

Democracy and Changes: How Research Tails Reality

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Democracy and Changes: How Research Tails Reality

Leonardo Morlino

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This article contends that the most important traditional topics of empirical theory of democracy have been deeply reshaped by the phenomenon of the diffusion of democracies in the world during at least the last 30 years. More precisely, the definition of democracy is reconsidered under the new light shed by that phenomenon; the issue of hybrid regimes will be addressed with all its problems of empirical intractability; the issue of the emergence of a theory, a quasi theory or at least a good theoretical framework about democratization processes is discussed; and finally a contested issue such as that of the empirical assessment of democratic quality is introduced.

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As in other fields of research the burden of research tradition has been always influential in empirical democratic theory. Consequently, there have always been new studies that continue building on previous published work. As a result of this, there has been no significant gap between reality and research. On the contrary, for the most important contemporary phenomena such a gap has been minimal if we consider the years when papers and manuscripts began to circulate and to be read, rather than the years of publication of related articles and books.¹ Thus, when we consider European and non-European democracies at the end of the 1960s and early 1970s we should take into account people mobilization, demand for participation and civil rights, activism of worker movements, dissatisfaction and protest, instability and military coup d'état as key phenomena of those years and we can immediately trace the related analyses of democratic crises and stability, participation and so on to work by Huntington (1968), Crozier Huntington and Watanuki (1975), Linz and Stepan (1978), Barnes and Kaase (1976) and many others.² When we pay attention to the diffusion of democracy from Southern Europe, where the process began in the second half of the 1970s, to Latin America in the 1980s and Eastern Europe as well Asia and part of Africa in the

1990s and later, we find related research on democratizations, consolidations and analyses of more ambiguous cases of pseudo, façade or minimal democracy.

One consequence of such consistency between reality and empirical research is that if we compare the empirical theory of democracy as it was 30 or so years ago and as it is today, we see enormous differences due to research on the new phenomena, especially on democratization. Without setting the impossible goal of being exhaustive, given the page constraints of a journal article, here we will present some of the key themes that have changed the contemporary empirical theory of democracy by ‘tailing’ reality. Thus, first, we will pick up the old, recurrent question of the definition of democracy, which has been reshaped by the tripling of the number of democracies during the last 30 years (see Puddington 2007). Second, the phenomenon of hybrid regime will be addressed with all its problems of empirical uncertainty, instability and intractability. These two issues can be summarized in two questions: after these decades has a theory, a quasi theory or at least a good theoretical framework for democratization processes emerged; and in the light of the diffusion of democracy and the impossibility of openly challenging this kind of regime, are we able to assess the quality of democracy empirically?

Definitional Conundrums

We know that definitions are necessary compasses for empirical research. We are also aware that there are terms, such as democracy that have an empirical reference and a normative, ideal connotation at the same time. Consequently, for decades ‘democracy’ has been an essentially contested concept. But when the regimes that we label as democratic neared 100 (90 in 2006) and an additional 58 transitional cases of partially free regimes can be taken into consideration (see again Puddington 2007), then the definitional conundrums are modified accordingly. Collier and Adcock (1999, 562) remind us that “concepts, definitions, and operationalization may evolve with changes in the goals and context of research” and we recalled above that goals and context of research changed because key events and processes have taking place.³ Thus, first, we do need a minimal definition that suggests when in a transitional process we can consider a regime to be democratic or not; second, to try to capture the complexities of a transitional period the possibility of measuring, grading the various steps would also be useful: a regime can become democratic in some respect and remain authoritarian in others, although in the long run the various dimensions tend to converge in one direction or another; third, if democracy is left as ‘the only game in town’ and consequently is no longer challenged as such, then the procedural definitions so important in a different period as an empirically solid point of reference within the liberal tradition are no longer very useful, an analysis of the ‘content’ of democracy may appear more interesting for empirical

research; fourth, if we have so many democracies, an empirical analysis of the actual implementation of the main democratic values or tenets, or better an analysis of the quality of democracy, seems obvious. This, however, implies some standard or a sort of ‘maximal’ definition of democracy as a frame of reference in the development of quality.

The problem of the minimal definition of democracy was already analyzed by democratic theory (see e.g. Dahl 1971). Consequently, we are on safe ground when proposing that a regime has to be considered a minimal democracy if it has at least universal, adult suffrage; recurring, free, competitive and fair elections; more than one political party; and more than one source of information. An important addition was made to this definition by Schmitter and Karl (1993, 45-46), who stress that democratic institutions, existing rights and also the decision-making process should *not* be constrained by both non-elected elites and external powers. When considered jointly, all six requested characteristics are clearly demanding, and especially the four adjectives attached to elections are ‘heavy’. It is not easy to have ‘recurring, free, competitive and fair’ elections to the point that in some democracies that have been consolidated for decades there are charges of corruption even today. Moreover, as Diamond (2002, 28) recalls, “often particularly difficult are judgments about whether elections have been free and fair, both in the ability of opposition parties and candidates to campaign and in the casting and counting of the votes. In other cases, the element of ‘more than one source of information’ is difficult to meet if we only make reference to TV broadcasts. Or in yet other countries a decision-making process not constrained by an army, which ironically can be formed by democratic officers – see the Turkish case – is difficult to achieve”.

