

Uncertain Knowledge and Democratic Transitions: Revisiting O'Donnell and Schmitter's *Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies*

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Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter's *Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* is one of the most influential texts on the study of democratic transitions in contemporary political science. Nevertheless, while O'Donnell and Schmitter emphasized the provisional, contingent, and uncertain character of their reflections on regime change, later scholars constructed a discourse of "transitology," which theorized about regime change more broadly and which, thereby, overlooked a key component of the two authors' original work—its tentative character as an intervention in a complex and rapidly changing situation. This article highlights the tensions between O'Donnell and Schmitter's normative and political intervention into a historically uncertain period, and the subsequent research on transitions. Through a review of the volume, the article illuminates the relation of normative political practice to social scientific inquiry in the field of democratization.

Polity (2015) 47, 114–139. doi:10.1057/pol.2014.26; published online 22 December 2014

Keywords democratization; transitology; regime change; Guillermo O'Donnell; Philippe Schmitter; transitions from authoritarian rule

Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter's *Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (1986), that "little green book" as some social scientists have come to call it, served as the summary to their four-volume research project, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*.¹ The project began as a series of conferences at

I wish to thank Cyrus Ernesto Zirakzadeh, the editorial team of *Polity*, and three anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and suggestions. The article has also benefited at various stages from the feedback of my colleagues, including Brendon Westler, Bogdan Popa, Mike Kovanda, and Laura Bucci. A special thank you is owed to Jeffrey C. Isaac, whose encouragement and keen editorial eye were especially helpful for the development of the article.

1. Gerardo L. Munck and Richard Owen Snyder, *Passion, Craft and Method in Comparative Politics* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 329.

the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. Its purpose was to examine the initial stages of the Third Wave of democratization—primarily the overthrow of the Estado Novo dictatorship in Portugal, the restoration of democracy in Greece after the demise of the Papadopoulos military regime, and the democratization of Spain following the death of Franco.² Between 1979 and 1981, a group of scholars and policy practitioners attempted to provide a rigorous, empirically based analysis of the dynamics behind these regime changes.

The project's subsequent influence on the field of comparative democratization has been immense. Most studies today that address issues of regime typology, the dynamics of negotiated transitions, and the role of political elites in both authoritarian and democratic regimes have been influenced by this collective work. According to Gerardo Munck, “contemporary political science would be unimaginable” without the *Transitions* project, especially because it inspired and was a seminal contribution to the emerging field of “transitology”—the body of research focusing on the comparative study of democratization processes and regime change that emerged during the 1990s.³ Although scholars like Barrington Moore, Jr. and Seymour Martin Lipset had paved the way for the comparative historical study of the paths to democracy, the innovative element in O'Donnell and Schmitter's project was found in the summary volume, *Tentative Conclusions*. There, the authors introduced agency, historical contingency, and uncertainty into the analysis of regime change.⁴ In their thinking, political skill and leadership became just as important to the prospects of democracy as a country's social structure, level of economic development, and long-term historical trajectory.⁵

Tentative Conclusions was written at a time when much was up in the air about the future of the new post-authoritarian governments. The volume captured and

2. O'Donnell noted that when he and his colleagues began their work on transitions in the late 1970s and early 1980s, they were not responding to democratization in Latin America, because those processes had barely begun. The mid-1970s transitions in Southern Europe served as the primary inspiration behind their project. See Guillermo O'Donnell, “In Partial Defense of an Evanescent ‘Paradigm,’” *Journal of Democracy* 13 (July 2002): 6–12.

3. Gerardo L. Munck, “Democratic Theory after *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*,” *Perspectives on Politics* 9 (June 2011): 333–43, at 333. To my knowledge, the scholarly discussion of transitions preceded the earliest use of the term “transitology.” The earliest use of that term that I was able to locate was in Nibaldo Galleguillos and Jorge Nef, “Introduction: The Uneasy Road to Democracy,” *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 15 (1990): 7–25.

4. As with any form of theoretical and conceptual innovation, O'Donnell and Schmitter's insights had earlier precedents, such as Dankwart Rustow, “Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model,” *Comparative Politics* 2 (April 1970): 337–63. Rustow, too, emphasized temporal discontinuity in the evolution of democracy and posited a Weberian ideal type of transition from oligarchy to democracy. He also argued that choices and decisions, particularly by a small elite, figure heavily into the outcome of a transition.

5. A summary of this development can be found in Scott Mainwaring, “Transitions to Democracy and Democratic Consolidation: Theoretical and Comparative Issues,” in *Issues in Democratic Consolidation: The New South American Democracies in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Scott Mainwaring, Guillermo O'Donnell, and J. Samuel Valenzuela (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 294–341.

articulated this moment of historical uncertainty through a precarious set of hypotheses and “thoughtful wishing” about the new possibilities for democracy in the region. Because O’Donnell and Schmitter were keenly aware of the contingent and open-ended nature of the processes they were studying, they wrote in a provisional and hypothetical manner. They also reflected in passing on the limitations of conventional political science during moments of transition. The “tentative” and “uncertain” character of the knowledge disseminated during that specific historical moment speaks to the study’s temporally constrained and epistemically bounded nature.

The historically uncertain background of the *Transitions* project can be contrasted with its reception and influence on subsequent scholarship. Even though its influence on the study of democratization is undeniable, later scholars have overlooked the “tentativeness” announced in the subtitle of the project’s most general and programmatic volume. If the original rationale for the *Transitions* project was to draw upon present experiences to help shepherd effective transfers of regime power in the future, the successes of the Southern European and Latin American cases raised expectations that similar democratic transitions could occur in other authoritarian contexts. This led to the emergence of a new area of disciplinary research dedicated to transitions. Later scholars, however, downplayed the tentativeness and contingency present in O’Donnell and Schmitter’s original contribution. The attempts of transitology research to stretch these insights across regional and historical contexts began to overshadow the original project’s situated character as a political intervention. As a result, the transitions framework has had a mixed legacy in other regions; and this has spurred debates about its applicability to other contexts, including the post-communist world.

The first goal of this article is to describe O’Donnell and Schmitter’s belief that they were contributing to a wave of political change through their contingent and provisional theorizing. O’Donnell and Schmitter wanted their comparative and systematic study of regime transitions to contribute to a desired end, democracy, and they viewed their text as a form of knowledge that would affect a unique historical conjuncture. This article, therefore, approaches *Transitions* from a meta-theoretical perspective, and views it as a form of historically bounded and epistemically constrained *practical* political science, undertaken for the purpose of engaging with the political problems of its time. This topic is expanded in the next section, which reviews the theoretical implications of *Tentative Conclusions* regarding the contingency and uncertainty of regime change in relation to the generation of scientific knowledge. That section also suggests that the practical and theoretical mission of *Transitions* can be understood (and in fact *was* understood by O’Donnell and Schmitter themselves) as a kind of Machiavellian political science.

Of course, O'Donnell and Schmitter were also empirical researchers of a Weberian cast. They clearly shared with Weber a number of underlying assumptions about the nature of social scientific research—for example, the distinction between facts and values, and the belief that true understanding can be approached through a process of systematic inquiry that combines conceptual definition, the examination of specific cases, and the refinement of theory in light of new evidence. At the same time, Weber emphasized that social facts are never freestanding but exist within specific cultural contexts. In addition, the social scientist's point of view is shaped by his or her own cultural and historical context.⁶ O'Donnell and Schmitter were attuned to this second Weberian point, and knew that their research agenda was based on a set of pressing concerns driven by new political developments, which required engagement on their own terms.⁷

In recent years, the idea of a practical political science has garnered significant attention. Especially after the Perestroika movement, a number of scholars have challenged what they saw as conventional assumptions about the objectivity of social scientific research and about a sharp “fact/value” distinction.⁸ To be clear, O'Donnell and Schmitter did not anticipate the Perestroikan conception of “phronetic social science,” and they largely avoided the sorts of epistemological and hermeneutic questions raised by a phronesis-based critique. But O'Donnell and Schmitter were deeply mindful of the extent to which the contemporary dilemmas of democratization both inspired and gave meaning to their work. Their research was therefore emphatically practical. It was a concerted and problem-driven engagement with a set of new events, animated by the hope that scientific understanding would inform policy and facilitate more democratic outcomes.

6. Max Weber, “‘Objectivity’ in Social Science and Social Policy,” in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, ed. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch (New York: The Free Press, 1949), 24–37.

7. In Weberian fashion, O'Donnell remarks that “Values determine your research questions, that is, questions come from your moral concerns and political engagements.” Guillermo O'Donnell, “Democratization, Political Engagement, and Agenda-Setting Research,” in *Passion, Craft, and Method*, ed. Munck and Snyder, 297.

