFaul makes it clear that transitologists, by concentrating on similarities of outcome (democratic transition in the form of negotiated pacts), neglected to theorize another distinctly possible type of democratic transition, brought about through revolutionary collective action.

Despite these flaws, transitology has played an important role in forcing even area specialists to on the application of social science theory to Central and Eastern Europe. In addition, even when area-study specialists criticize transitology, there is the advantage that somebody is trying to falsify universalist theories. Consequently, by increasing the number of cases, attempts to apply universal theories of democratization to Central and Eastern Europe have improved social science theories by making it necessary to revive some previous hypotheses.

**Area Studies Specialists and Sovietologists.** Whereas comparative studies have been better at providing interesting theoretical hypotheses than at giving empirical evidence, works in the field of area studies have been better at providing useful empirical information than at theoretical explanations of the transitions. Among the best-known empirical accounts of the fall of communism are the historian Timothy Garton Ash’s eyewitness account of 1989 and the political scientist George Schöpflin’s historical study of communism in Eastern Europe.\(^5\) Schöpflin uses theoretical terms like “legitimacy,” but does not develop a theory of how legitimacy influenced the collapse of the communist regimes. Moreover, his use of the term is rather inconsistent and confusing. At different points in the book, he mentions “legitimization by nationhood,” “economic legitimacy,” “negative legitimacy,” and “self-legitimacy,” without ever defining or comparing these terms.

In addition to empirical comparative studies, many books and articles describe the collapse of communism in a single country. These generally lack theoretical pretensions but provide ample empirical evidence that can be used by more theoretically inclined social scientists. Three areas of unique empirical material are of especial interest. One is the negotiations between the communists and the opposition in Hungary and Poland.\(^5\) Interestingly, when the renowned theorist Jon Elster edited a book on the roundtable talks in Eastern and Central Europe, he did not require the participating authors to use theoretical models.\(^5\) A second area of empirical contributions to the study of 1989 pertains to the internal operations of the East German party-state. Using the wealth of archival information that is now available, dozens of books have dealt with the Politburo and the secret police.\(^5\) Most of these are in German, however, and thus have not been widely accessible to transitologists.\(^5\) A third area is the huge body of information on the role of Gorbachev, both in terms of his foreign policy toward “satellite” states and his strategy against Yeltsin and the conservative opponents, including the failed coup of 1991.\(^5\)

Some cases studies are rather atheoretical yet still make strong arguments. For example, David Kotz and Fred Weir maintain that the Soviet Union did not collapse because the system had lost support among the populace—it still enjoyed popular legitimacy, but the intellectual elite had become believers in market liberalism.\(^6\) Brian Crozier’s historical account of the fall of the Soviet Union also avoids social scientific theory, stressing nationalism as the main cause of the collapse, as does Barner-Barry and Hody’s account to some extent.\(^6\)

Most of these studies are atheoretical, but some have developed terms useful for theoretical analysis. For example, Gazsó and Tökes use the term “convertible skills” to differentiate members of the state and Party apparatus who have the kind of education that would enable them to easily find jobs in the private sector during a transition to capitalism.\(^6\) In discussing the dynam-
ics of the Polish negotiations, Staniszkis devised the term “new center” to characterize the process in which both sides eliminated the extremist groups from their negotiating teams in order to create a moderate atmosphere that would make it easier to reach an agreement.64

Finally, it should be added that some area specialists have made use of theoretical explanations but not as the focal points of their books. Interestingly, the same writers often ignore recent actor-based and institutional trends and return to the older modernization theories that were popular in the 1960s.65

A Synthesis? Obvious advantages would arise out of a synthesis of the two schools: interesting theoretical models combined with strong empirical data. The question remains, though, whether area studies specialists are correct in claiming a special status for the former Soviet bloc countries. In a sense, they are. The evidence currently available indicates that the transitions did not follow previously established patterns anywhere near as closely as transitologists would have us believe. For example, unlike the typical model, in which transitions begin when liberalizing reformers come to power, hard-line regimes were brought down either by popular movements in the absence of regime reformers (East Germany, Bulgaria, and Romania) or with the very weak presence of very moderate reformers (Czechoslovakia). The regimes with strong reformist factions behaved differently than the traditional models would have predicted. For example, the Polish communists embarked upon liberalizing reforms and reached a pact agreement that resembles Przeworski’s “institutional compromise” and “democracy with guarantees,” but, as already noted, the leadership did not act nearly as strategically as Przeworski’s rationalist model would have forecasted.66 In Hungary, the reformists did not even seek the kinds of institutional guarantees that Przeworski predicted.67