This same discussion shows how important it is to be conscious of the problem addressed by Collier and Adcock (1999) on the two possible paths when dealing with research on democracy: dichotomy and gradation. Although they affirm (1999, 561-562) that “research that focuses on democratization as a well-bounded event and on classical subtypes of democracy favors dichotomies”, actual research in the field suggested how a graded approach can be more appropriate in the empirical analysis of transitions to democracy as well. The key point seems to be that in this kind of research measurement is not always possible: analysis has necessarily to be qualitative. Consequently, falling back upon classifications and typologies – not dichotomous ones – as substitutes for quantitative measures is the only possible and feasible path. However, this is a non-dichotomous path and sometimes is essential to trace the processes of transitions in its various dimensions, such as the electoral one, the building of governmental institutions (decisional and representative bodies, judiciary, bureaucracy, army and police) with or without a constitutional subprocess, the establishment of a party system, the development of interests.

A graded approach to democracy is also useful in at least two additional domains of research. The first has again been pointed out by Collier in a piece written with Levitsky (1997), where they show that adjectives may serve to cancel part of the meaning of democracy. Therefore, we have ‘diminished subtypes’: “The subtype thus expresses the idea of a gradation away from democracy. The use of diminished subtypes presents an interesting alternative to employing an ordinal scale” (Collier and Adcock 1999, 560). A second important domain of research concerns the analysis of the quality/qualities of democracy (see below the final section). In this, whenever possible, the use of gradation is essential to understand the extent to which the quality under scrutiny is present in a democracy. Here again the key problem is the actual possibility of adopting measurement or, if this not possible, classifications, i.e. ‘nominal scales’.

As mentioned above, a third conundrum refers to another long and heated debate in the past on democracy as ‘form’ and as ‘substance’. The prevailing conclusion of that debate in empirical theory considered the definition of democracy as form or, better, procedure to be preferred to democracy as substance (see e.g. Kelsen now 1981, Schumpeter 1954, Dahl 1971, Bobbio 1984). Such a conclusion was complemented by the so-called ‘not reversible’ relationships between freedom, as civil and political rights, and equality, where following the experiences of Northern Europe vis-à-vis Eastern Europe the key point was that no kind of equality can be achieved if there is no actual guarantee of civil and political rights as a pre-requisite (see Sartori 1987). The consequence of this has been not only a growing attention to substantive aspects in the research that in our fields has been mirrored by the enormous developments in policy studies, welfare rights included, but also to political equality as suggested by the most recent book by Dahl (2006) and to the ways of complementing equality and freedom by giving to democracy a substantive important content, as in Ringen (2007).

Finally, the last salient debate and related conundrum we would like to point out here concern the possibility of proposing a ‘maximal’ definition of democracy that would complement the minimal one and facilitate the analysis of democratic quality (see below). Rather than summarizing and discussing an extended debate involving scholars from political philosophy, political science, political sociology, political economy, and political theory as the bridging field among those disciplines, we will single out the most salient aspects for empirical research. To begin with, a maximal, ideal definition of democracy is at least inappropriate and unnecessary: ideals, normative tenets are at a high level of abstraction. They are by themselves unattainable and above all in continuous change and adaptation. In addition, the ideal definition we need has to have the requisite of being empirically ‘related’ or detectable, that is, we need a notion that sets up a standard, a benchmark and consequently the relative gap with reality can be empirically assessed. In

this perspective two well-known examples of normative definitions, that of May (1978, 1) on the necessary consistency between governmental decisions and the preferences of people affected by them, and that of Dahl (1971, 1) on the continuous responsiveness of government to the preferences of its citizens, considered politically as equals, are very relevant as they do not indicate a 'maximal definition' by pointing to substantive and procedural aspects. However, they cannot be accepted because of the insurmountable difficulties in the actual empirical analysis in detecting empirically the 'preferences' of citizens on the more and more complex issues of a modern democracy.

