

## CHAPTER I

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### *Rethinking Some Hard Facts*

Far be it from me to advocate a new social science orthodoxy. Yet there is a rekindled public and scholarly interest in the prospects for democracy in countries where democracy does not now exist. That attention and the renewed theoretical optimism among a number of scholars deserve a fair hearing. This essay has been written in defense of that optimism.

On some grounds the optimism may not seem warranted, and the skeptics may have a field day. If optimism were based on democracy's recent record of victories, we should take note that the record is at least mixed. Since the middle of the 1970s a number of surprisingly promising transitions to democracy have occurred. All these transitions were from right-wing authoritarian regimes—as conventionally understood. All were in southern Europe (Greece, Portugal, Spain) or South America (Argentina, Brazil). Reacting to those events, several students of the two areas have eagerly turned their attention to “democratic transitions.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet other transitions—in South America, the Mediterra-

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nean, and elsewhere—have been less than promising or inspiring. In South America (Peru, Ecuador, Paraguay, Uruguay, Bolivia), the Mediterranean (Turkey), Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala, Santo Domingo), and Asia (the Philippines, South Korea) the final outcomes of recent democratizing efforts are either uninspiring or difficult to call. Also, expectations that democratization would create regional demonstration effects, carrying along other authoritarian regimes, have so far remained unfulfilled. In South America the Chilean dictatorship has put up a long if apparently losing rearguard action against democratic intrusions. In Central America democracy, reaction, and revolution mix freely and explosively. Prospects look just as unpromising among Marxist or Socialist regimes—despite considerable internal variation (from East European people's democracies to self-styled Marxist regimes in Central America and Africa). Recent momentous developments in Communist Europe promise radical changes, but are we willing to bet on democracy in the short run? Poland and Hungary offer reasons for hope, but regional demonstration effects are still unclear. For all its economic liberalization, China, a continent by itself, seems to be taking steps toward what students of Latin American development call "bureaucratic authoritarianism." And as to Africa as a whole, the prospects we can extrapolate from the postcolonial record seem just as bleak.

Finally, trends toward democratization must be balanced against their counterparts. In Latin America, for example, stable regime types have been rare. Rather, there has been a seesaw between regimes. In general, the 1970s and 1980s have not yet produced that dramatic leap in democratization that followed both world wars. In general, even by the most generous definition of democracy, the proportion of democ-

racies among independent nations is no greater today than it was after World War I.<sup>2</sup>

In sum, the hard facts of trends and numbers do not speak in favor of democracy. And there is another apparent hard fact, closely connected with trends and numbers. The greater the pool of independent nations and the more we move away from the core of long-established Western-style democracies, the more the nations facing democratization fall short of qualities classically associated with Western democracy. Such qualities have been investigated extensively by many influential scholars, mainly in the 1950s and 1960s, and fall into three categories: (1) economic prosperity and equality; (2) a modern and diversified social structure in which nondependent middle classes occupy center stage; and (3) a national culture that, by tolerating diversity and preferring accommodation, is already implicitly democratic. Nations facing democratization without these three characteristics face yet another impediment: democratic transitions are now tending to take place in a climate of mobilization and impatience, if not of outright violence. The benefits of gradualism and accommodation, which have marked the Western experience, would thus be lost.

These are the hard facts weighing on the future of democracy. Indeed, they have led Samuel Huntington to question recent theoretical optimism. He concludes that “with a few exceptions, the limits of democratic development in the world may well have been reached.”<sup>3</sup> Is the tail of theoretical optimism trying pointlessly to wag the dog of hard facts? Is the optimism largely a fad—another example of the social scientist who obliges tenuous events?

The hard facts (albeit not all of them) miss some points; in fact, they miss *the* point. Theoretical optimism is not stimulated by the hard facts at all, which, taken by them-

selves, counsel caution. (There may be further reason for caution: owing to emerging incompatibilities between post-industrial progress and democracy as a system of government, the future of the system itself may be questioned in its geographical core.)<sup>4</sup> Rather, theoretical optimism, modest in itself, builds from a different and banal observation. Hard facts do not mean necessity. In political matters, particularly in matters of regime change, causal relations are only probable and outcomes uncertain. We can make broad probabilistic predictions about categories (such as, “Countries possessing quality X are more likely to develop democracy than . . .”), but we cannot make firm predictions about individual cases. In any single case, unless relevant circumstances cumulate in the extreme, the end result is not inescapable. This is true even if we were to discount the roles of choice and discretion in political events. But this role should not be discounted, especially when it comes to the macropolitical change embodied in regime crises and transitions. Not for nothing does the word *crisis* derive from the Greek *krisis*, meaning sorting out, choosing, deciding. From this to my next assertion the step is small.