While the transitions from communism did not completely resemble the transitions from authoritarian rule in Latin America and southern Europe, this does not mean that comparative social scientific theory is useless for understanding them. Rather, it means that previous models must be modified. Much of the framework of previous theoretical schools can be used, but without the universal results. Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan’s influential Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation provides the best-known example. The authors use traditional institutional analysis to show a connection between regime type and process of transformation. Since the Latin American and southern European countries had authoritarian regimes, their transitions to democracy could not be like those of the East and Central European countries, which had various types of “post-totalitarian” regimes.68 Similarly, one of the present authors has applied an institutional-Marxist analysis to explain the transitions in Central Europe.69

Since the countries of the Soviet bloc had class and institutional structures different from those in countries with capitalist modes of production, an institutional-Marxist model should expect their transitions to democracy to differ from previous democratic transitions. Even Valerie Bunce has given up her opposition to transitology and instead argues for finding a “middle—not middling—position on the universality of political dynamics. There are generalizations, but their width varies according to the question at hand.”70 In addition, although arguing that the transitions from communism represent a fourth wave differing in its dynamics from the third wave that dominated previous theories of transitology, McFaul acknowledges that transitology provides useful theoretical tools which he combines with neo-institutional theory about path dependence. Working, like Bunce, at the middle-range level, he concludes:

The project of constructing a general theory of democratization may very well fail. The causes of democratization in Poland may be distinct from the causes in Spain, let alone from those that predominate in France. This article’s emphasis on temporal path dependence implies that different historical contexts may create unique factors for and against democratization. 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.71

Another example of the trend toward the middle-range level is Geddes’s 1999 article, “What Do We Know About Democratization After Twenty Years?” in which she combines institutional analysis with game theory.72 In the same vein as Linz and Stepan, she argues that different types of regimes are likely to have different types of transitions. She brings in the actor level by proposing that the types of transitions differ because each regime has a different dynamic, which means that different types of games emerge among competing ruling factions. Although her conclusions in many ways resemble those of Linz and Stepan, Geddes devotes the least amount of space in her article to the transitions from communism. In contrast to Linz and Stepan, she lumps communist regimes together with other one-party regimes, such as Mexico, and does not discuss...
whether patrimonial communist regimes, such as Ceaușescu’s in Romania or Kim’s in North Korea, are one-party states or personalistic regimes. Neither does she explain why the processes of change differed so radically, from Czechoslovakia and East Germany, where popular uprisings brought down the regimes, to Poland and Hungary, where regime reformers negotiated “pacts.” All four of these regimes were one-party states, yet their roads to transition differed. Nevertheless, Geddes follows the same path as Linz and Stepan and McFaul, showing that there can be no general social science theory of transition because the route to transition is influenced by regime type, but that social science theory can be used to explain the different types of transitions, and middle-range theories can be developed that explain the dynamics of the regime types.

Finally, although the debate on the transition to democracy in Eastern and Central Europe was long dominated by comparativists and area specialists, a new generation of social scientists is combining the best of both worlds. Political science has become more theory-oriented in the last few decades. Methodological training in graduate programs has improved, and most graduates of American universities have statistical skills superior to those of previous generations. The opening of the former communist societies has given Western scholars greater access to the kind of data that mainstream political scientific methods require. Public opinion surveys are now quite common in these countries, and their results are readily available to the international academic community. The emergence of freely contested elections has made it possible for political scientists to run statistical tests on the correlations between various factors (e.g., type of electoral system) and electoral results (e.g., percentage of female representatives, number of parties in parliament, political stability). The opening of society has also facilitated qualitative research, since social scientists may now interview political actors and engage in direct observation. All this makes it possible to combine the best of both area studies and comparative politics. An example is Valerie Bunce’s *Subversive Institutions*, which combines the theoretical and methodological findings of comparative politics with the empirical expertise of area studies and Sovietology in a comparative framework. Thus far, this synthesis has made more progress in discussing post-communist developments than in explaining the collapse of the old regimes—it has influenced the debates on democratic consolidation more than the debates on democratic transition.