A different path is that of recalling the main values that a contemporary democracy is supposed to implement with its policies. For most authors these are freedom and equality/solidarity. The attainment of those values helps to establish the autonomy of an individual, which is according to other authors (see e.g. Held 1989, esp. ch.9) a key element in an ideal democracy. This can lead to a definition of a 'good' democracy as "the set of institutions that create the best opportunities to carry out freedom and equality" or in a more developed way "a stable institutional structure that realizes the liberty and equality of citizens through the legitimate and correct functioning of its institutions and mechanisms". Thus, a good democracy is a broadly legitimated regime that completely satisfies its citizens. When institutions have the full backing of civil society, they can pursue democratic values. If, in contrast, the institutions must postpone their objectives and expend energy and resources on consolidating and maintaining their legitimacy, crossing even the minimum threshold for democracy becomes a remarkable feat. Second, in a good democracy the citizens themselves have the power to check and evaluate whether the government pursues the objectives of liberty and equality according to the rule of law. They can monitor the efficiency of the application of the laws in force, the efficacy of the decisions made by government, and the political responsibility and accountability of elected officials in relation to the demands expressed by civil society. All this implies that the different levels of government, such as the local, regional, national and supranational (especially for European countries), cannot be overlooked (see also Morlino 2004).

The salience of the ambiguity: hybrid regimes

Finer (1970, 441-531) was one of the first authors to single out the existence of *façade democracies* or *semi-democracies* to indicate regimes that are no longer authoritarian, but not yet minimally democratic and have institutions that are recurrent in a democracy, such as a constitutional charter and elections, but where the former is not actually implemented and the latter are largely constrained. Other authors such as Rouquié (1975) and O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986), who had a Spanish background and were working on Latin American countries, labelled the

phenomenon of ambiguous cases *dictablandas* and *democraduras*. Thus, the notion of *hybrid regimes* has been present in the classic political science literature for years. The basic change in recent years is the sheer size and variety of the phenomenon. To recall again the Freedom House data (see Puddington 2007) in 2006 the number of regimes defined as partly free was 58, i.e. 30% of all independent polities in the world today.

Consequently, the suggestion by Croissant and Merkel (2004, 1) cannot be not surprising: “diminished sub-types of democracy (illiberal democracies, defective democracies and so on) have begun to become the new predominant trend in democracy theory and democratization studies.” No wonder that Epstein et al. (2006, 556 and 564-5) assert: “[Partial democracies] account for an increasing portion of current regimes and the lion’s share of regime transitions....[but]...we have little information as to the factors that would lead partial democracies to either slide down to autocracy or move up to full democracy....the determinants of the behavior of the partial democracies elude our understanding....the factors affecting transitions out of partial democracy remain poorly understood.” Finally, it is clear that several authors have recently analyzed the phenomenon and proposed different labels for it: from the semi-consolidated democracies mentioned by *Freedom House* to partial democracy (Epstein et al. 2006), electoral democracy (Diamond 1999), illiberal democracy (Zakaria 1997), defective democracies (Merkel 2004), competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way 2002), electoral authoritarianism (Schedler 2006), semi-authoritarianism (Ottaway 2003) - to mention only some of the authors and the labels adopted to refer to some model of hybrid regimes.

Merkel and Croissant (2000) also take a step towards a classification of those regimes. Thus, under the category of *defective democracies* they include: ‘exclusive’ democracies, which offer only limited guaranties for political rights; ‘dominated’ democracies, in which powerful groups use their influence to condition and limit the autonomy of elected leaders; and ‘illiberal’ democracies, which offer only partial guarantees on civil rights. Diamond (2002) goes in the same direction when breaking down hybrid regimes into four categories on the basis of the degree of competitiveness: hegemonic electoral authoritarian, competitive authoritarian, electoral democracy and a residual category of “ambiguous regimes”. The failure to ensure a minimum level of civil rights in three categories keeps them below the minimum threshold requirement for classification as minimally democratic. Electoral democracies also fail to overcome the threshold of a minimal democracy if the definition suggested above is applied with reference to non-constrained decisions by non-elected elites and external powers (see previous section).

Looking at the most recurrent empirical cases Morlino (2003, ch. 1) contends that the two most recurrent hybrid regimes are: the *protected democracy* and the *limited democracy*. In the first

model the limits to the effective expression of civil and political rights come from the political role of the army or police in the country or from an external power such as another country. This is the 'dominated' democracy of Croissant and Merkel, with specific characteristics due to the fact that the 'powerful groups' are clearly identified. *Limited democracy* is a case where universal adult suffrage and competitive elections, multiparty with incumbent leaders as a result of those elections, are undermined by the lack of effective guarantee of civil and political rights for most or many people with monopolized, not independent information, and in some cases a lack of actual political opposition. In such a regime competition is limited and some parties, be they extremist religious or of the extreme radical left, are not allowed to participate in the electoral competition.