It is a dismal science of politics (or the science of a dismal politics) that passively entrusts political change to exogenous and distant social transformations.<sup>5</sup> Applied to the future of democracy, such a science translates instinctively the structurally improbable (the hard facts) into the politically impossible. A recent carefully drawn propositional inventory of the conditions favoring the development or maintenance of democracy in the Third World lists forty-nine demanding conditions—mostly, in fact, preconditions.<sup>6</sup> A similarly lengthy list could have easily been drawn, after World War I, by a panel of European social scientists, Marxist or non-Marxist, to demonstrate the impossibility of a Communist revolution in backward places like czarist Russia. But

Lenin, by choosing to act, denied not only the prophecy but also his own social scientific Marxist heritage. And the Russian Revolution demanded new explanations.

Should we not, as students and advocates of democracy, reexamine our tried-and-true theoretical staple, to pare it down, to enrich and diversify it, somewhat? "It ill serves the cause of democracy in the third world," writes Myron Weiner, drawing from the Russian case,

for countries to be told that their growth rates are too low, their political culture inappropriate for democracy to thrive, or that an independent judiciary, a free press, and political pluralism are alien to their political tradition. . . . Perhaps it is time to recognize that democratic theory, with its list of conditions and prerequisites, is a poor guide to action as well.<sup>7</sup>

Albert O. Hirschman's lifetime work has probably done the most to consistently expose the mechanisms by which existing paradigms—namely, theories about the conditions and prerequisites for economic and political development—can blind us to possible and even probable political action.<sup>8</sup>

Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter offer considerations on how to study democratic stability and change that buttress Weiner's and Hirschman's points.<sup>9</sup> Once democracy is established and functioning, democratic performance can be studied, to be sure, by reference to such enduring structures as class, party systems, prevailing values, or level of economic development<sup>10</sup> Social scientists refer to these structures in practicing what O'Donnell and Schmitter call normal social science methodology. But during periods of democratic transition and formation, those structures (whether or not they are themselves the agents of change) are called to respond to a changing situation. Quite apart from whether they are undergoing lasting mutations, they

may at least temporarily cease to function as tried constraints or channels: interest perceptions may shift, class alliances may be suspended, party identities may lose their appeal, and cultural values and economic inequalities may be set aside.

In such a climate of uncertainty and potential reversals, initiative must come at a premium. Also, given uncertainty, how do structural and conjunctural factors recombine in the transition; to what extent are they recombined by actors; and how influential do structural factors remain? These issues do not appear to lend themselves to simple and parsimonious predictions. Constellations and permutations tend to become unique, and no set of them is exclusively and inherently superior when it comes to democratic success (more likely, a few may emerge as *reasonably* inferior). Thus, the realm of the possible, the plausible, indeed, the probable, can be expanded. I do not claim indeterminacy, but rather the need to explore further and to refuse to foreclose the search.

As many a reader may surmise, one recent democratic transition—that of Spain—could act as the midwife of the above reconsiderations. I remember distinctly the initial uneasiness among experts following the death of Francisco Franco. For the first two years, their attitude wavered consistently, intermittently afterwards, between withholding judgment and painting uncertain, mostly bleak scenarios. Everybody seemed to “know” that the transition would be difficult to call, and extremely delicate at any rate. But was there a social scientific ground to that assessment? In other words, why the uneasiness? To simplify matters, experts seemed to work more or less explicitly from two contrasting guides to prediction, loosely derived from existing democratic theory. The first guide augured well for Spanish democracy, by pointing to the fact that, during the last fifteen

years of the dictatorship, the country had already progressed socially and economically, and in a laissez-faire context. The “Europeanization” of Spain stood in marked contrast, mentally, culturally, socially, from the more traditional and divided society that saw Franco’s violent ascent to power. The other predictive guide argued the opposite: attempts at rapid regime changes are invariably traumatic and can backfire; but the more so if the old regime is still in place, is not rent by significant crises, and has in fact carefully arranged for, and committed itself to, an orderly succession. The two contradictory guides produced indeterminacy, the expert’s unwillingness to issue a verdict. Or, if the expert were pressed, the latter guide would somehow prevail conservatively. Even my own dauntless attitude at the time was much less a matter of superior social science than of gut feelings and wishful thinking.