**Beyond the Comparativist–Area Specialist Divide**

If a new generation is moving beyond the comparativist–area specialist divide, then new categories are necessary to differentiate the various types of studies. Such categories would shed light on the research strategies dealing with the fall of the communist-led regimes. There have been three main strands of research on the transition to democracy in Eastern and Central Europe: (1) case studies of individual countries, (2) analyses of similarities attempting to show that the same processes took place in all the communist-led countries, and (3) analyses of differences that seek to explain the differences in the process of change or to compare change to lack of change.

**Case Studies.** The majority of the books and articles dealing with the fall of communist-led regimes are case studies or collections of case-study articles. Most of these contributions come from the area studies tradition, such as the Bruszt and Tőkes studies of Hungary, Holc, Kundigraber, and Sanford on Poland, and Wheaton and Kavan’s work on Czechoslovakia. However, several doctoral dissertations have applied social scientific theory (including transitology) to individual countries—for example, Daniel V. Friedheim’s dissertation on East Germany and Patrick H. O’Neil’s dissertation on Hungary. Both authors have published articles based on their dissertations. Descriptive and theoretical case studies both have the advantage of being able to give more detailed analyses of particular cases, but they lose some of their theoretical power in that they are not as easily generalized even to neighboring post-communist countries.

**Analysis of Similarities.** Most studies claiming to be comparative concentrate on showing the similarity of the outcomes in former communist-led countries. These include the vast majority of theoretical works, such as those discussed above by Di Palma, Przeworski, Tarrow, Dix, and Karklins and Petersen. This category also includes area studies specialists like Waller, who have added theoretical aspects to their descriptive reports, and even the collection of articles in Vladimir Tismaneanu’s *Revolutions of 1989*, which reads like a “greatest hits” of previously published articles on the collapse of communism. As a consequence of the popular focus on similarities, most studies of this kind concentrate on Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic—the countries that have the best chances of
integration into the community of Euro-Atlantic democracies. Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, Russia, and the other post-Soviet states are often left out. The reason for this exclusion, it is often argued, is that they have lagged behind in the political and economic reform processes, and thus are less suitable for testing of theories. 77

The authors of these studies are so intent on similarities that they often ignore important differences, even when these are theoretically possible according to their own models. For example, in his game theory analyses, Przeworski shows that if rules and oppositional groups make certain strategic decisions, then revolutionary change is possible. 78 Nevertheless, he only seriously considers a negotiated solution that gives the rulers certain institutional advantages—that is “democracy with guarantees.” Even in his short empirical discussions of Eastern Europe, as in his introduction, he only discusses similarities among countries. Thus, he does not explain why the East German, Czechoslovak, and Romanian regimes were brought down by mass movements rather than negotiated settlements giving institutional guarantees. These studies fail to pose interesting theoretical questions, such as why the communists willingly negotiated with the opposition in Poland and Hungary, but in Czechoslovakia and East Germany tried to avoid the opposition until faced with mass movements. Why did mass movements emerge so quickly in some countries but not in others? The answers to these questions should better our understanding of the dynamics of systemic change.

Analysis of Differences. Although analyses that emphasize the reasons for the differences in outcomes have the greatest potential for theoretical advancement, such studies have been by far the rarest, if one excludes descriptive studies79 or books collecting case-study articles that do not offer theoretical explanations. 80 Linz and Stepan’s Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation is the most famous instance of a theoretical model that explains the different routes to democratization. As already noted, it is an institutional analysis showing that communist countries that develop different types of post-totalitarian regimes are also likely to experience different types of transitions. Despite the great insights their book offers, Linz and Stepan do not try to explain why different regime types emerged. In contrast, one of the present authors offers such explanations in his comparison of East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary. 81

