

**Problems of Early Post-Communist Transition Theory:**

***From Transition from to Transition to***

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**Summary:** The paper critically assesses the main approaches developed within the theories of post-communist transitions in the 1990s by looking at early works of Przeworski, Fukuyama, Vanhanen and Schoepflin. The author argues that the post-communist transition theories departed from the original understanding of transition, as developed by O'Donnell and Schmitter in the 1980s. Instead of focusing on explaining the past, the post-communist transition theories constructed themselves as primarily normative, ie. forward-looking. They adopted key elements of 'objectivist' and normative approaches in analyzing political actions. In order to emphasise this anticipatory approach to analyzing political and economic transformations, the new 'transitologists' described transition as 'transition to democracy', rather than 'transition from authoritarianism'. The author argues that some of the (self-admitted) failures of anticipatory transition theories in predicting events that led to 1989 in Eastern Europe were primarily due to their 'objectivist' approach in analyzing political actions.

Keywords: transition theories, post-communist transitions, transitology, Eastern Europe.

In the 1990s, theories of transition were the main analytical tool for both explaining economic, social and political transformations in Eastern Europe, and for guiding political/economic/social elites in these countries towards achieving the main objectives of these transformations. When describing social and political reality

in the countries of 'Eastern Europe'<sup>1</sup>, they argued that these countries were undertaking important political and economic reforms, aimed at 'returning to diversity' (Rothschild, 1992) and 'consolidating democracy'. They were going through a process of 'multiple transformation' (Offe, 1995: 34) after a 'regime change' (Kis, 1995). They were in 'transition' (Welsh, 1994: 379), and this transition was from 'authoritarianism' to 'democracy' (Pridham, 1995; Linz, 1990; Agh, 1991). Hundreds of books and articles (Shin, 1994) have been written on this 'third wave of democratization' (Huntington, 1992) since the sudden and (as today almost every former 'Kremlinologist' admits) unexpected 'revolutions' (Havel, 1990) of 1989. Whether the 1989 events have been described as a 'negotiated revolution' (Schöpflin, 1993), as a 'velvet revolution', 'refolution' (Ash, 1990), or - more modestly - as a 'revolution without a historical model and a revolution without a revolutionary theory' (Offe, 1996: 31) - it is nevertheless commonly accepted that they made a 'turning point' in the history of these countries. Even more so: the 1989 events have changed the rest of the world as well (Beyme, 1996:7). The Cold War ideological barrier between East and West suddenly found itself amidst the ruins of the Berlin Wall. Two worlds, irreconcilably distant before 1989, have now approached each other with a prospect of 'building a common European home'. The only existing 'universal' ideological alternative to 'Liberal Democracy' - 'Communist Democracy' has disappeared. Some argued that even (political) geography had changed - the

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<sup>1</sup> As political concept, 'Eastern Europe' (as well as 'Western Europe') is a term closely associated with Cold-War Europe, and the relevant political actors and public in the countries concerned try to avoid it. They prefer more regionally-based self-descriptions, such as 'East-Central Europe', 'South-Eastern Europe', Caucasus, the Baltic States etc. I shall use 'Eastern Europe' only when I refer to all countries of the former Soviet Bloc, and always in inverted commas.

only difficulty was whether the former 'East' had now become 'the South' (Przeworski, 1991: 191) or 'the West'. For others, in the initial years of enthusiasm, even history came to its end. 'Liberal Democracy', which came out of the Cold War victorious, "constituted the 'end point of mankind's ideological evolution' and the 'final form of human government'" (Fukuyama, 1992:XI). Not only is there no alternative to it in political reality, but 'we cannot picture to ourselves a world that is *essentially* different from the present one, and at the same time better' (Fukuyama, 1992:46). The end of the Cold War thus became the end of visions as well. And if we are now without visions about any 'world substantially different from our own... then we must also take into consideration the possibility that History itself might be at an end' (Fukuyama, 1992:51)

From 'Retrospective' to 'Anticipatory' Transition Theory (O'Donnell and Schmitter vs. Przeworski)

Such a dramatic change, of course, could not have left the craft of explaining politics - and especially not 'political science' - indifferent. The 'new' post-1989 world was a new challenge for political science - especially for those of its disciplines focused on the former 'Eastern Europe' and 'democratization' in general. While 'theories of totalitarianism' (Arendt, 1951; Friedrich and Brzezinski, 1956) were still used to explain the past, they became inadequate to tell us much about the present of East European societies. 'Theories of democratization' and - particularly - theories of

'democratic consolidation' or 'transition from authoritarian rule' became more accurate.

The 1989 events were a good motive for a reassessment of various types of 'transition theories'. 'Transition' as a concept came into being in the late 1960s and early 1970s and has its origins in 'theories of democracy', probably the most productive branch of political science since its formation. But, while the 'theories of democracy' were primarily concerned with macro structural explanations of democratization, 'transition theory' focused on various cases of regime change. The democratization of Southern America in the sixties and of Southern Europe in the seventies was the primary focus of these analyses.

On many counts 'transition theories' made a clear difference from a mainstream behaviourist (Ricci, 1984) political science 'theories of democracy' which dominated in the 1960s and the 1970s. The 'theories of democracy' were macro-structural theories, since they attempted to find a correlation between the type of 'democracy' and various long-term macro-structural trends, such as the level of modernization, social structure (cleavages), political culture or institutional setting of the societies analysed. Regardless of which of these factors they identified as the one that could explain most of the political events, they were still focused on the search for 'necessary' (if not even 'sufficient') conditions for a stable democracy to occur.