8. Works like Bent Flyvbjerg's *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How it Can Succeed Again* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Sanford F. Schram and Brian Caterino's edited volume *Making Political Science Matter* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Flyvbjerg, Todd Landman and Schram's *Real Social Science: Applied Phronesis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012) have contrasted the Aristotelian notions of *phronesis* (practical wisdom) and *episteme* (knowledge), and have discussed the tension between detached and engaged scholarship. The purpose of those works has been to contribute to the development of a hermeneutical, self-reflexive framework that integrates social scientific knowledge with the resolution of practical problems, and thereby to reorient some basic premises of social scientific research. For contemporary evaluations of Perestroika, see the exchange between David D. Laitin (“The Perestroikan Challenge to Social Science”) and Bent Flyvbjerg (“A Perestroikan Straw Man Answers Back”) reprinted in Schram and Caterino, 33–86. More recently, the effectiveness of the Perestroika movement has been discussed in a symposium in the pages of *PS: Political Science & Politics* 43 (2010): 725–54.

In O'Donnell and Schmitter's opinion, the democratic openings of the Third Wave were exceptional political events. Therefore, the knowledge produced about them—as a “practical” and normatively attuned political science—would also be unique, contingent, and eventful. Nevertheless, these tentative findings had a practical dimension in the sense that they helped democratic agents grapple with the political problems at hand, even if without the promise that these scholarly insights could apply beyond the concrete situation.

The article's second goal is to use the original mission and normative context of the *Transitions* research program to reevaluate the discourse of transitology that appeared afterwards. Although the emergence of transitology from an uncertain political context and its later systematization into a form of disciplinary knowledge evoke Kuhn's arguments about the logic of scientific revolutions, *Transitions* is not an example of revolutionary paradigmatic knowledge in the Kuhnian sense.⁹ O'Donnell and Schmitter's project did not introduce a paradigmatic revolution in the discipline because they conceived of their work as a variation on themes previously addressed by figures like Moore, Lipset, Juan Linz, and Alfred Stepan.¹⁰ However, O'Donnell and Schmitter were alive to Kuhn's insights about the normalization of science, writing that “‘normal science methodology’ is inappropriate in rapidly changing situations, where those very parameters of political action are in flux.”¹¹ The authors' invocation of Kuhnian vocabulary to highlight the contrast between what they called “normal science methodology” and the flux of the current transitions suggests that in their minds, the indefinite nature of the phenomena they were attempting to grasp posed a unique theoretical challenge. The later incorporation (and marginalization) of various aspects of O'Donnell and

9. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996). Scholars continue to debate whether Kuhn's insights are applicable to the human sciences, or are meant to describe the development of knowledge only in the natural sciences. Recently, Rudra Sil and Peter J. Katzenstein, in “Analytic Eclecticism in the Study of World Politics: Reconfiguring Problems and Mechanisms across Research Traditions,” *Perspectives on Politics* 8 (May 2010): 411–31, and Thomas C. Walker, in “The Perils of Paradigm Mentalities: Revisiting Kuhn, Lakatos, and Popper,” *Perspectives on Politics* 8 (May 2010): 433–51, have questioned the usefulness of the Kuhnian paradigm framework for social science. For a more positive evaluation, see Nelson W. Polsby, “Social Science and Scientific Change: A Note on Thomas S. Kuhn's Contribution,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 1 (1998): 199–210.

10. For an overview of this research tradition, see James Mahoney, “Knowledge Accumulation in Comparative Historical Research: The Case of Democracy and Authoritarianism,” in *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences*, ed. James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer (New York: Cambridge University Press), 131–74.

11. Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule Vol. 4: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 4. Recall that Kuhn described how normal science advances by building on past research: its object is to “solve a puzzle for whose very existence the validity of the paradigm must be assumed” (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 80). The new insights of scientific revolutions tend to become institutionalized and subjected to a regularizing and disciplinary process of vetting by the scientific community—as “research firmly based upon one or more past scientific achievements … that some particular scientific community acknowledges for a time as supplying the foundation for its further practice” (*Ibid.* 10).

Schmitter's conclusions raises questions about exactly how the generation of new theory affects the accumulation of social scientific knowledge. The section, therefore, looks at how O'Donnell and Schmitter's practical, contingent approach was modified by later scholars, and situates the book in relation to the growth and development of transitology as a field of study.

The article's concluding section reflects more broadly on the implications of the contrast between O'Donnell and Schmitter's approach and that of later transitologists for the study of democracy. O'Donnell and Schmitter emphasized that rare and unpredictable political moments, such as regime change, influence the form that social scientific knowledge takes. Not only that, but awareness of this provisional and contingent element in social scientific theorizing has normative implications, when the construction of theory is reconceived as a form of political intervention. O'Donnell and Schmitter had conceptualized democracy as an always-present possibility, which may emerge out of the most improbable arrangement of circumstances. This is a radical way of thinking about democracy: not simply as an object of knowledge, but as a unified process bridging theory and practice. Rather than conceiving of democracy only as a consolidated regime, or seeing it as an end stage to be reached once and for all, they viewed democracy as an open horizon of perpetually ongoing contestation, and as bridging the praxis of scholars with the praxis of engaged citizens.

Uncertainty and Political Intervention

In an early review of the *Transitions* project, Nancy Bermeo remarked that, "For better or worse, social scientists thrive on political change." She also noted a downside to the Schmitter-O'Donnell endeavor: "as is inevitable with collections of such practical political importance, events have moved much faster than the publication process so that some of the essays are out of date."¹² As Bermeo suggested, political change is essential to the growth and development of social scientific knowledge because change poses new puzzles, and because it exerts pressure on scholars either to reconcile change with existing theories and conceptual frameworks, or to redefine them anew.

In the 1960s, Moore, Lipset, and Samuel Huntington wrote seminal works on political change that influenced O'Donnell and Schmitter.¹³ O'Donnell explained in an interview, in which he reflected on his own career trajectory, that this "historical-structural" approach took into account "large structures: states, classes,

12. Nancy Bermeo, "Rethinking Regime Change," *Comparative Politics* 22 (April 1990): 359–77, at 359, 373.

13. Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966); Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (New York: Anchor Books, 1960); Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).

and the international context.” A scholar was expected to understand the rationality of actors within that set of circumstances.¹⁴ Before the *Transitions* project, both Schmitter and O’Donnell wrote within that tradition of inquiry and sought to explain large-scale social change by “analyzing objective relationships between groups and societies,” by examining the dynamics of class relations and economic development, and by seeking to answer the question of why some countries took different historical paths than others.¹⁵

The emergence and breakdown of these large-scale structures has long interested political scientists, including O’Donnell and Schmitter. In *Tentative Conclusions*, they conceived of transition moments as “the interval between one political regime and another” that occurred between the beginning of the dissolution of an authoritarian regime and the installation of another regime—whether democracy, a new authoritarianism, or a revolutionary alternative.¹⁶ What made these transition moments unique, however, was that they were characterized by a “high degree of structural indeterminacy”—that is, a loosening of existing structural frameworks that situate actors’ behavior under normal circumstances. Because of the high degree of structural indeterminacy, political agency and chance take on more prominent roles in determining future outcomes.¹⁷ As O’Donnell later put it, “Since in transitions there are not established rules to the political game, the impact of the whole set of structural variables diminishes at those times of generalized uncertainty.”¹⁸ In other words, when the rules of the political game are not clearly defined, political outcomes rest on a series of tactical maneuvers among a number of actors rather than on any previously agreed upon procedural framework.

O’Donnell and Schmitter viewed a transition as a series of strategic moves, contingent upon the other side’s actions, that occurs during a brief window of opportunity. At each stage of moves and counter-moves, there is an element of unpredictability that requires the actions of political agents for its unfolding and resolution. (As we will see in the next section, the tactical metaphor of a multilayered game in the midst of uncertainty differs from the institutionalized uncertainty of consolidated democracies during “normal” times.¹⁹) O’Donnell and Schmitter, when describing causal relations, maintained that transitional moments

14. Munck and Snyder, *Passion, Craft, and Method*, 286.

15. Mahoney, “Knowledge Accumulation,” 151.

16. O’Donnell and Schmitter, *Tentative Conclusions*, 6.

17. *Ibid.* 19.

