

Comparative Transitions to Democracy  
Masaryk University in Brno

## **Unit II. Transitions to Democracy: Types, Actors and Patterns**

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## 2.1 Transitions to Democracy and Political Science

Study of regime change has been a popular field in political science  
a very rich literature

democracy and its meaning

from XIX Century; Montesquieu

Tocqueville

Marx

Weber

breakdown of democracy

after WWI, why do democracies collapse?

since 1970s boom of the studies of democratisation

collapse of authoritarianism

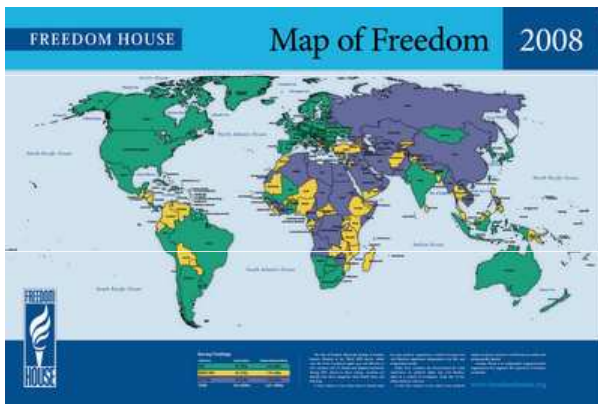
attempt to study reasons

regularities

models

laws

engineer transitions



1970s mark the start of the “transitology”

transitology, the subdiscipline of political science devoted to the study of the processes of regime change and, in particular, transitions to democracy

1980s and 1990s, the most fruitful period

Southern Europe

Latin America

Post-communist countries

Today, still an important field

extension of democracy

democratising countries

consolidation of democracy



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## 2.2 Defining Transition

Not as easy as it could appear

different understanding of what constitutes a transition

starting point

final point

Schmitter and O'Donnell: "transition in regime type implies a movement from something towards something else"

simple definition, rather vague

3 elements present

old regime

new regime

movement

abnormality

lack of institutionalisation



transition vs. liberalisation

transition implies dramatic change

two different regimes

liberalisation suggests adaptation

essence of regime not changed

temporal dimension of transition

relatively short period of time



Two ways of understanding transition

whole period of democratisation process

movement from one regime to other

the period of dramatic change

distinguishing two phases

transition

consolidation

transition vs. consolidation

transition, period of dramatic transformation

new institutions

new elite

consolidation, period of “normalisation” of the new structures

stabilisation, generation of legitimacy

profound changes in civil society



## 2.3 Studying Transitions: Theoretical Approaches

Attempt to study transitions with an scientific method

discover regularities

generate models explaining the cases

“predict” future developments

Two main approaches have dominated the study of processes of democratisation

traditional: structuralist-determinist

modern: elite-focused

Traditional approach, related with older studies of democracy

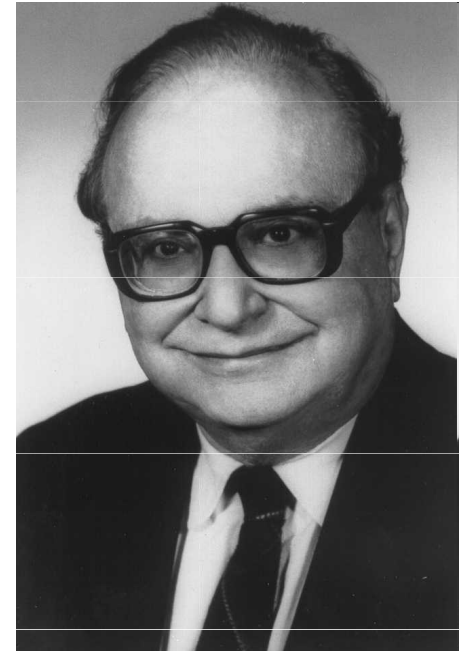
analysis of the social conditionings

transition as a consequence of social developments in a society

certain factors spur democratisation

analysing the social structures

predict the political behaviour of that society



Economic factors

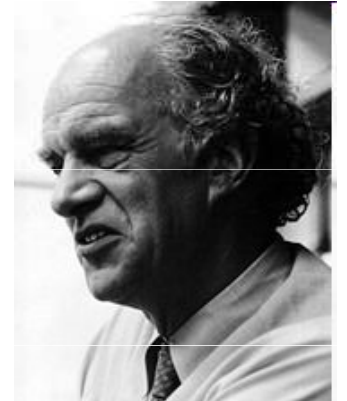
Social factors

given certain conditions, democratisation is unavoidable

Determinism

social sciences as sciences

Lipset, Rustow, Vanhanen, Przeworski



Second approach developed from the observation of the processes of democratisation in the 1970s

structural elements could not explain

why at that moment, and not before?

why did some transitions failed?