Hybrid regimes can also be seen from a different perspective. In fact, their main characteristic is that they do not have - any more - some of the key aspects of authoritarianism, such as limited pluralism, low participation and mobilization from above, the presence of traditional ambiguous mentalities, some extent of institutional structuration (see Linz 1975 and Morlino 2003) and at the same time have not yet acquired all the aspects of a minimal democracy (see the previous section). They are diminished models of both regimes because a process of change is under way. Therefore, they can be labelled *transitional regimes*, although the direction of transition is not necessarily linear toward democracy. On the contrary, reversals of direction as well as long stalemates are recurrent. From this perspective, however, the classification of a changing, highly unstable political arrangement is not so relevant. More interesting is an analysis that pays attention to the process. Thus, we may have at the beginning *liberalization*, that is, "the partial opening of an authoritarian system short of choosing governmental leaders through freely competitive elections" (Huntington 1991, 9). During liberalization at least the two key aspects of authoritarianism, i.e. limitation of pluralism and participation managed from above, are changed in an empirically detectable way with the tolerated appearance of new political actors who are opposed to the existing regime or with manifestations of uncontrolled participation. Oppositions, of course, are basically accepted but excluded from any involvement in government; any hegemonic party may still control the political arena and is able to win elections with or without manipulation. The electoral law is manipulative in favor of the authoritarian leaders or of a clientelist party. The justification of a regime on the ground of traditional mentalities often disappears. Police suppression may gradually fade away. Existing authoritarian institutions may become hollowed out and remain only on paper, without any actual activity (see also Morlino 1998). Then, if there is no deadlock or reversal but again change, there is a proper *transition*, which refers to a fluid and uncertain period when new democratic structures are about to emerge, while some of the structures of the old regime still exist. Above all, it is not yet clear what regime is going to be installed - a democratic one, or even another

form of authoritarianism, perhaps a less repressive one. Tilly (1978) might call it a situation of *dual sovereignty*, meaning that there is still ongoing competition or conflict for supremacy in the coercive-political arena between two different actors or coalitions of actors. During the transition aspects of minimal democracy begin to appear, such as opposition, a number of parties and competitive or semi-competitive elections. Again, if there is no deadlock or reversal, *installation* of democracy is inaugurated to meet the main requisites for a minimal democracy. Attention to these three processes might make more meaningful the analysis of hybrid regimes and replace a possibly unhelpful classification in a situation of high instability where a regime can switch from one cell to another in a week or a month.

Does a theory of regime change exist? Can it exist?

The first question of the subtitle has been present for years in the classic literature in political science, but it has been recast in the new context of democratization. To my knowledge the most appropriate reply is still the one suggested by O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986, 3): "We did not have at the beginning, nor do we have at the end of this lengthy collective endeavor, a 'theory' to test or to apply to the case studies". Some years ago, in a still valid review of the democratization literature Valerie Bunce (2000) made a significant advance by distinguishing between theoretical propositions at a high level of generalization and regional propositions. Bunce concludes that five large generalizations have been proposed. The first regards a high level of economic development as a guarantee of democratic continuity; the second concerns the centrality of political leaders in the founding and designing of democracy; the third stresses the assets of parliamentary systems rather than presidential ones for "the continuation of the democratic governance"; the fourth considers the salience of the settlements of "national and state questions" for "the quality and survival of democracy"; and the fifth concerns the key importance of rule of law for a fully fledged democracy. In addition, regional generalizations relate to the salience of 'pacting', that is, of reaching agreements and accommodation in the democratic transitions of Southern Europe and Latin America; the advantages of breaking with the past in Eastern Europe; the high correlation between democratization and economic reform in a capitalist direction in Eastern Europe; and the threat to democracy in Latin America and post-socialist Europe because of the weakness of the rule of the law. We can easily agree that these propositions cannot form any theory of democratic transition, whether general or regional.

Some further progress had been made in this direction and has to be acknowledged. First of all, much earlier than the review by Bunce, Krassner (1984) with his reference to *punctuated equilibria*, later Collier and Collier (1991) to *critical junctures*, and more recently Pierson (2000)

with *path dependence* had made some of the most important attempts to develop a theory of political change, although at a high level of abstraction. With language borrowed from economics and with reference to the other two studies Pierson attempts to sketch out a general theory based on a few key propositions: “specific patterns of timing and sequence matter”; “a wide range of social outcome are often possible”; “large consequences may result from relatively small and contingent events”; “particular courses of action, once introduced, are often virtually difficult or impossible to reverse even if their consequences prove to be disastrous”; “political development is punctuated by critical moments and junctures which shape the basic contours of social life”; and, finally, in the political realm, the high density of institutions, the central role of collective action, the complexity and opacity of politics, compounded by the short time horizon of politicians and the ‘stickiness’ of politics, make path dependence a relevant key theory for us. Following Pierson, Mahoney (2001) made an attempt to apply such a theory to some cases of democratization in Central America. Despite its salience, however, it is very difficult to consider the attempts by Krasser, Collier and Collier, and Pierson a good, adequate theory of democratization or of democratic transition.