18. Munck and Snyder, *Passion, Craft, and Method*, 292.

19. As Karl and Schmitter would later write in “From an Iron Curtain to a Paper Curtain: Grounding Transitologists or Students of Postcommunism?” *Slavic Review* 54 (Winter 1995): 965–78, uncertainty means that “at the time, ‘normal politics’ were no longer possible; actors no longer knew what their resources were, what their preferred strategies ought to be, who their appropriate allies were or even who their enemies should be” (969).

create asymmetrical dynamics, which are context sensitive and affected by “the high degree of indeterminacy of social and political action and the inordinate degrees of freedom that collective and even individual action may have at some momentous junctures of the transition.”²⁰ By asymmetrical dynamics, they meant that a breakdown of democracy and a transition *to* authoritarianism was not merely the inverse of a transition from authoritarianism *to* democracy. Whereas the breakdown of democratic regimes often seems inevitable (if not destined to occur), transitions away from authoritarianism open up greater spaces of possibility, bringing with them hope, opportunity, choice, and inventiveness: “What actors do and do not do seems much less tightly determined by ‘macro’ structural factors during the transitions we study here than during the breakdown of democratic regimes.”²¹

Students of historical institutionalism, often influenced by the work of Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier, have viewed these moments of transition through the lens of critical junctures—that is, as “a period of significant change, which typically occurs in distinct ways in different countries (or in other units of analysis) and which is hypothesized to produce distinct legacies.”²² Such scholars interpret these short and infrequent periods as an opening of the range of choices before political actors in which actions will have greater consequences for the future. Critical junctures thus add contingency into the structural regularities that influence and determine the social world. This approach can demonstrate how the causes of some social phenomena are found not in more temporally proximate “triggers,” but rather in the unfolding of processes over the long term.²³

The notion of critical junctures, however, reinforces certain naturalist assumptions that characterize some strands of qualitative research. As Mark Bevir and Asaf Kedar have pointed out, naturalism entails a way of thinking about concepts that is prone to both reification and essentialism.²⁴ According to the naturalist view, “the

20. O'Donnell and Schmitter, *Tentative Conclusions*, 18–19.

21. *Ibid.* 19.

22. Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena: Critical Junctures, the Labor Movement, and Regime Dynamics in Latin America* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 29. Giovanni Capoccia and R. Daniel Kelemen, in “The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative, and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism,” *World Politics* 59 (April 2007): 341–69, expand at 343: “Critical junctures are characterized by a situation in which the structural (that is, economic, cultural, ideological, organizational) influences on political action are significantly relaxed for a relatively short period, with two main consequences: the range of plausible choices open to powerful political actors expands substantially and the consequences of their decisions for the outcome of interest are potentially much more momentous. Contingency, in other words, becomes paramount.”

23. See James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer, “Comparative Historical Analysis: Achievements and Agendas” (3–40); Paul Pierson, “Big, Slow-Moving, and ... Invisible: Macrosocial Processes in the Study of Comparative Politics” in *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences*, ed. Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, 177–207.

human sciences study fixed objects of inquiry that possess observable and, at least to some extent, measurable properties, such that they are amenable to explanations in terms of general laws.²⁵ Consequently, an over-reliance on naturalist epistemology in qualitative research risks construing explanation as the result of a “unidirectional subject–object relationship.” That is, the social scientist crafts explanations at a detached, observer-level distance from her or his research.²⁶ Critics of naturalism maintain that the generation of social scientific knowledge actually contains a dialogical dimension between the scholar and the social actors and social phenomena being studied. Instead of attempting to abstract themselves from their uniquely situated perspectives (says the anti-naturalist critic), scholars ought to embrace the irreducible nature of their particular historical, linguistic, and normative standpoints.²⁷ Bevir and Kedar therefore recommend that social scientists always attempt to see themselves in relation to their objects of study—an epistemic turn that, ostensibly, applies to a wide range of questions and research agendas.

O'Donnell and Schmitter never adopted an explicitly anti-naturalist methodology, and they were not concerned with developing a new meta-theory of practical political science. They instead sought to generate new theoretical insights from empirical observations for the purpose of addressing pressing practical problems. Nevertheless, the anti-naturalist critique can help illuminate the self-reflexive understanding of contingency in *Tentative Conclusions*, an understanding that renders its argument distinct from some of the assumptions found in the literature on comparative democratization.

For O'Donnell and Schmitter, the sudden unfolding of unexpected events (such as the opening of the Third Wave, or more recently, the Arab Spring) also affects the epistemic-discursive position of the scholar who otherwise may be operating within the conceptual framework of the “old” order.²⁸ Such sporadic and transformative moments therefore can affect the trajectory of the discipline and the processes of knowledge creation in which scholars are involved. After all, the process of knowledge production occurs not only *about* a historically contingent period of time but, as in the case of the *Transitions* project, *within* that period.

24. Mark Bevir and Asaf Kedar, “Concept Formation in Political Science: An Anti-Naturalist Critique of Qualitative Methodology,” *Perspectives on Politics* 6 (September 2008): 503–17, at 504.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.* 507.

27. *Ibid.* 506.

28. This approach is expanded upon in Andreas Schedler, “Taking Uncertainty Seriously: The Blurred Boundaries of Democratic Transition and Consolidation,” *Democratization* 8 (Winter 2001): 1–22. Schedler argues that scholars cannot continue to stress uncertainty when conceptualizing processes of transition and ignore that same uncertainty when measuring these processes: “Conceptually, most scholars seem to accept uncertainty as a defining feature of transition and consolidation processes. But operationally, except in case studies that adopt a close focus on actors and patterns of interaction, uncertainty does not play any role in most empirical treatments of comparative democratization” (5).

Implicit in O'Donnell and Schmitter's analysis is the insight that regime change is an event that breaks apart not only the previously existing material structures and relations of power that make up the object of analysis (in this case the authoritarian regime), but also the corresponding epistemic and discursive structures necessary for its study. Regime change is an event that problematizes knowledge previously taken for granted, challenges the viability of existing concepts upon which a scientific discipline has developed up to that point, and provokes a renewed questioning of the basic premises behind the theoretical explanations used up till then. Thus, even though *Transitions* did not undermine the foundations of comparative politics research as a whole (in the Kuhnian sense of a paradigm shift), it had important implications for the then-dominant theories about the connection between modernization and democracy. For this reason, as Schmitter noted, the outcomes of regime change in Southern Europe provoked an "agonizing reappraisal of assumptions about the nature of the fit between regime type, class structure, economic development and international context in those parts of the world."²⁹

O'Donnell and Schmitter, furthermore, saw themselves not simply as scholars trying to remotely understand a series of events but also as engaged participants with something at stake. Their self-perceptions highlight the eminently political nature of the *Transitions* project. As Ido Oren remarked in *Our Enemies and Us*, American political science is often blind to its motivations: "the presupposition of subject-object separation is belied by the reality of political science's enmeshment in the politics it studies."³⁰ O'Donnell and Schmitter, however, did recognize that *Transitions* was a reflection of the politics of its time. Nicolas Guilhot recounts in *The Democracy Makers* that their project originated at The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars—an institution seeking to bridge academia with the policy-making liberal establishment.³¹ With *Transitions*, O'Donnell and Schmitter turned from dependency theory, which had characterized much of Latin American studies during the 1970s, and toward a microanalysis of political elites and an emphasis on the autonomy of political outcomes from structural determinants. Guilhot points out that this analytic shift dovetailed with the foreign policy establishment's traditional goal of "promoting democratic elites that would be moderate, respectful of capitalistic interests, and pro-American," by putting

29. Philippe C. Schmitter, "Speculations about the Prospective Demise of Authoritarian Regimes and its Possible Consequences (I)," in *Transitions to Democracy: Comparative Perspectives from Southern Europe, Latin America and Eastern Europe*, ed. Geoffrey Pridham (Aldershot, UK: Dartmouth Publishing Company, 1995), 88.

30. Ido Oren, *Our Enemies and Us: America's Rivalries and the Making of Political Science* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 177.