begin to study the transition in itself

transition as an object of study

so, the final result is determined by the product of the transition

transitologists



Focus their study in actors of the transition

leaving elite

“democratisers”

masses

path dependency approach

the final result is determined by the different steps taken

at the beginning of the transition we do not know the  
final result

Linz, Stepan, O'Donnell, Schmitter



## 2.4 Studying Transitions: The Old Regime

It is common sense to think that to understand processes of democratisation it is necessary to study the regime from which the transition is attempted

duality democratic/non-democratic regimes

but are all non-democratic regimes the same?

the answer is not

Depending on the old regime, the transition is going to be different

we can distinguish between

authoritarian

totalitarian regimes

traditional distinction

how to define totalitarianism

attempt of total control of the society

a guiding ideology

suppression of pluralism

strong degree of violence

capacity to mobilise the society



But this is a controversial concept  
politically “contaminated”

Cold War

how many countries are real examples of totalitarian regimes?

theories of post-totalitarianism

Other categorisation that could help us to understand the mode of the process of democratisation would be the type of regime

types of dictatorships

party type

military

“personalist”

need to study the leading elite

internal homogeneity

unity or split (hard-soft liners)

relation with civil society



## 2.5 Studying Transitions: Actors

In order to understand a transition and its outcomes is necessary to analyse the relevant actors that take part in it

We can divide the actors in three main categories

leaving elite

civil

military

how strong they are

capacity to resist

capacity to dictate the conditions

“democratisers”

size of opposition

how well organised they are

internal division or unity

capacity to engage the rest of the society  
and mobilise it



## External Actors

the international environment can make easier or more difficult the transition

favourable external environment

difficult international context

sometimes, primacy of the external over the internal

mediators

external actors intervening directly

both facilitating and making transition impossible



## 2.6 Studying Transitions: The Process

The way in which the process takes place is central in order to understand the output of the process of democratisation and the result of the transition

Three different types of transitions can be identified

### a) Rupture/revolutionary

the new regime is completely different to the old one

no continuities

new elite

revolution

violent

peaceful

weakness of the old regime

openers finish with it

does not mean that the sociological base of the regime disappears



b) Reform/adaptation

transition is negotiated old-new elite

weakness of new elite

strength of old elite

support of population

pact: trade-offs

political power for economic power

legal “sanctuaries”

imposed institutions

avoid a violent revolution



c) Imposed

transition is imposed by external actors

question is how much an imposed regime can last...

## 2.7 Comparing Transitions: How Far Should we Go?

Comparative approach

analysis of variables present in different political systems in order to draw conclusions valid for more cases than the one studied

Comparative Pol. Science can use comparison in two directions

Possible to compare very similar countries

“most similar systems”, try to find two countries that share as many features as possible, ideally all but one, explaining dissimilar political outcomes relating them to the influence of that dissimilar feature (independent variable)

Possible to compare very different cases

“most different systems”, try to find two countries dissimilar in as much features as possible, ideally all but one, and try to explain similar political outcomes relating them to the influence of that similar features

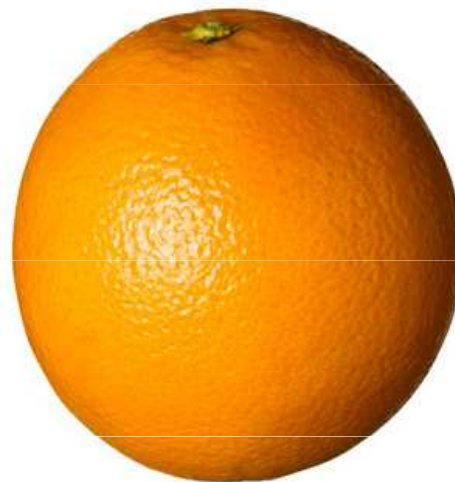
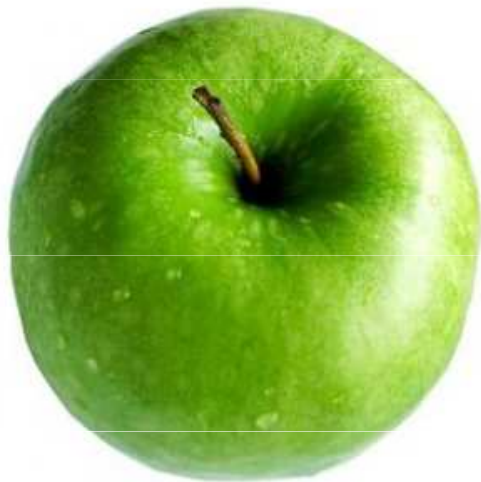


## Advantages of Comparison

- it provides a global vision
- creation of general models, universal aim
- create of categories and rankings
- possible to study transnational phenomena
- know more about our "local" objects of study

## Dangers of Comparison

- compare badly
- know our limitations
- perfect theories vs. wrong realities





**Survey Findings**

Freedom Status	Country Breakdown	Population Breakdown (in billions)
FREE	90 (47%)	3.03 (46%)
PARTLY FREE	60 (31%)	1.19 (18%)
NOT FREE	43 (22%)	2.39 (36%)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>193 (100%)</b>	<b>6.61 (100%)</b>

The Map of Freedom reflects the findings of Freedom House's *Freedom in the World 2008* survey, which rates the level of political rights and civil liberties in 193 countries and 15 related and disputed territories during 2007. Based on these ratings, countries are divided into three categories: Free, Partly Free, and Not Free.