Within the perspective of analyzing and explaining the change at a high level of abstraction Goodin (1996, 24-25) more usefully refers to the three basic ways, in which institutions can change: accident, evolution, conscious intervention. Accordingly, one could say that the first transitions to democracy came by accident; transitions with strong characteristics of continuity like the Mexican, the Brazilian and the Chilean show an evolutionary path; and the discontinuous transitions brought about by different and identifiable actors in other cases can be seen as the result of conscious intervention. Thelen and Steinmo (1992, 16-18) also had pointed out four “sources of institutional dynamism”: 1. broad changes in socio-economic or political context that make previously latent institutions more salient; 2. changes in socio-economic context or political balance that “produce a situation in which old institutions are put in service of different ends, as new actors come into play who pursue their (new) goal through existing institutions”; 3. exogenous changes that “produce a shift in the goal or strategies being pursued within existing institutions”; and 4. “political actors adjust their strategies to accommodate changes in the institutions themselves” through a dramatic change or “piecemeal change”. Thanks to these theoretical proposals an initial modelling of institutional change is achieved. But still we are some way from a theory of any kind.

The fact is that when someone tries to give substance to his theoretical ambitions in this field, almost inevitably the research advances by breaking down the analysis into a few key, but different questions. The main ones include: how to explain the crisis and fall of the previous non-democratic regime; whether there are recurrent modes of transition; why some institutions are created rather than others, e.g. why a presidential regime rather than a parliamentary regime; and

also what is the best institutional design to implement during the transition to achieve a stable democracy. There can be no general theory to reply to these questions.

Linz and Stepan (1996) and O'Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead (1986) seem to have been aware of this since the beginning, as already said above. Here, we can add that the analysis proposed by them and other authors who have been working on several cases in Southern Europe and Latin America particularly focuses on: the main characteristics of the previous regime, the important role performed by "pacts" or elite agreement on the institutions to build, recalled by Bunce as a key regional generalization, the "resurrection" of civil society, the limited role of political parties, the salience of contingent consensus on institutions to be built, the enormous uncertainties of the entire process of transition, the importance of first, founding elections. That is, what all these authors actually propose is a theoretical framework that points to key aspects that are considered recurrent in the case to analyze and consequently useful for understanding those variegated countries. In such a framework actors, institutions, timing and the very notion of process play the central role in analyzing the countries in two geo-political areas, i.e. Southern Europe and Latin America.

Apparently, Huntington (1991, 30) follows a different path by setting a temporally and spatially defined explanatory goal ("explain why, how and with what consequences a group of roughly contemporaneous transitions to democracy occurred in the 1970s and the 1980s"). Then, he explicitly mentions five changes as the main explanatory factors of transitions in about 30 countries in those decades: the legitimacy problems of previous authoritarian regimes, in connection with poor domestic performance, the global economic growth during the 1960s, the basic changes in the doctrine and activity of the Catholic Church, the new policies of external actors (the EU, the USA, and the breakdown of the USSR), "snowballing" or demonstration effects (Huntington 1991, 45-46). That is, within a multi-causal explanation a few cultural, economic and international aspects are considered the key factors.

When a systematic explanation of Southern European and Latin American cases is attempted (see Morlino 2003) the political traditions of the country stand out as a key factor. More precisely, the key variables are the organization and control of civil society by a hegemonic party and the consequent manipulated participation through which the regime was able to destroy the social structure and the previous political and social identifications, the consequent socialization and re-socialization carried out by party organizations and other ancillary organizations to create new loyalties and identifications, and the suppression of the opposition. These variables were relevant as during the transition they heavily conditioned the subsequent activation of a democratic civil society with its social and political structures. That is, an authoritarian regime that has been

able to carry out effective policies of socialization and suppression may leave a passive, weak, fragmented, poorly organized civil society during the subsequent transition.

The change of polity boundaries and, consequently, of territory and population took place in several Eastern European cases, but not in the Southern European and Latin American transitions. Moreover, the analyses of the Southern European and Latin American cases totally ignored economic factors. These are, on the other hand, very relevant in Eastern Europe. Southern Europe had no such problem of changing the economic system from a collectivist one to a capitalist one with market and private property. But again the considerable attention devoted to the relationships between economic and political aspects in Eastern Europe leads us to reconsider similar relationships in Southern Europe. It is an obvious mistake to think that there are no differences between an economy coexisting with an authoritarian regime and an economy coexisting with a democracy. With some exceptions (see esp. Ethier, 1990), most analyses of Southern European transitions simply overlooked those important aspects, and for example – just to mention one feature – they largely glossed over the reshaping of the relationships between more or less organized interests and parties and between those interests and the bureaucracy with or without a large public sector in the economy.

International factors are at the core of other analyses of transitions, for example in the research by Whitehead (1996), who points to three mechanisms of ‘contagion’, ‘control’ and ‘consent’. Linz and Stepan (1996, 72-81) also discuss the salience of the foreign policies of other countries - USA for one - together with ‘zeitgeist’ and ‘diffusion’. However, in general, attention to the role of external actors in the transitions and consolidation of democracy is more recent, when the Eastern European cases and above all the enlargement of the European Union have been studied (see Pridham et 1994, but also Pevehouse 2002, Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005, and many others).