31. Nicolas Guilhot, *The Democracy Makers: Human Rights and the Politics of Global Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 137–54.

forward “scientifically a moderate, professional, and non-threatening conception of democratization.”³²

In their text, O’Donnell and Schmitter admit that they shared a common normative stance about liberal democracy. They believed “that the instauration and eventual consolidation of political democracy constitutes *per se* a desirable goal.”³³ In later retrospectives on the project’s legacy, both reaffirmed that, in O’Donnell’s words, they were “committed to help the demise of the authoritarian regimes that plagued these regions—ours was academic work with an intense political and moral intent.”³⁴ According to O’Donnell, their analytic turn from socioeconomic factors and toward political ones (individual agency, the indeterminacy of the moment) was based in part on a pragmatic belief “that this way of thinking might be useful for stimulating transitions away from authoritarian regimes.”³⁵ By engaging in “thoughtful wishing” the authors “assumed that purposive political action could be effective, and that good analysis might be helpful to this end.”³⁶ Likewise, Schmitter stated that they “tried to think like politicians and put ourselves in their shoes.” This may explain why the book traveled beyond the academy and into the hands of activists, journalists, and politicians (including Nelson Mandela).³⁷ Schmitter, as if invoking Bevir and Kedar’s argument about the dialogical quality of social science, remarked that the book had become “part of the political process, not just something external to it.”³⁸

This practical and political aspect of *Transitions* becomes even more salient when one recalls the influence that Machiavelli’s writings exerted on the authors. Even before looking closely at the text itself, one can see a tantalizing parallel between Machiavelli, the aspiring advisor to a prince, and O’Donnell and Schmitter, the professional intellectuals (and in O’Donnell’s case, a former activist) who hope to provide “a useful instrument—pieces of a map—for those who are today venturing, and who tomorrow will be venturing, on the uncertain path toward the construction of democratic forms of political organization.”³⁹ Of course, one must be careful not to overstate the similarity. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli at times seems to endorse the use of

32. *Ibid.*, 149 and 154.

33. O’Donnell and Schmitter, *Tentative Conclusions*, 3.

34. O’Donnell, “In Partial Defense of an Evanescence ‘Paradigm’,” 9–10. Even more recently Schmitter, in “Reflections on ‘Transitology’: Before and After,” in *Reflections on Uneven Democracies: The Legacy of Guillermo O’Donnell*, ed. Daniel Brinks, Marcelo Leiras, and Scott Mainwaring (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 80, has slightly reverted from the explicitly political impetus behind the project: “In the *Transitions* volume, we may have applauded the possibility of pacted and even imposed transitions, but we did not predict their increase (nor did we harbor any illusions about our capacity to promote them).”

35. O’Donnell, “In Partial Defense of an Evanescence ‘Paradigm’,” 10.

36. *Ibid.*

37. Munck and Snyder, *Passion, Craft, and Method*, 291, 328.

38. *Ibid.* 328.

39. O’Donnell and Schmitter, *Tentative Conclusions*, 5.

any means in the pursuit of power, and there is little trace of such thinking in O'Donnell and Schmitter's volume. They insisted that uncertainty necessitates pragmatism in politics; that high stakes mean that both incumbents and opposition often must make significant compromises. They warned at one point that "Morality is not as fickle and silent as it was when Machiavelli wrote his experiential maxims of political prudence; transitional actors must satisfy not only vital interests but also vital ideals—standards of what is decent and just."⁴⁰

At the same time, the two authors maintained that Machiavelli was crucial for how they approached and framed their work. Sheldon Wolin once argued that Machiavelli's writings were distinctive in that he created "a truly 'political' philosophy which concentrated solely on political issues and single-mindedly explored the range of phenomena relevant to it."⁴¹ This aspect of Machiavelli's thought—the situated and practical character of his political reflections—was especially important for Schmitter, who called Machiavelli the "founder and patron-saint" of transitology.⁴² In many writings and remarks, Schmitter displayed a fascination with Machiavelli and expressed his indebtedness to the Florentine thinker. For him "Machiavelli *was* the theorist of regime change," and it was thanks to Machiavelli's reflections on the importance of uncertainty (*fortuna*) and agency (*virtù*) in politics that "transitology was born (and promptly forgotten) with limited scientific pretensions and marked practical concerns."⁴³ Schmitter sought to come up with "a pure Machiavellian interpretation of regime transitions." In his words, "to study such moments, [Machiavelli] said, you need a new political science. What I got from Machiavelli was that a distinctive set of assumptions about politics is required to study transitions."⁴⁴

Furthermore, some scholars have tried to understand Machiavelli as a theorist of "the political" and of political praxis.⁴⁵ There is an intriguing overlap between

40. *Ibid.* 30.

41. Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 189.

42. Schmitter, "Reflections on 'Transitology,'" 72. O'Donnell and Schmitter's concern with regime change and with the uncertainty of the political moment immediately drew attention from scholars who noticed a Machiavellian element in the *Transitions* project. According to Schmitter, some considered the project "insufficiently Machiavellian—perhaps for not having put theoretical [sic] squarely and aggressively at the service of improving the prospect for a republican-cum-democratic outcome"; and some considered it "excessively Machiavellian—perhaps for its assumption that political regimes are not merely given by culture or imposed by circumstance, but are willed and chosen into being" (Schmitter, in "Speculations About the Prospective Demise of Authoritarian Regimes and its Possible Consequences," 88). O'Donnell, however, reports that he has "never been very attracted to Machiavelli" (Munck and Snyder, *Passion, Craft, and Method*, 299).

43. Munck and Snyder, *Passion, Craft, and Method*, 325; Philippe C. Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl, "The Conceptual Travels of Transitologists and Consolidologists: How Far to the East Should They Attempt to Go?" *Slavic Review* 53 (Spring 1994): 173–85.

44. Munck and Snyder, *Passion, Craft, and Method*, 325. Along with his admiration of Machiavelli, Schmitter (in "Reflections on 'Transitology,'" 74) also invokes Gramsci for "updating" Machiavelli's thoughts about agency for contemporary times with his notion of the party as the "modern Prince."

this interpretation of his thinking and the earlier reflections of O'Donnell and Schmitter. They used Machiavelli to illustrate the same theme—the importance of agency and contingency to politics—and to explore the existence of “the political” as a dynamic and autonomous realm of activity that operates according to its own logic rather than being a byproduct of sociological or economic forces. “Political democracy usually emerges from a nonlinear, highly uncertain, and imminently reversible process involving the cautious definition of certain spaces and moves on a multilayered board,” as Schmitter put it.⁴⁶ Schmitter’s “new political science” referenced precisely this element because, as we have seen, he and O'Donnell believed that previous concepts and assumptions grounded upon a more structural form of analysis were inadequate for capturing the dynamics of the transitions before them. They therefore borrowed from Machiavelli’s political vocabulary—*fortuna* and *virtù*—to communicate the “unexpected events” and “talents of specific individuals” that were needed to traverse this conceptual gap, and to convey the “high degree of uncertainty and indeterminacy” of transitions.⁴⁷

O'Donnell and Schmitter's use of Machiavelli, and their own stance as normatively driven academics, makes evident that *Tentative Conclusions* is not just a text about politics. It also is a text of and directed to politics, in a way that resembles Machiavelli's own bridging of theory and practice. First, the book's normativity is part and parcel of its analytics, in the sense that both authors were clearly concerned with bringing their empirical findings to bear on the promotion of democratic outcomes. Second, the text examines the implications of a political situation that at the time was in many ways still unsettled and provisional. Thus, rather than analyzing the beginning of the Third Wave as a political crisis removed from their own wishes and goals, and which could be studied neutrally, their work attempts to intervene in a historical conjuncture. In doing so, O'Donnell and Schmitter were practicing their own version of a Machiavellian science of politics.⁴⁸

45. For some recent examples, see Miguel Abensour, *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2011); Mikko Lahtinen, *Politics and Philosophy: Niccolò Machiavelli and Louis Althusser's Aleatory Materialism* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2011); John P. McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

46. O'Donnell and Schmitter, *Tentative Conclusions*, 70.

47. *Ibid.* 5, 66.