In the end, democracy succeeded and many analysts began to broaden their perspective. That is to say, the most important lesson we learned from that success was not that democratic and prosperous Europe had carried Spain along (for Spain’s successful transition to democracy was, by itself, no proof that Europeanization had prevailed) but that our vision was too narrow. The scholars’ early wavering and even pessimism stood in sharp contrast to the final success of Spain’s transition. We have learned two lessons as a result. First, one limitation of existing social-change paradigms has been confirmed: to wit, that paradigms, though sharing social scientific ambitions, are competing or contrasting. Moreover, each paradigm, even when trying to overcome or recombine disparate predecessors, has predictive force only in those extreme, and therefore rare, occurrences when the positive (or negative) cumulate. This, incidentally, explains the social scientists’ reluctance to predict events when questioned by the naive layperson. Second,

Spain's successful transition (and other, more complex, transitions) dramatically illustrated the role political actors may come to play in transitions where outcomes are indeterminate and available paradigms do not help.

In so doing, transitions such as Spain's revealed the essential reason for the experts' wavering between noncommittal and pessimistic assessments. In effect, we suffered from blind spots. We were inadequately prepared for the intervening role of political actors; inadequately prepared to perceive the extent to which innovative political action can contribute to democratic evolution; inadequately prepared, in sum, to entertain and give account of the notion that democracies can be made (or unmade) in the act of making them. Thus, we were taken by surprise when *reforma pactada*—a negotiated agreement between democratic forces and interests from the old regime—turned out to play a crucial role in carrying Spanish democratization over the top.

To be sure, nothing in this revaluation of transitions implies that they are easy affairs. This is certainly not the point of optimism. On the contrary, transitions are almost always demanding. Portugal, Argentina, and Spain held our attention precisely because nothing was foregone. Transitions, as crisis junctures, point to uncertain outcomes. Still, they also point to the need for action. The optimism—which is actually an open-mindedness—comes in connection with this latter aspect of transitions: that of decision and resolution.

Thus, as Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan have observed,<sup>11</sup> democratization is ultimately a matter of political crafting. By "crafting," I mean to describe chiefly four aspects of democratization: (1) the quality of the finished product (the particular democratic rules and institutions that are chosen among the many available);<sup>12</sup> (2) the mode of decision making leading to the selection of rules and institutions (pacts and negotiations versus unilateral action); (3) the type of



“craftsmen” involved (the alliances and coalitions forged in the transition); and (4) the timing imposed on the various tasks and stages of the transition. Naturally, political actors in the transition may or may not have the objective opportunity—or the subjective ability that transcends opportunities—to make the correct choices. Nonetheless, it is these four aspects that ultimately influence the success of transitions.

The importance of crafting should be enhanced by Huntington’s cautionary note about the future of democracy. When more countries arrive on the threshold of democracy without those structural or cultural qualities deemed important, when more arrive under conditions of harried and divisive mobilization, then the task of crafting should be the more crucial and challenging. Whatever the historical trends, whatever the hard facts, the importance of human action in a difficult transition should not be underestimated.<sup>13</sup>

A few words about how this essay will proceed. I will take the opposite tack to Robert Dahl’s *Polyarchy*.<sup>14</sup> Dahl’s justly popular book explores broad historical paths and general structural conditions for the development and maintenance of democracies. Only in a postscript to the book does the author tackle what we may call the “microproblems” of crafting. Further, the postscript opens on a cautionary note that foreshadowed the one issued by Huntington fifteen years later: “It is unrealistic to suppose, then, that there will be any dramatic change in the number of polyarchies within a generation or two.”<sup>15</sup> Still, Dahl notes that, compared with most countries with profiles unfavorable to democracy (and very few with favorable ones), some countries have mixed profiles—that is, given the limits of existing strands of democratic theory, predictions are difficult to make. The purpose of the postscript is to explore policy and action recommendations that may help the democratization of the latter

countries. But, in keeping with the very same theory which occupies most of *Polyarchy*, the recommendations are doubly restrained. First, they are limited to only one aspect of democratic crafting: the choice of rules and institutions that reconcile cohesive democratic government with strong mutual guarantees for conflicting groups. Second, unless a country has a highly favorable profile, the recommendations advise against pushing for rapid democratization, even in a power vacuum. For institution building takes time, and so does habituation to the conventions of new democratic institutions. Beyond this, Dahl's recommendations contain little of any use, as he himself points out, for those aspects of democratic crafting that relate to processes, timing, alliances, and in sum tactics.

My essay intends, instead, to look mainly beyond the existing strands of theory; to extend and improve Dahl's list of recommendations; and to give democratization a second chance. Questioning Huntington's hard facts and Dahl's theories behind those facts is therefore only a small part of my task. Our blind spots about the role of crafting reflect the penchant of social scientists to consider regime transitions as a kind of black box—interchangeable steps to a foreclosed outcome—rather than open processes of interaction. Worse, in close connection with that methodological penchant, our blind spots also give a distorted and somehow dispiriting view of democracy as a particularly rare and delicate plant that cannot be transplanted. This view of democracy will be corrected in the next chapter. But the preliminary exercise will take us only a small part of the way.