A rational choice approach has also been applied, although in a limited way (see e.g. Przeworski 1986 and Colomer 1995), to the transitional process with again close attention paid to élites and their choice and strategies. The building of democratic institutions is basically the product of those strategies and choices. The analysis by Colomer should be emphasized, not only for the theoretical approach he applies, but also because it is an analysis of a case, Spain, to which some theoretical mechanisms are applied, with useful improvement in understanding as a result. More generally, Spain is the case that has attracted most attention from a number of scholars who have developed some kind of theoretical proposals working just on that case. Fishman (1990), Share (1987) and Gunther (see esp. Gunther, Montero, Botella 2004), are only some of the several authors who have been working especially on Spain. Moreover, some of the theoretical framework or

propositions formulated for Spain have also influenced the analysis of Latin American and even Eastern European cases investigated by other authors. The recurring reference to pacts, the moderation of elites, the resurrection of civil society, the salience of memory of the past and even some of the regional propositions mentioned by Bunce emerge from this close attention paid to Spain.

In addition to the theoretical framework or to the emphasis on specific mechanisms that characterize some transitions, there have been a few attempts to develop models or patterns of transition. Stepan (1986), Karl and Schmitter (1991), Munck and Skalnik Leff (1997) and Berins Collier (1999) are some of the main authors who have proposed those models. Some of the differences among them are simply explained by the different cases considered. For example, Stepan and Berins Collier also include the classic Western European cases of the past in addition to Southern and Eastern European ones; Karl and Schmitter and also Munck and Skalnik Leff encompass the Latin American transitions as well as the Eastern European ones of the early 1990s. The similarities of those attempts lie in the fact that all the authors quoted above mainly focus their analysis on two macro-variables: the actors of transition, be they the authoritarian incumbent elites or those of the opposition, and the strategies pursued by them, be they accommodating or conflictive ones. For example, according to Munck and Skalnik Leff, the resulting models are four: the ‘revolution from above’, if the actors of transition are the authoritarian elites who pursued a conflictive strategy of confrontation; the ‘conservative reform’, if those elites chose agreements and compromises; the ‘social revolution’, if counter-elites were at the core of transition and pursued a conflictive strategy; and the ‘reform from below’, if counter-elites at the core of transition adopted an accommodating strategy. The advantages and limits of such models are fairly evident and connected. One of the main points is that the most immediate understanding of a country is counterbalanced by a strong simplification of a great number of relevant aspects. In addition, the adoption of mixed models is very common. Consequently, there is a strong simplification complemented by a loss of theoretical efficacy that would have been to some extent rescued with the ‘pure’ models. On the whole, despite a few attempts the “impossibility” of a general or regional theory to deal with the transition to democracy or to some other regime is confirmed.

To conclude by coming back to the question addressed in the title of this section, a general theory of regime change or democratization, even temporally bound, cannot exist if we really want to understand the cases we work on, if not for other reasons, because of the complexities and the large differences among the various cases. But there is an additional important reason for this, which is nicely captured by March and Olsen (1989, 65-66) when they write: “institutional change rarely satisfies the prior intentions of those who initiate it...Change cannot be controlled

precisely..... there are frequently multiple, not necessarily consistent, intentions, ...intentions are often ambiguousinitial intent can be lost”. If the “carnation revolution” triggered by the *golpe* of Portuguese captains and a number of other examples are considered, the words of March and Olsen become very telling, and additionally strengthen the point made above.

A controversial frontier: the quality of democracy

The idea that a normative topic can be empirically investigated is rather disturbing after all the years spent within social sciences to develop and profess good methodological standards in empirical research. But this is possible because of full-grown social science: once the empirical methodology, be it quantitative or qualitative, is established on more solid ground, working on a normative topic can even be more enjoyable and without doubt more relevant. How to do it is the key challenge about this topic, but looking into democracies to assess their quality is becoming more and more the object of empirical research.

In fact, a number of authors have crossed this frontier. A first group led by David Beetham (1994) carefully developed the notion of ‘auditing’ for political analysis. As Weir and Beetham (1999, 4) put it: “audit is a systematic assessment of institutional performance against agreed criteria and standards, so as to provide a reasonable authoritative judgment as how satisfactory the procedures and arrangements of the given institutions are”. The auditing procedure should follow four steps: to identify appropriate criteria for assessment; to determine standards of good or best practice which provide a benchmark for the assessment; to assemble the relevant evidence from both formal rules and informal practices; to review the evidence in the light of the audit criteria and defined standards to reach a systematic assessment. A number of authors followed Beetham in developing the experience of auditing in other countries (see, e.g. Beetham, Bracking, Kearton, Weir 2002, Beetham, Byrne, Ngan, and Weir 2002 and Sawyer 2001 and 2007; see also Landman 2006). There are still two key open questions in this approach: is there a shorter and more effective path to analyze democratic quality, since the one suggested by auditing is empirically very cumbersome and complex; and are there better ‘agreed criteria and standards’ vis-à-vis those set up by Beetham (popular control and political equality of citizens as basic tenets, and free and fair elections, accountable government, civil and political liberties and democratic society as key more specific aspects)?