48. There is an intriguing parallel here between O'Donnell and Schmitter's invocation of Machiavelli and the interpretation of Machiavelli by Louis Althusser with regard to the development of theoretical knowledge in order to further a political goal. In *Machiavelli and Us* (London: Verso, 2001), Althusser read Machiavelli as the first theorist of the conjuncture (or, the exact balance of social and historical forces at a given moment) and suggested that *The Prince* posits a concrete political problem—the need for a revival of the Florentine Republic—in theoretical terms. In this way, the political problem presents the task of generating political knowledge, with the goal that this knowledge in turn contribute to the problem's resolution. By staging a political intervention on theoretical terms, Machiavelli, in Althusser's words, “not only formulates, but thinks, his problem *politically*—that is to say, as a contradiction in reality that cannot be removed by thought, but only by reality” (80). According to Althusser, the distinction between theory

The Return to Normality

Because of its timely insights, the *Transitions* project became a reference for the study of the subsequent wave of political changes occurring across the world in the late 1980s and '90s. Bermeo had correctly predicted that O'Donnell and Schmitter's contribution would "provoke not only wide discussion" but also spur further interest in the elite-oriented research agenda of Linz and Stepan.⁴⁹ The assumptions of both modernization and dependency theories, such as that democracy was the product of long-term structural transformations in class dynamics and socioeconomic status, were replaced with a different set of theories focusing on short-term, strategic agency on the part of political elites who could foster democracy from the demise of authoritarian rule.⁵⁰

For scholars of democratization such as James Mahoney, these theoretical shifts in the study of democracy and authoritarianism represent a form of progress in disciplinary knowledge. Mahoney contends that the presentation of new findings is, by itself, not enough for disciplinary progress to take place. New types of knowledge should also grow out of preexisting knowledge.⁵¹ Moreover, progress involves more than the acquisition of more precise descriptive and causal findings. It also involves the elaboration of more precise meta-theories—"overarching assumptions and orientations that can be used to formulate empirical puzzles and testable hypotheses, and that help analysts frame more specific research

and practice is collapsed because, "For Machiavelli it is a necessity of political practice itself that this [political] relationship involve elements of political theory. But it is the viewpoint of *political practice* alone that fixes the modality of the relationship to the elements of political theory" (17). This overlap between Althusser and O'Donnell and Schmitter on Machiavelli's insights deserves a fuller exposition that, unfortunately, falls beyond the bounds of the current article. However, it bears remembering that the scholarly literature on democratic transitions often touches upon the conjunctural character of transitions, in which the presence or absence of a single factor can sway the final outcome. For example, Gerardo L. Munck, in "Democratic Transitions in Comparative Perspective," *Comparative Politics* 26 (April 1994): 355–71: "To explain the timing of transitions, what is needed is an in-depth analysis of both the characteristics and contradictions of the *ancien régime* and the formation and activities of opposition groups" (395).

49. Bermeo, "Rethinking Regime Change," 362. See Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

50. The debate on the interplay between structural and agency or process-oriented explanations in the study of democratization is voluminous. Some examples include Herbert Kitschelt, "Political Regime Change: Structure and Process-Driven Explanations?" *American Political Science Review* 86 (December 1992): 1028–34; Scott Mainwaring, "Transitions to Democracy and Democratic Consolidation"; James Mahoney and Richard Snyder, "Rethinking Agency and Structure in the Study of Regime Change," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 34 (Summer 1999): 3–32; Rudra Sil, "The Foundations of Eclecticism: The Epistemological Status of Agency, Culture, and Structure in Social Theory," *The Journal of Theoretical Politics* 12 (July 2000): 353–87.

51. To quote Mahoney: "Accumulation does not merely entail the introduction of new knowledge or the proliferation of new empirical insights. In this sense, knowledge *accumulation* is not equivalent to knowledge *generation*. Unless the new knowledge grows out of preexisting knowledge, its addition to a research program does not signify accumulation" (132–33).

questions.”⁵² The shifts from structuralism to dependency theory to voluntarism exemplify one trajectory within political science in which knowledge about the origins of democratic and authoritarian regimes has been progressively refined.

Mahoney’s perspective clarifies why cumulative research programs offer knowledge that is “more valid and more substantively enlightening.”⁵³ At the same time, he treats the accumulation of knowledge as if it proceeded almost entirely by subsuming and reintegrating past theories, and as if this process occurred at some distance removed from the actual social and political changes taking place in a given historical conjuncture. For example, Mahoney, in constructing a history of the study of democratization, subsumes O’Donnell’s 1973 work *Modernization and Bureaucratic Authoritarianism* into a single trajectory that privileges the accumulation of knowledge about two general categories: “authoritarianism” and “democracy.” Yet in an interview (published four years after Mahoney’s essay) O’Donnell suggested that in his own eyes the research agenda on bureaucratic authoritarianism represented a significant shift in the research on authoritarian regimes: “Existing theories and typologies could not account for [the rise of new authoritarianisms], and my book, with all its flaws, offered a new, surely more cogent interpretation that, in addition, raised new research questions.”⁵⁴ Given that O’Donnell elaborated the features of a type of authoritarian regime that he saw as qualitatively different from previous instances, the inclusion of that study under a broader framework of democratization studies risks overlooking how knowledge accumulation is itself subject to the contingency of real-world developments that can “interrupt” disciplines, shifting them onto new and unexpected theoretical grounds.

Although Mahoney writes that knowledge can be subsequently called into question and thus cannot ever be proven beyond all doubt and that social science findings are always uncertain, he still largely portrays knowledge accumulation as arising from its own internal logic of scientific discovery rather than as affected by the unexpected situations in which inquirers find themselves.⁵⁵ This perspective downplays the generation of new knowledge, and especially how new trajectories of research, emerge out of the interpretations of novel and unexpected phenomena. Perhaps for this reason, Mahoney concludes that “The transitions literature, in particular, has not been the site of substantial cumulative research about causal findings.” In his historical account, the research agenda of the *Transitions* project was indebted to the earlier work of Linz and Stepan and, due to its voluntarist underpinnings, problematically saw each transition as unique and unpredictable.⁵⁶

52. *Ibid.* 136.

53. *Ibid.* 163.

54. Munck and Snyder, *Passion, Craft, and Method*, 288.

55. Mahoney, “Knowledge Accumulation,” 137, 164.

56. *Ibid.* 160.

However, O'Donnell and Schmitter's work can be approached not only from the point of view of the patient, steady accumulation of social scientific knowledge, but also as a political intervention that—by its very definition—was agency-oriented, particularistic, and context-sensitive.

Tentative Conclusions opens with the statement that it intends “to capture the extraordinary uncertainty of the transition, with its numerous surprises and difficult dilemmas.”⁵⁷ It becomes apparent almost immediately that the authors did not envision their research as a contribution to a comprehensive theory of transition.⁵⁸ Were such an ambitious project to be attempted, they stated, it would need to “include elements of accident and unpredictability, of crucial decisions taken in a hurry with very inadequate information, of actors facing irresolvable ethical dilemmas and ideological confusions, of dramatic turning points reached and passed without an understanding of their future significance.”⁵⁹

So, how best to study a phenomenon that, according to O'Donnell and Schmitter, resists easy prediction or classification? O'Donnell and Schmitter only briefly address the task of producing scientific research about uncertain moments. The authors state, while alluding to Kuhn, that description and explanation in normal social science depends on a minimal amount of nomothetic predictability. The actions that social scientists normally study rely on an anticipated stability, which is absent in the moment of transition. During these times of regime transition, actors are likely to hesitate about their interests, which may be radically transformed alongside the institutions through which they were previously channeled. For this reason, past instances of regime change cannot guarantee similar outcomes in the future. As Schmitter has recently remarked, “In the *Transitions* volume, we carefully avoided drawing inferences about the future of our cases from past patterns of regime change.”⁶⁰

While the above statement from the *Transitions* volume may further substantiate Mahoney's claim that the transitions literature did not represent a form of knowledge accumulation, other parts of the work reveal that the authors were struggling with the elusive moments of indeterminacy in their efforts to ground their research on some stable assumptions and generalizations. Although O'Donnell and Schmitter's theoretical reflections convey a significant amount of hesitation about the possibility of constructing and practicing normal science in transitional moments, the more empirically oriented aspect of their work also showed

57. O'Donnell and Schmitter, *Tentative Conclusions*, 3.

58. In a later interview, O'Donnell clarified that while “the model of transitions that Philippe and I elaborated does have some pretensions of generality, I never thought I had the knowledge or authority to say whether our model should apply to cases that I did not know well.” Cited in Munck and Snyder, *Passion, Craft, and Method*, 293.

59. O'Donnell and Schmitter, *Tentative Conclusions*, 3–4.

60. Schmitter, “Reflections on ‘Transitology,’” 76.

tendencies toward the regularization of knowledge for the sake of a more general theory of transitions. One example is the distinction they drew between the order that marks the high point of authoritarian rule, and the disorder that characterizes the uncertainty during the moment of transition. Transitions were seen as abnormal intervals between two “normal” political regimes. As they wrote in their concluding chapter,

The transition is over when “abnormality” is no longer the central feature of political life, that is, when actors have settled on and obey a set of more or less explicit rules ... Normality, in other words, becomes a major characteristic of political life when those active in politics come to expect each other to play according to the rules—and the ensemble of these rules is what we mean by a regime.⁶¹

This contrast between normality and uncertainty creates a tension, since it presents the problem of studying something that is by definition contingent.⁶² On one hand, they concede that the contingency of the transition makes it necessary to deploy tentative and uncertain knowledge in its study. The authors understood that they were dealing with new phenomena that rendered problematic the old categories and assumptions in the study of democratization. On the other hand, however, they continued to uphold a belief that positive knowledge about the uncertain dynamics of regime change could be obtained through systemic inquiry. Not only that, but their later writings on transitions are characterized by a repeated concern with precisely the question of how far and how broadly a theory of transitions could be stretched. *Tentative Conclusions* thus uneasily straddles the gap between the irregular and unpredictable moment (to which it, as an instance of scientific knowledge, owed its existence), and the normal and regular processes whose existence it needed to assume in order to remain a scientific endeavor.