A Free country is one where there is broad scope

for open political competition, a climate of respect for civil liberties, significant independent civic life, and independent media.

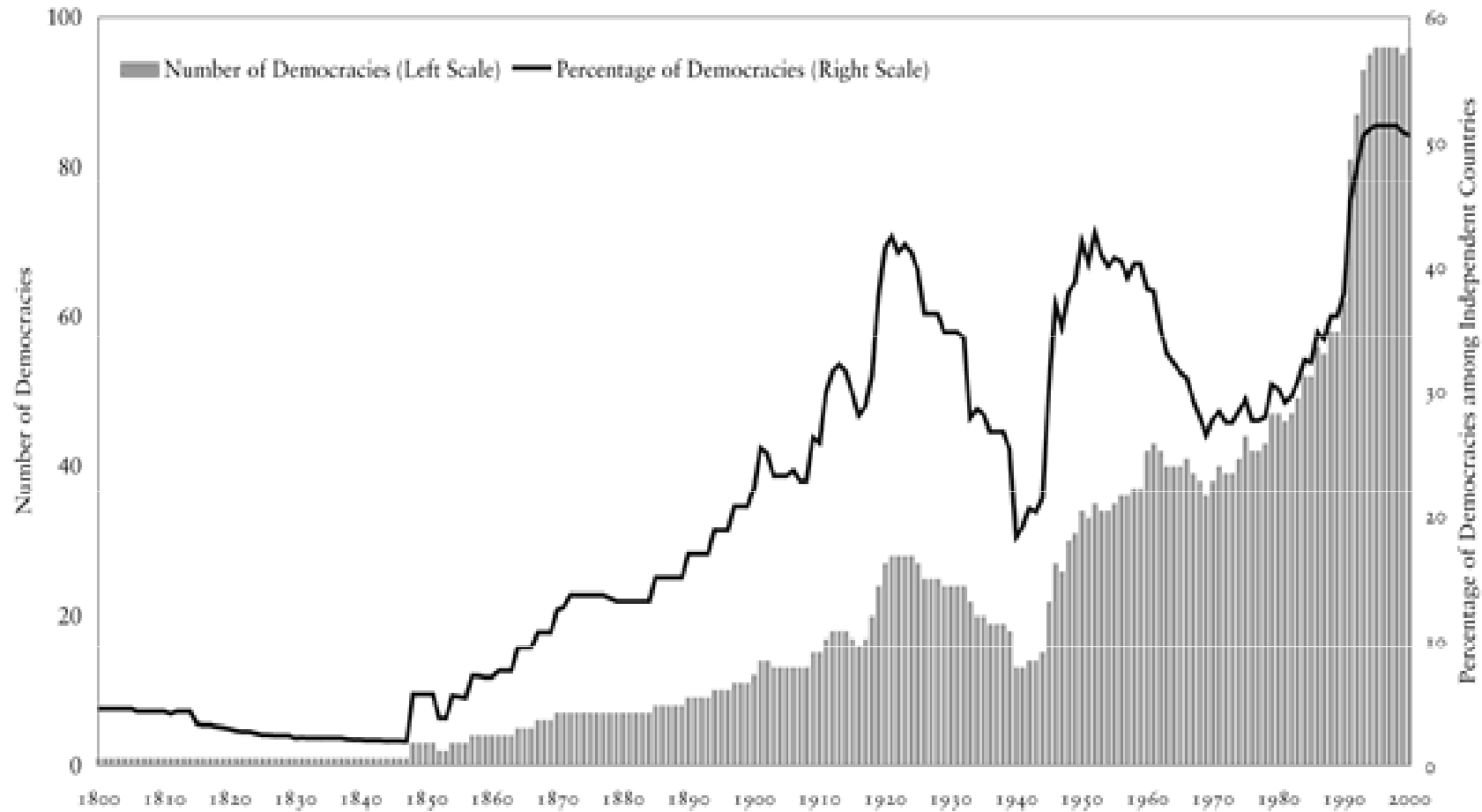
Partly Free countries are characterized by some restrictions on political rights and civil liberties, often in a context of corruption, weak rule of law, ethnic strife, or civil war.

A Not Free country is one where basic political

rights are absent, and basic civil liberties are widely and systematically denied.

Freedom House is an independent nongovernmental organization that supports the expansion of freedom worldwide.

[www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org)



Source: Carles Boix, *Equality, inequality, and the choice of political institutions*, *Public Policy*, 135, 2006 [back](#)