The most interesting replies to the first question come from the work of Altman and Perez-Linan (2002) and Lijphart (1999). Both develop a quantitative comparative strategy. Some differences also emerge vis-à-vis the definition of good democracy proposed in the first section and consequently in the dimensions of variation and related indicators. Altman and Perez-Linan refer to

three aspects that draw on Dahl's concept of poliarchy (civil rights, participation, and competition). Consistent with his notion of consensual democracy, Lijphart includes indicators such as female representation, electoral participation, satisfaction with democracy, and corruption. Once applied, these indicators show how a consensual democracy can have a higher quality.

A reply to the second question is suggested by Morlino (2004) and Diamond and Morlino (2005). In addition to the definition of 'good' democracy suggested in the first section, a more developed notion of *quality* is considered necessary. A survey of the use of the term in the industrial and marketing sectors suggests three different meanings: (a) quality is defined by the established procedural aspects associated with each product: a 'quality' product is the result of an exact, controlled process carried out according to precise, recurring methods and timing; here the emphasis is on the *procedure*; (b) quality consists in the structural characteristics of a product, be it the design, materials, or functioning of the good, or other details that it features; here, the emphasis is on the *content*; (c) the quality of a product or service is indirectly derived from the satisfaction expressed by the customer, by his requesting the same product or service again, regardless of either how it is produced or what the actual contents are, or how the consumer goes about acquiring the product or service; according to this meaning the quality is based on *result*. Thus, the three different notions of quality are grounded either in procedures, contents, or results. Each has different implications for empirical research.

Starting from these premises, we have to assess the main dimensions of variation. There are at least six possible dimensions on which good democracies might vary and which should be at the core of empirical analysis. The first three are procedural dimensions. First, there is the *rule of law*. As O'Donnell (2005) recalls "under a rule of law all citizens are equal before the law, which is fairly and consistently applied to all by an independent judiciary, and the laws themselves are clear, publicly known, universal, stable, and non-retroactive. These characteristics are fundamental for any civil order and a basic requirement for democratic consolidation, along with other such cognate features of a constitutional order as civilian control over the military and the intelligence services and an elaborated network of other agencies of horizontal accountability that complement the judiciary."

The second and third procedural dimensions concern the two main forms of accountability. In general, accountability corresponds to the obligation of elected political leaders to answer for their political decisions when asked by citizen-electors or other constitutional bodies. Schedler (1999, 17) suggests that accountability has three main features: information, justification, and punishment/compensation. The first element, information on a political act or series of acts by a politician or political body (the government, parliament, and so on), is indispensable for attributing

responsibility. The second – justification – refers to the reasons furnished by the governing leaders for their actions and decisions. The third, punishment/compensation, is the consequence drawn by the elector or whatever other person or body following an evaluation of the information, justifications, and other aspects and interests behind the political act. All three of these elements require the existence of a public dimension characterized by pluralism and independence and the real participation of a range of individual and collective actors. The two kinds of accountability are electoral and inter-institutional. Vertical or electoral accountability refers to electors being able to make their elected officials responsible for their actions. This first type has a periodic nature, and is dependent on the various national, local and, if they exist, supra-national election dates. The voter decides and either awards the incumbent candidate or slate of candidates with a vote in their favor, or else punishes them by voting for another candidate, abstaining from the vote, or by nullifying the ballot. The actors involved in vertical accountability are the governor and the governed, and are thus politically unequal. Horizontal or inter-institutional accountability is when governors are responsible to other institutions or collective actors that have the expertise and power to control the behaviour of the governors. In contrast to vertical accountability, the actors are for the most part political equals. Inter-institutional accountability is relatively continuous, being formally or substantially formalized by law. In practice, it is usually manifest in the monitoring exercised by the governmental opposition in parliament, by the various assessments and rulings emitted by the court system, if activated, and by constitutional courts, agencies of auditing, central banks, and other bodies of a similar purpose that exist in democracies. Political parties outside of parliament also exercise this kind of control, as do the media and other intermediary associations, such as unions and employers' associations. (see Morlino 2004).

The fourth dimension of variation concerns the responsiveness or correspondence of the political decisions to the desires of the citizens and civil society in general, that is, the capacity to satisfy the governed by executing the policies that correspond to their demands. This dimension is analytically related to accountability. Indeed, judgments on responsibility imply that there is some awareness of the actual demands, and that the evaluation of the government's response is related to how its actions either conform to or diverge from the interests of its electors. Perhaps the most effective method for measuring responsiveness is to examine the legitimacy of government – i.e. the citizens' *perception* of responsiveness, rather than the reality – and consequently to use survey analysis for doing that.