Research on transitions developed in the wake of O’Donnell and Schmitter’s work took up the task of generating a broader theory about democratic transitions and consolidation. As we have seen, the transitions model placed more emphasis on agency and on political (as opposed to socioeconomic or cultural) causes, while minimizing the influence of structural constraints. In addition, the central dynamic within transitions was strategic bargaining and pacting between the incumbent authoritarians and the democratic opposition. The key issues on the table during the transition were breaking with authoritarians while eliciting their

61. O’Donnell and Schmitter, *Tentative Conclusions*, 65.

62. Schedler, “Taking Uncertainty Seriously,” 11–12. An alternate way of understanding the dichotomy between normalcy and irregularity is as an ideal-typical continuum, along which empirical phenomena fall depending on their degree of indeterminacy. However, the notion of the ideal type raises a number of other questions about the relationship of concepts to empirical phenomena that, for reasons of space, cannot be elaborated upon in this article.

cooperation and building democratic institutions. To reach a successful outcome, bargaining needed to be “realistic” and moderate. The opposition needed to reduce the range of controversial issues on the table, such as economic reforms and the retroactive prosecution of the authoritarians; needed to demobilize mass publics; needed to give the military constitutional leeway for political maneuvering and allow it to retain certain privileges; and needed to hold competitive elections that produced a government representative of both the authoritarians and the opposition.⁶³

Critics of transitology, such as Thomas Carothers, claimed that this discourse suffered from a teleological predisposition, in that the transition was treated as a stage in a broader process linked to the consolidation of a “normal” liberal democratic order.⁶⁴ Democratization was seen as unfolding in a set sequence of stages: a democratic opening, an oppositional breakthrough, and then the consolidation of the new regime.⁶⁵ For Carothers, this style of thinking edged dangerously close to the determinism found in modernization theory by emphasizing similarities across various historical instances of democratization. Furthermore, by constructing a narrative about a common “wave” of political transformations, transitologists portrayed Western liberal democracy as the prescribed outcome against which other, deficient regimes were compared.⁶⁶

Although influential, Carothers’ critique was not entirely on the mark. It conflated the idea of the transition from authoritarianism with the idea of a transition to democracy. In other words, it confused the moment of transition with a related but nevertheless distinct (and more arduous) process of democratic consolidation and institutionalization. O’Donnell, in a published response to Carothers, made precisely this point and stressed that *Transitions* did not teleologically assume that a transition away from authoritarianism necessarily implied a transition toward democracy.⁶⁷ O’Donnell also denied that the contributors to *Transitions* project shared the simplistic view that democratization proceeded in a linear, three-stage manner.

63. Valerie Bunce, “Rethinking Recent Democratization: Lessons from the Postcommunist Experience,” *World Politics* 55 (January 2003): 167–92, 170–71.

64. Thomas Carothers, “The End of the Transition Paradigm,” *Journal of Democracy* 13 (January 2002): 5–21. Also see Philippe C. Schmitter, “Twenty-Five Years, Fifteen Findings,” *Journal of Democracy* 21 (January 2010): 17–28, 18; Guillermo O’Donnell, “In Partial Defense of an Evanescence ‘Paradigm’,” 7. Subsequently, Schmitter cautioned that transitions *from* authoritarian regimes are a less deterministic notion than transitions *to* democratic ones (Schmitter, “Reflections on ‘Transitology’,” 73).

65. For example, this is the framework of overlapping phases suggested by Munck in “Democratic Transitions in Comparative Perspective,” 372n2. Initially there is the problem of starting a transition from a non-democratic regime; following that is the problem of installing a democracy; lastly there is the problem of consolidation.

66. Jeffrey C. Isaac, *Democracy in Dark Times* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 20–22.

67. O’Donnell, “In Partial Defense of an Evanescence ‘Paradigm.’”

At the same time, O'Donnell agreed with several of Carothers's arguments. He cited an earlier article in which he himself warned against "illusions about consolidation" and, also, had warned that transitology research often suffered from problems of conceptual clarity and teleological optimism.⁶⁸ In that particular article, he said that in transitology literature, "the Northwest [i.e. the polyarchies and consolidated democracies of North America and Western Europe] was seen as the endpoint of a trajectory that would be largely traversed by getting rid of the authoritarian rulers." For O'Donnell, even if this view was not always analytically cogent, it was a useful and pragmatically valid illusion for the purposes of giving hope to political actors.⁶⁹

For theorists of democratization, the study of regime consolidation, although closely linked to transitology, involved distinct issues and different dynamics since consolidation was more dependent on factors like institutions, economic structures, historical legacy, and state strength.⁷⁰ Theorists of democratization viewed consolidation as "the degree to which the key elements of a democratic order are in place, and whether those elements function to promote effective, inclusive, and accountable governance."⁷¹ Consolidation, they argued, marked a second phase in which the uncertainty and flux of the political moment was replaced by a return to the regularity of day-to-day politics, even if the elected governments of transitional democracies still operated in a somewhat uncertain political environment.⁷² Central to this discourse was the focus on electoral competition among political elites and parties, because elections were seen as causally important for democracy.⁷³ Theories dominant during the 1960s and 1970s—particularly those concerned with the "quality" of democracy (especially socioeconomic equality)—were eschewed in

68. Guillermo O'Donnell, "Illusions about Consolidation," *Journal of Democracy* 7 (April 1996): 34–51. For a rejoinder to this critique, see Richard P. Gunther, Nikiforos Diamandouros and Hans-Jürgen Puhle, "O'Donnell's 'Illusions': A Rejoinder," *Journal of Democracy* 7 (October 1996): 151–59.

69. *Ibid.* 47.

70. Munck, "Democratic Transitions in Comparative Perspective"; Mainwaring, "Transitions to Democracy and Democratic Consolidation." Carothers ("The End of the Transition Paradigm") argues that transitology was mistaken in treating the importance of coherent, functioning states to successful democratic consolidation as a secondary problem (or at least as a problem that would be resolved in tandem with the building of democratic government). For an early critique of the transitions literature on this point, and on the distinction between idea of state structure from the ideas of regime and government, see Robert M. Fishman, "Rethinking State and Regime: Southern Europe's Transition to Democracy," *World Politics* 42 (April 1990): 422–40. A subsequent return to a state-centric analysis of democratization in Eastern Europe can be found in Anna Grzymala-Busse and Pauline Jones Luong, "Reconceptualizing the State: Lessons from Post-Communism," *Politics & Society* 30 (December 2002): 529–54.

71. Bunce, "Rethinking Recent Democratization," 179. As Marc F. Plattner, in "A Skeptical Afterword," *Journal of Democracy* 15 (October 2004): 106–10, summarized, the success of the Third Wave of democratization led political scientists to shift their attention "from the ways in which democratic regimes come into being to the ways in which they can be rendered stable and secure" (106).

72. Mainwaring, O'Donnell, and Valenzuela, "Introduction," in *Issues in Democratic Consolidation: The New South American Democracies in Comparative Perspective*, 3.

73. Mainwaring, "Transitions to Democracy and Democratic Consolidation," 297.

favor of a more minimalist understanding of democracy. For example, Schmitter and Terry Karl defined democracy as a “system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their elected representatives.”⁷⁴ Scholars’ attention had shifted from “the heady excitement and underdetermination of the transition from autocracy” to the “prosaic routine and overdetermination of consolidated democracy.”⁷⁵ In other words, scholars studying consolidation focused less on the uncertainty of the transitional moment, where arbitrariness and political skill dominate, and more on the regularized, bounded uncertainty in which political elites play by the established rules of the game, even though the outcomes of their vying for power are not pre-decided.