Another example is Valerie Bunce’s Subversive Institutions. Using an institutional approach, Bunce discusses three questions: (1) why, when, and how communism collapsed, (2) why the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia simply ceased to exist, and (3) why the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the Czechoslovak federation was peaceful but the dismemberment of Yugoslavia was violent. According to Bunce, the key to understanding the two latter issues lies in “the power of the past.” 82

In The State Against Society, Grzegorz Ekiert also emphasizes the importance of differences between communist regimes in his study of the nature and consequences of political opposition and crises in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. Like Bunce, he argues that the communist past is the key to understanding contemporary developments: “We cannot adequately grasp the meaning and patterns of the massive changes occurring in the region today without reexamining past developments and their legacies.” 83

In Post-Communist Party Systems, Kitschelt et al. use path dependency to explain the different regime types in communist Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, and Bulgaria. 84 However, the main topic is the development of party systems after 1989. Several authors compare two countries, but usually these are countries with relatively similar results, such as Hungary and Poland (Stark and Bruszt), which both experienced some form of institutional compromise, or Czechoslovakia and East Germany (Thompson), which both experienced popular uprisings. 85

Although these authors go farther than most in emphasizing the differences in transition, they ignore the very important fact that communist regimes still control several countries. Since communist regimes remain in power in such diverse countries as Cuba, China, North Korea, and Vietnam, researchers on post-communism are finally beginning to realize that “post” is not always a suitable suffix, and we cannot understand why some regimes have fallen without understanding why some have remained in power. Studies on this subject are beginning to emerge, but it is still a highly underdeveloped theme in the research on communist transitions. 86 Even as careful an observer as McFaul, who emphasizes that the majority of transitions were from communist dictators to other types of dictatorships rather than to democracy, omits non-transitions from his analysis. 87

Table 1 sums up these arguments. Regardless of whether authors come from the area studies or transitology tradition, they fall into all three categories of doing case studies, comparisons of similar outcomes, and comparisons of different outcomes. As has been
argued thus far, too little attention has been given to theoretically based studies of different outcomes. We need to learn more about why communist countries went through such different processes of transition, and we need more comparative studies of why some regimes have been able to remain in power. The best results will be achieved by studies of the differences in outcome that combine the empirical rigor of area studies with the theoretical objective of transitology. Of course, these conclusions are equally valid for other types of transitions. Although much of the debate on democratic transitions in Latin America and southern Europe has focused on negotiated pacts, the Philippine “people’s power” revolution shows that democratic transitions can also be brought about through mass uprisings. As more researchers begin to understand that democratic transitions can follow several possible patterns, we are seeing more analysis of the different outcomes even in studies that do not concentrate on the collapse of communism.

## Conclusion

The transitology approach and non-theoretical descriptive studies dominated the first half of the 1990s, with authors in both groups concentrating either on single cases or on analyses of similarities. By the end of the 1990s, however, more writers were emphasizing differences in outcome. This latter group included scholars from the area studies tradition (e.g., Bunce and Eikert), the comparativist tradition (e.g., Linz and Stepan), and the new generation of area specialists trained in comparative methodology. An interesting twist of logic has also occurred. Despite the fact that actor-level analyses—especially the rational-choice variant—have traditionally emphasized the ability of political actors to determine outcomes, most actor-level transitological analyses have concentrated on the similarities rather than differences in outcomes. Bova’s interpretation of O’Donnell and Schmitter is particularly mechanistic and determinist. Ironically, actors, in a sense, have disappeared from most of the actor-based models, since the outcomes of these models are often over-determined. In contrast, those who try to explain the differences in outcomes have all used some sort of institutional analysis. Thus, although actor-based modeling originally began as a criticism of structuralist models because they only allowed one outcome, it is the more structurally oriented institutionalists who have emphasized the pos-