The final two dimensions of variation are substantive in nature. The first is the full respect for rights expanded through the achievement of a range of freedoms. The second is the progressive implementation of greater political, social, and economic equality. Freedom and equality, however

they are understood, are necessarily linked to accountability and responsiveness. Indeed, a higher implementation of freedom and equality for citizens and civil society lies in the sphere of those representative mechanisms. In addition, effective rule of law is also indispensable for a good democracy. The rule of law is intertwined with freedom in the respect for all of those laws that directly or indirectly sanction those rights and their concrete realization.

Two more dimensions can be considered: participation and competition (see Diamond and Morlino 2005). No regime can be a democracy unless it grants all adult citizens formal rights of political participation, including the franchise. But a good democracy must ensure that all citizens are in fact able to make use of these formal rights to influence the decision-making process: to vote, to organize, to assemble, to protest, and to lobby for their interests. With regard to participation, democratic quality is high when we in fact observe extensive citizen participation not only through voting but in the life of political parties and civil society organizations, in the discussion of public policy issues, in communicating with and demanding accountability from elected representatives, in monitoring the conduct of public office-holders, and in direct engagement with public issues at the local community level. As for competition, democracies vary in their degree of competitiveness—in the openness of access to the electoral arena by new political forces, in the ease with which incumbents can be defeated, and in the equality of access to the mass media and campaign funding on the part of competing political parties. Depending on the type of electoral system, democracies may allow for more or less decisive electoral alternation as well (see Diamond and Morlino 2005). These two dimensions deserve a special theoretical status. In fact one of the main conclusions we reached in our research (see again Diamond and Morlino 2005) is that ‘competition and participation are engines of democratic quality’, that is, they are the conditions that best explain the development of other dimensions, once some degree of rule of law exists.

The main subjects of such a quality or good democracy are the citizen-individuals, the territorial communities, and the various forms of associations with common values, traditions, or aims. In this sense, the possibility for good democracy exists not only in the case of a defined territory with a specific population controlled by state institutions under a democratic government, but also for wider-ranging entities such as the European Union. The main point is that the above named subjects are at the heart of a democracy in which the most important processes are those that work from the bottom up, and not vice-versa. In this way, the transfer of the analytical dimensions from the national level to the supra-national level - though not uncomplicated and without difficulty - is possible. The key is to hold constant the same elements characteristic of each dimension.

Finally, such a multidimensional analysis is also justified by the possibility of accepting in this way a pluralist notion of quality. That is, the content, the procedure and the result correspond to

three different conceptions of quality and each conception has its own ground in terms of values and ideals. In other words, if the notion of democratic quality has to become a legitimate topic of empirical research then the multidimensionality is essential to capture it empirically and to acknowledge at the same time that there are different equally possible, normative notions of quality.

No conclusion: 'Men at work'

Although partial, the picture delineated in these pages seems adequate to support the first main assertion of this article: that the wave of democratization, which began more than 30 years ago in Southern Europe, emerging later in Latin America, Eastern Europe and in some areas of Asia and Africa and still going on with ups and downs, has been changing in depth the main themes of empirical democratic theory. If we had the space to deal with another theme such as democratic typology, we would have shown how an analytical operation like this one is largely changed if there are 90 units to classify, as there are at the beginning of this century, rather than 20 or 30, as was the case only a decade ago or so. Moreover, meaningfully classifying the much higher number of units that have been changing and becoming more complex over the years is virtually impossible if we do not want to accept a quantitative approach. In such a situation a different strategy may seem more fruitful, that is, the multiple, specific configurations where every case is seen by itself, but along a few recurring dimensions that are the same for all cases (see also Mair 2007). The second point to stress is: how that new phenomenon emphasizes the salience of some definitions rather than others and, on the whole, stresses the necessity of adapting definitions to research goals; what are the difficulties of analysing ambiguous realities such as hybrid regimes that are becoming more and more salient; the constitutive impossibility of achieving a theory of democratic change; and in the end, the promise of intellectual rewards in a new growing subfield, such as the analysis of democratic quality. Thus, there are no proper conclusions to draw here as we are only 'men at work' in a continuously changing social and political environment that we are trying to understand with the same obstinate continuity.

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Footnotes:

¹ As examples, let's recall that some of the best known books of these years, e.g. those by Linz and Stepan (1978), O'Donnell, Schmitter and Whithead (1986), and Diamandouros, Gunther and Puhle (1995), were known since 1975, 1981, 1991, respectively, as they were the results of conferences.

² Here a recurring and at the same time interesting aspect can be stressed: the crisis of democracies of the 1970s gives the opportunity to reassess the crises of democracies of the 1920s and 1930s in Europe.

³ On the several definitions of democracy related to different research goals, see also Morlino (2003 ch. 1).