This move toward *institutionalized* uncertainty marked a key moment in the return to the normalcy of democratic life. In *Tentative Conclusions*, O’Donnell and Schmitter cautioned that an emphasis on uncertainty “as the defining characteristic of democracy can be misleading” because consolidated democracy institutionalizes certain “normal” uncertainties such as the outcomes of elections, while ensuring “normal” certainty in other areas of politics, such as rights to life, private property, and self-expression.⁷⁶ In a consolidated democracy, trust and mutuality emerge alongside the practices of normalized politics, like electoral cycles and collective bargaining.⁷⁷ The considerable uncertainty of the transition period thus differs substantially from the tamed uncertainty, which is considered to be a central and positive feature of consolidated democratic regimes.⁷⁸ Schmitter and Karl would later write that “democracy institutionalizes ‘normal,’ limited political uncertainty.” Consequently, “once the rules of contingent consent have been

74. Philippe C. Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl, “What Democracy Is ... and Is Not,” *Journal of Democracy* 2 (Summer 1991): 75–88, at 76. There has been renewed interest in the quality of democracy during the last decade. However, settling on uniform theoretical understanding of this idea has proven elusive. See, for example, Gerardo L. Munck, “The Regime Question: Theory Building in Democracy Studies,” *World Politics* 54 (October 2001): 119–44; Leonardo Morlino, “What is a ‘Good’ Democracy?” *Democratization* 11 (December 2004): 10–32; Dietrich Rueschemeyer, “Addressing Inequality,” *Journal of Democracy* 15 (October 2004): 76–90.

75. Schmitter and Karl, “The Conceptual Travels of Transitologists and Consolidologists,” 176. However, see also Schmitter and Guilhot, “From Transition to Consolidation: Extending the Concept of Democratization and the Practice of Democracy,” in *Democratic and Capitalist Transitions in Eastern Europe: Lessons for the Social Sciences*, ed. Michel Dobry (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), 131–46. The latter piece attempts to center the concept of consolidation less on order and stability, and more on the emergence of different subtypes of democratic regimes.

76. O’Donnell and Schmitter, *Tentative Conclusions*, 67.

77. Philippe C. Schmitter and Javier Santiso, “Three Temporal Dimensions to the Consolidation of Democracy,” *International Political Science Review* 19 (January 1998): 69–92, at 71.

78. Mainwaring, “Transitions to Democracy and Democratic Consolidation,” 317. As Harold Waldrup nicely put it, “politics in transitions does not (mainly) take place *within* institutions but is *about* institutions.” Found in his article “Incommensurability? On the Comparison of Eastern and Southern Regime Changes,” in *The Challenges of Theories on Democracy: Elaborations over New Trends in Transitology*, ed. Stein Ugelvik Larsen (Boulder, CO: Social Science Monographs, 2000), 102.

agreed upon, the actual variation is likely to stay within a predictable and generally accepted range.”⁷⁹

The unexpected fall of communism in Eastern Europe after 1989 initially presented a significant opportunity for scholars to expand the geographical boundaries of the transitology model. At the same time, these events also gave rise to a theoretical debate about the model’s potential limitations.⁸⁰ Those favoring the development of a more general model argued that the new post-communist regimes could not in advance be disqualified from being studied as transitional cases similar to the experiences from the 1970s and 1980s. Schmitter and Karl, for example, maintained that even though particular regional differences could be decisive in determining the outcome of the transition process, “all these cases of regime change regardless of their geopolitical location or cultural context should (at least hypothetically) be regarded as parts of a common process of diffusion and causal interaction.”⁸¹

Such calls for a more general theory of transition encountered skepticism from other scholars who questioned the assumption that the general outlines of the transitions process could be similar across regional contexts.⁸² Should post-communist transitions be seen as part of the same wave of democratization that previously swept through Southern Europe and Latin America, or did historical and cultural differences render them unique? If unique, then the transitologists’ search for a general model of transition and consolidation could be seen as guilty of conceptual stretching and of ignoring the importance of particular historical legacies.⁸³

Meanwhile, the greater emphasis that transitologists gave to agency brought with it the notion that immediate influences are more important for shaping the dynamics and outcome of a transition than are historical legacies.⁸⁴ As some have argued, the turn to more temporally proximate explanations obfuscated how socioeconomic and cultural changes formed a necessary base for any political

79. Schmitter and Karl, “What Democracy Is ... and Is Not,” 83.

80. Gerardo L Munck and Carol Skalnik Leff, “Modes of Transition and Democratization: South America and Eastern Europe in Comparative Perspective,” *Comparative Politics* 29 (April 1997): 343–62.

81. Schmitter and Karl, “The Conceptual Travels of Transitologists and Consolidologists,” 178.

82. Valerie Bunce, “Should Transitologists Be Grounded?” *Slavic Review* 54 (Spring 1995): 111–27; M. Steven Fish, “Postcommunist Subversion: Social Science and Democratization in East Europe and Eurasia,” *Slavic Review* 58 (Winter 1999): 794–823; Béla Greskovits, “The Path Dependence of Transitology,” in *Postcommunist Transformation and the Social Sciences: Cross-Disciplinary Approaches*, ed. Frank Böcker, Klaus Müller, and Andreas Pickel (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 219–46; Howard J. Wiarda, “Southern Europe, Eastern Europe, and Comparative Politics: Transitology and the Need for New Theory,” *World Affairs* 164 (Spring 2002): 149–56.

83. For an overview of these debates, see Jordan Gans-Morse, “Searching for Transitologists: Contemporary Theories of Post-Communist Transitions and the Myth of a Dominant Paradigm,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 20 (October–December 2004): 320–49.

84. For example, see Munck and Leff, “Modes of Transition and Democratization.”

transition. Understanding such circumstances required a broader historical vision than the relatively brief moment of political transition itself. The almost exclusive focus on political and institutional changes had overlooked cultural, economic, and social transformations that had been bubbling in those countries for decades.⁸⁵

The transitions model therefore was met with substantial criticism among scholars studying regime change in post-communist societies.⁸⁶ Some critics, like Valerie Bunce, argued that the emphasis on pacting among elites was too heavily inspired by the Spanish case and overlooked the role of mass mobilization in the post-communist experience.⁸⁷ Michael McFaul contended that successful democratic transitions in post-communist Europe were actually of a non-cooperative nature, and were characterized by unequal distributions of power rather than by a pacted compromise between evenly matched incumbents and opposition.⁸⁸ Meanwhile, M. Steven Fish maintained that transitologists focused excessively on the type of transition and their assumption that the first post-authoritarian election inaugurated a new democratic regime could not account for cross-national variation in the extent of democratization.⁸⁹ The persistence of electoral authoritarian regimes in some (although not all) post-communist states further problematized the dichotomy of new democracies either becoming consolidated liberal democracies or regressing back to authoritarianism.⁹⁰ The post-communist societies thus posed new questions for the transitions model.

Certainly, the international context had changed greatly over two decades. The original framework of the *Transitions* project did not dwell on external factors as potential causes of transitions. Nor did it anticipate the rise of a set of external actors—such as the EU, various NGOs, and other networks that promoted human rights—that some scholars have dubbed a “transnational civil society.”⁹¹ In Schmitter’s words, the European Union was of “considerable (but not sufficient) importance” in the consolidation of democracy in Southern Europe, but had a much greater role to play in Eastern Europe.⁹² Nevertheless, democratization in the post-communist world has proven to be uneven despite the close geographic proximity to the EU. As Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way have argued, this was

85. Wiarda, “Southern Europe, Eastern Europe, and Comparative Politics,” 152.

86. Gans-Morse, “Searching for Transitologists.”

87. Valerie Bunce, “Comparative Democratization: Big and Bounded Generalizations,” *Comparative Political Studies* 33 (September 2000): 703–34.

88. Michael McFaul, “The Fourth Wave of Democracy and Dictatorship: Noncooperative Transitions in the Postcommunist World,” *World Politics* 54 (January 2002): 212–44.

89. Fish, “Postcommunist Subversion,” 799.

90. Aurel Croissant and Wolfgang Merkel, “Democratization in the Early Twenty-First Century,” *Democratization* 11 (December 2004): 1–9, at 2. Also see Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

91. See Waldrauch, “Incommensurability?” 112–13.

92. Schmitter, “Reflections on ‘Transitology,’ ” 81.

because the degrees of Western linkage and leverage varied across the post-communist territory, which rendered problematic the argument that successful transitions in some post-communist states could be replicated across the entire region.⁹³

The later literature on democratization had carried the model of the transitions process from O'Donnell and Schmitter's work into the post-communist region. The new wave of scholarship, however, had largely overlooked O'Donnell and Schmitter's discussions about the context-sensitive nature of their findings. Arguably, the refinement of the theory of transitions necessitated that it be carried over into a different comparative context and, thereby, become an institutionalized field of inquiry. But such theoretical refinement came at a cost: post-*Transitions* research lost the original study's situated character. The insight that transitology was an instance of knowledge produced at a period of uncertainty (and that it was therefore, in Schmitter's words, "quite explicitly possibilistic—not probabilistic or deterministic—in epistemology and design") was bracketed out.⁹⁴

Transitions to ... a Democratic Horizon?