From there, the focus will shift to the hitherto overlooked politics of transitions. This occupies chapters 3–5. They will take up in turn the insufficiently stressed rewards that the democratic game, as an open contest, can offer to those who come to play it; the rules that are best suited to induce re-

luctant players to play, and the transitional coalitions that favor the adoption of those rules; and finally the tactics (bearing on the speed of transitions and on trade-offs between regimes and oppositions) that assist democratization. Supported by evidence from recent transitions, these chapters should insert themselves in the cracks, as it were, left open by existing democratic theory. In so doing, the “cracks” will get magnified and more visible. They will accommodate possibilities that seemed squeezed out of the realm of democratic development as commonly understood. In the process, the predicament envisioned by Dahl and Huntington should not appear quite as forbidding.

In turn, the treatment of transitions will raise novel questions about what lies beyond transitions. Will a difficult transition weigh heavily on the future of a democracy? How heavily? Or, to rephrase the question, are the problems that are said to afflict new democracies (i.e., performance authenticity, so-called legitimacy) invariably brought on by difficult transitions? In particular, are contemporary transitions marred by a socially conservative bias without which they could not succeed? Also, if the problems of a new democracy bring about a breakdown, in what precise way can the breakdown be explained by the circumstances of its birth, or by its sheer newness—except to say that everything that comes after must somehow be explained by what existed before?

Should we assume as well that, because almost any democratic transition is difficult, a long period of time is needed, way past the transition proper, before a new democracy is safe? That is, does a new democracy require a protracted process of “consolidation” (to use a popular but fuzzy term)? Does it require the testing and validation over time of new institutions and untried rules? What, otherwise, are the exact risks of decay and breakdown? And what do we make

of the broader philosophy (embodied in Dahl's postscript) behind these concerns with consolidation; namely, that democratization should be a slow process, offering opportunities for fuller development and orderly internalization of democratic skills?

Finally, is what we call legitimacy anything more than behavioral compliance, and does it need to be anything more? In point of fact, and until I justify the use, I will employ "legitimacy," "loyalty," and similar terms in the simple sense of behavioral compliance.

In sum, all the above aspects of democratic theory also need a second and more critical look. Chapters 6 and 7 take up the assignment.

I conclude the essay by returning to the hard facts and how they bear on the future of democracy. Are more democracies possible? In answer, chapter 8 will consider how, thanks to crises whose outcomes appear indeterminate, crafting may operate (or has operated) with success even in countries and regimes whose predicament would not otherwise be favorable. Interestingly, the differences among the countries and regimes I have chosen to examine—mainly those of Central America and Eastern Europe—do not prevent the possibility of similar outcomes. Finally, chapter 9 will return to the theme of chapter 2 in considering the role of international factors in favoring (or hindering) present and impending democratizations. Important as domestic historical and structural conditions may be for these processes, it is sufficient to reflect on the role of regional and global hegemons such as the United States and the Soviet Union to appreciate the weight that diffusion and demonstration effects exercise, more and more so, on political transformations that today embrace entire regions of the globe. This insight, too, is in keeping with the consciously actor-oriented approach of the essay.

Antonio Gramsci, in some ways a Leninist with an eye for the power that political persuasion exercises in the construction of new regimes, spoke in reference to goal-oriented action of a pessimism of the intelligence rescued by an optimism of the will. My essay is cast in that mold.

Before beginning, I would like to make a confession and to offer an encouragement to the readers. The confession is that my reflections, my examples, will be influenced by my knowledge of Western Europe. The burden of the proof, in extrapolating to the larger picture, is on me. Not a light burden because my reflections go beyond Western and Western-inspired societies to embrace Communist societies as well. In this regard, there is no hiding it, I have obliged events. Originally, the essay was to focus mainly on transitions from right-wing dictatorships, with a final chapter es-saying to apply the same type of insights to still unattempted transitions from communism. But, during the drafting stage, mounting events in the Soviet Union and Poland, and anticipations of similar events in Hungary, encouraged me to make my comparisons more integral to the essay. Even at this early point, the comparisons between transitions East and West reveal common issues and behaviors that are the more striking in view of the institutional differences between the respective regimes of each area.

The encouragement to the readers is for them to read the notes at the end of the essay. Most are integral to the argument. Some are entertaining.