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approaches to Post-Communist Studies</th>
<th>Area studies</th>
<th>Transitology/comparative</th>
<th>Synthesis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Case studies</td>
<td>Advantage: good empirical evidence that can be used by non-area specialists</td>
<td>Advantage: attempts to test previous theories, but does not explain overall dynamics as well as comparative approaches</td>
<td>Advantage: good empirical evidence linked to theory.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disadvantage: lack of theorizing</td>
<td>Disadvantages: lack of empirical evidence often leads to questionable conclusions</td>
<td>Disadvantages: uncertainty as to how valid theoretical conclusions are for other transitions from communism, since theories are based on non-communist cases</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similar outcomes</td>
<td>Advantage: Shows general trends through inductive methods</td>
<td>Advantage: good theoretical insights</td>
<td>Advantage: good theoretical insights supported by empirical evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disadvantage: lack of new empirical evidence; does not explain different paths to transition or cases of non-transition</td>
<td>Disadvantage: lack of empirical evidence often leads to questionable conclusions; does not explain different paths to transition or cases of non-transition.</td>
<td>Disadvantage: explains neither different paths to transition nor cases of non-transition.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different outcomes</td>
<td>Advantage: recognizes plurality of paths to transition</td>
<td>Advantage: good theoretical insights; more able to explain dynamics of transition than those using similar outcome approaches</td>
<td>Advantage: good theoretical insights supported by strong theoretical evidence; best able to explain dynamics of 1989, including various paths of transitions and non-transition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disadvantage: lack of theorizing, but usually not much new empirical evidence</td>
<td>Disadvantage: lack of empirical support, reliance on secondary sources and so far no attempts to explain non-transitions from communism</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Saxonberg and Linde **Beyond Transitology** 13
sibility of different outcomes. Interestingly, when a rational-choice theorist like Geddes tries to overcome the weaknesses of the earlier actor-based transitology theories, she does so by moving to the institutional level. Although she brings in game theory, claiming that different regime types lead to different games, she makes regime type an independent variable because the type of game depends on the type of regime. At least in the case of military dictatorships, however, the type of game played means that there are no dominant strategies, and the outcome depends on choices of actors. In the case of one-party regimes, a transition depends on “exogenous” factors rather than choices made by ruling factions. Thus, at least for most of the communist regimes, actors in her model do not much influence outcomes by making strategic decisions. Although Geddes, a rational-choice theorist, combines institutionalism with rational choice, neo-institutionalist theorists have also seen the need for explanations that afford flexibility to actors without necessarily using rational-actor models. For example, the present author combines institutionalism with a psychological-emotive approach. Thus, perhaps the current trend for area specialists to combine empirical expertise with comparative methodology will not only lead to a more nuanced tendency in research on democratic transitions, but will reinvigorate neo-institutional theory. If this comes about, we will see area studies specialists making some valuable contributions to comparative studies, rather than, as was once feared, comparativists appropriating area studies.

Notes


11. The Transitions project was not meant to be a theoretical work, but rather a frankly empirical and case-study-influenced investigation of different possible ways of analyzing democratization. O’Donnell and Schmitter state: “We did not have at the beginning, nor do we have at the end of this lengthy collective endeavor, a ‘theory’ to test or to apply to the case studies and thematic essays in these volumes.” O’Donnell and Schmitter, Transitions from Authoritarian Rule, p. 3.


23. Seymour Martin Lipset and Gyorgy Bence, “Anticipations of the Failure of Communism,” Theory and Society 23 (1984): 169–210. Lipset and Bence include a third group of scholars who were not pluralists but also not supporters of the totalitarian model, and thus are grouped together under the rubric of “revisionists.”


36. Fleron and Hoffman, “Communist Studies and Political Science.”


50. Przeworski, Democracy and the Market, esp. chaps. 1 and 2.


64. Staniszkis, Dynamics of the Breakthrough in Eastern Europe.


67. See Saxonberg, The Fall and “Regime Behavior in 1989.”

68. Linz and Stepan, Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation.

69. Saxonberg, The Fall.

70. Bunce, “Comparative Democratization,” p. 727.


78. Przeworski, Democracy and the Market.

79. Ash, We the People; Schöpflin, Politics in Eastern Europe; Judy Batt, East Central Europe from Reform to Transformation (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1991).


81. Saxonberg, The Fall and “Regime Behavior in 1989.”

82. Bunce, Subversive Institutions, p. xii.


85. Stark and Bruzst, Power Monopoly: Subversive Institutions.


88. This is a theme of Mark Thompson’s “Whatever Happened to Democratic Revolutions?” Democratization 7, no. 4 (2000): 1–14.

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