Both O'Donnell and Schmitter expressed ambivalence about the *Transitions* project's influence on later studies of democratization. Both also expressed consternation that they were labeled "transitologists" and that their insights were construed as containing a "magic formula for success" on how to consolidate democracy.⁹⁵ But while Schmitter "welcomed the challenge of 'stretching' our original work and applying it to such different cases" as Central and Eastern Europe, O'Donnell came to distance himself from efforts to generalize the project's insights about transitions and consolidation across disparate cases.⁹⁶

O'Donnell warned in his 1994 article "Delegative Democracy" that the process of democratization could stall as certain regimes, primarily in Latin America, came to approximate polyarchies but fell short of being true representative democracies. In his opinion, these regimes may not be "consolidated (i.e., institutionalized) democracies, but they may be enduring ... [with] no sign either of any imminent threat of an authoritarian regression, or of advances toward representative democracy."⁹⁷ As is evident in his response to Carothers, he held ambivalent views by 2002 on the direction of the democratization scholarship and on the research of

93. Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*, 87–130.

94. Terry Lynn Karl and Philippe C. Schmitter, "From an Iron Curtain to a Paper Curtain: Grounding Transitologists or Students of Postcommunism?" *Slavic Review* 54 (Winter 1995): 965–78, at 969.

95. Guillermo O'Donnell, "Schmitter's Retrospective: A Few Dissenting Notes," *Journal of Democracy* 21 (January 2010): 29–32, at 29; Schmitter, "Twenty-Five Years, Fifteen Findings," 18.

96. Schmitter, "Twenty-Five Years, Fifteen Findings," 18.

97. Guillermo O'Donnell, "Delegative Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 5 (January 1994): 55–69, at 56.

fellow scholars working in his footsteps.⁹⁸ A year before his death, he once again cautioned that the discourse surrounding issues of democratic consolidation often evokes “static, teleological, and in some cases ethnocentric notions.”⁹⁹ At that point, he rejected the idea of a universal model of consolidated democracy in favor of approaches that emphasized regional differences—especially the particularities of Latin America.

O'Donnell's views had changed since the *Transitions* project. Some of his later reflections on democracy more closely resembled the post-foundational political theories of figures like Sheldon Wolin, Cornelius Castoriadis, Claude Lefort, and Ernesto Laclau than the liberal-democratic approach to institutionalized uncertainty that scholars working on issues of transition and consolidation often invoked.¹⁰⁰ For example, his 2007 article “The Perpetual Crises of Democracy” stated that democracy is based ultimately not on voters but on active, contesting citizens.¹⁰¹ Democracy entails an “open horizon,” which is a “projection toward an unending and undefined, always risky yet promising future,” expected and demanded by human beings who recognize themselves as carriers of inalienable rights. He opposed the reduction of democracy to a set of formal institutions because “Democracy is more than a valuable kind of political arrangement.” It is also “the often notorious sign of a lack. It is *the perpetual absence of something more*, of an always pending agenda that calls for the redress of social ills and further advances in the manifold matters which, at a certain time and for a certain people, most concern human welfare and dignity.”¹⁰² For this reason, in O'Donnell's opinion, to speak of a crisis of democracy was paradoxical, because “Democracy is and always will be in some kind of crisis: It is constantly redirecting its citizens' gaze from a more or less unsatisfactory present toward a future of still unfulfilled possibilities.” Because the meaning of democracy is always contested, “the theoretical and empirical

98. Timothy J. Power, “Theorizing a Moving Target: O'Donnell's Changing Views of Postauthoritarian Regimes,” in *Reflections on Uneven Democracies: The Legacy of Guillermo O'Donnell*, 173–88.

99. O'Donnell, “Schmitter's Retrospective,” 29.

100. For example, see Sheldon Wolin, “Fugitive Democracy,” *Constellations* 1 (December 1994): 11–25; Cornelius Castoriadis, “Democracy as Procedure and Democracy as Regime,” *Constellations* 4 (April 1997): 1–18; Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory* (New York: Polity, 1991); Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 2007). It is worth noting that O'Donnell cites Laclau a number of times in *Bureaucratic Authoritarianism: Argentina 1966–1973 in Comparative Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). Also interesting to note is that, like O'Donnell, Laclau's politically formative years were spent in 1960s Argentina, where both O'Donnell and Laclau were involved in opposition movements, albeit with different organizations. Like O'Donnell, Laclau credited his experience as a political activist for teaching him lessons about contingency in politics. See Warren Breckman, *Adventures of the Symbolic: Post-Marxism and Radical Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 202–3.

101. Guillermo O'Donnell, “The Perpetual Crises of Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 18 (January 2007): 5–11, 7.

102. *Ibid.* 9–10.

analysis that we frame as social scientists should take into account these constantly varying and contested meanings.”¹⁰³

In a sense, these remarks reveal a consistency in O'Donnell's thought. Undergirding the *Transitions* project was a possibilist approach that saw democracy more as a conjunctural outcome than as a necessary stage of development. It resembled Albert Hirschman's use of the term “possibilism” to indicate the domain of the accidental and of unintended consequences.¹⁰⁴ In Guilhot's words, democracy was viewed as the outcome of “specific, transitory, and reversible configurations of political forces … relatively independent of structural factors, and so always within reach—provided that there was sufficient political will among the relevant political actors.”¹⁰⁵ Long after the completion of the project, both O'Donnell and Schmitter remained skeptical about broad explanatory theories that were detached from the “messiness” of the actual politics that prompted the theories. If democracy was as much a process of contestation over meaning and shared values as it was a definitive end-state characterized by a specific institutional arrangement, transitions could not be understood as a formula or general framework—for example, as set specific processes or stages.¹⁰⁶ Instead, transitions needed to be seen as inherently unstable processes without a predetermined end, and characterized by an openness to contestation and a receptivity to political intervention on the part of various actors. One unintended lesson of the *Transitions* project was that these actors are not limited to the authoritarians and opposition forces, but can also include scholars themselves.

Today, more than four years after the beginning of the Arab Spring, which arguably is a political “event” of historical dimensions comparable to the Third Wave eruptions of the 1970s, scholarly debates focus on the long-term implications of political transitions in the Middle East and North Africa.¹⁰⁷ These current events,

103. *Ibid.* 10. Schmitter has recently echoed O'Donnell's remarks on the inherently contestatory nature of democracy. In “Reflections on Transitority” he writes that “we are still far from reaching ‘the end of history’ at which citizens will have become so settled in their institutions and approving of their politicians that they can no longer imagine improving them … I suspect that democracy consecrated will become democracy contested—that the triumph of democracy in the last decades of the 20th century will lead to a renewed criticism of democracy well into the 21st century” (84). Similarly, because “really existing democracy is a perpetually unfinished product, democratization will always be on the research agenda of political scientists” (“Twenty-Five Years, Fifteen Findings,” 28).

104. Albert O. Hirschman, *A Bias for Hope: Essays on Development and Latin America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 26–37.

105. Guilhot, *The Democracy Makers*, 144.

106. On the closure of the meanings of democracy and the triumph of the liberal-democratic model in post-war political science, see Isaac, *Democracy in Dark Times*, 30–40.

107. In October 2011 the Kellogg Institute for International Studies and the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies held a symposium at the University of Notre Dame dealing with the lessons of the transitions to democracy in Latin America for transitions in the Middle East. The report of those proceedings is available online at: <https://kellogg.nd.edu/about/Tipping%20Point-Arab%20Spring.pdf>, accessed August 2014. This has also been the focus of Schmitter's recent work. For example, in “Is it Safe

which so far refuse to conform to long-term predictions, represent the “messiness” that both drives social scientific research forward and prevents it from ever converging on a fully completed account of a given process, such as democratization. O’Donnell and Schmitter’s tentative conclusions can help us remember that contingency and unpredictability are crucial elements of political life, and that they both enable and constrain the development of social scientific theorizing and the growth of disciplinary knowledge. The writings of O’Donnell and Schmitter also can remind us that unpredictable moments and exceptional circumstances, when they do occur, can give rise to a rare form of engaged scholarship and reveal an often-forgotten practical dimension to the study of politics.

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for Transitologists & Consolidologists to Travel to the Middle East and North Africa?" (http://iis-db.stanford.edu/pubs/24224/Article_-_M-EAST3.pdf, accessed August 2014), Schmitter argues that scholars should not *ex ante* reject the possibility that their frameworks can carry over into this region, despite the peculiarity of the national context. "All these cases of regime change—regardless of their geo-political location or cultural context—should (at least hypothetically) be regarded as parts of a common process of diffusion and causal interaction" (19).