A significant alternative to such approaches was offered by Rostow in his 1970 article 'Transition to Democracy'. Rostow's writing had an enormous impact on future debates on transition. Instead of looking at macro-trends as determinative factors of modernization, Rostow suggested a limited scope analysis of particular regime changes. Di Palma argues (1990: 205) that Rostow's article paved the way for what would become a 'path-dependency' approach to analysing democratization. According to this approach - now widely used in transition theories - macro-structural trends have only an indirect influence on the process of democratization. What matters more is the actual process of changes. The transition theories therefore concentrate on various phases of this process, such as 'decay of authoritarian rule', or its replacement with 'democratically' legitimized governments.

This shift from macro-structural theories to 'micro' theories of particular regime-change was also an indicator of a somewhat new understanding of political action in general. Theories of transition attached much more importance to actions performed by political actors than to various exogenous factors which influenced mega-trends. From a macro-level analysis, political scientists of transition moved to an analysis of elite-behaviour in the uncertain circumstances of regime change. From a 'universalist' approach which implied a high level of generalization about social trends they now focused their attention on particular cases, recognizing the differences between them.

Finally, transition theorists criticized and challenged the idea that a development of society is almost linear and ultimately certain (since it depends on mega-trends). They instead emphasized uncertainty and unpredictability as the main features of politics. Instead of an ambition to predict events on the basis of long-term trends, transition theories were retrospective in their focus.

For all these reasons, 'transition theories' (as they were - perhaps not entirely adequately - named by their authors) became a significant challenge to macro-theories of the time. It was, however only in the late 1970s and early 1980s that 'transition theories' got a real wind into their wings, when Latin American and South European changing societies offered them an excellent source for case studies of political transformations. After several years of researching, O'Donnell and Schmitter published in 1986 their four-volume 'Transitions from Authoritarian Rule', which became the cornerstone of 'transition theory' as a separate sub-discipline within comparative politics. The authors themselves say that this was 'the first book in any language that systematically and comparatively focuses on the process of transition from authoritarian regimes, making this the central question of scholarship as it is today in Latin American politics' (Lowenthal, 1986:IX). Rejecting the 'normal science methodology' (1986:4) of behaviorist political science, O'Donnell and Schmitter clearly define their alternative by saying that this methodology and these theories are inappropriate and thus unable to explain rapid political changes where 'those very parameters of political action are in flux' (1986:4). In a situation of uncertainty and complexity, anticipations are impossible, since actors are hesitant

about their own interests. Unexpected events, insufficient information, hurried and audacious choices, confusion about motives and interests, plasticity and even lack of definition of political identities, as well as the talents of specific individuals - this all may prove to be 'decisive in determining the outcomes' (1986:5). 'Macrostructural' theories simply do not take these unexpected and unintended elements seriously enough.

For O'Donnell and Schmitter, transition may lead equally to 'the installation of a political democracy or the restoration of a new, and possibly more severe, form or authoritarian rule' (1986:3). Opposing the then dominant macro-structural approaches, they refused to offer any 'theory to test or to apply to the case studies and thematic essays in these volumes' (1986:3) since the whole process of transition is subject to 'extraordinary uncertainty' and 'unpredictability' (1986:3). Any theory they could formulate would be only another 'theory of abnormality in which the unexpected and the possible are as important as the usual and the probable' (1986:4). In opposition to the mainstream political scientists of the time (modernization theories, cultural theories and institutionalists), O'Donnell and Schmitter clearly said that "this 'normal science methodology' is inappropriate in rapidly changing situations, where those very parameters of political action are in flux" (1986:4). It is equally 'impossible to specify *ex ante* which classes, sectors, institutions, and other groups will take what role, opt for which issues, or support what alternative' (1986:4). Finally, they offered only a minimal definition of transition, saying that it is 'the interval between one political regime and another'.

'Our efforts generally stop at the moment that a new regime is installed, whatever its nature or type. Transitions are delimited, on the one side, by the launching of the process of dissolution of an authoritarian regime and, on the other, by the installation of some form of democracy, the return of some form of authoritarian rule, or the emergence of a revolutionary alternative' (1986:6).

Thus, such a minimalist definition of transition differs from previous attempts at defining complex universalist models of democratization, since it does not attempt to construct predictions for the future but is instead rather retrospective. The future was left to itself.

O'Donnell and Schmitter's project was concerned with democratization in Southern Europe and in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s. But, only three years after the publication of this book, the events in Eastern Europe offered a new challenge. With events of 1989, transition theories moved their attention to Eastern Europe. The circumstances of these events were, however, rather different from those which the project originally analysed. The changes in Eastern Europe were not primarily gradual, but rapid and unexpected even for academics and other experts in the region. In addition, with the withdrawal of Soviet power from Eastern Europe (and subsequent disintegration of the USSR itself), the structure of international system has changed too. Instead of a Cold-War "bipolar" system (1949-1989), the leading transitologists predicted a "unipolarism". As it would turn out rather soon, the notion of unipolarism was soon to be questioned – just as some would in fact question that the Cold-War period had been a permanent interplay of only two powers. Nevertheless, the projected age of unipolarism in Europe left no place for a

viable alternative. Based on this projection, politicians of the 1990s often used a TINA metaphor (“there is no alternative”). At the same time, transitologists argued that their endeavor was not as uncertain as transition used to be in previous cases, due to the changed nature of international system. Projected unipolarity created circumstances in which any fundamental uncertainty about the final outcome has disappeared.

This rapidness of changes in Eastern Europe did not leave much space for ‘transition’, defined merely as ‘the interval between one political regime and another’. In some cases (in Romania, East Germany, even in Czechoslovakia) such change between one and another ‘types’ of regimes happened too fast to make a ‘transition’. It was the replacement of one regime by another with almost no liberalization to precede it. In some other cases (Hungary, for example), economic as well as political changes happened gradually and without a clear ‘revolution’ between them.

The surprise of political scientists at the events was seen as a sign of failure of their predictive ability. 'No one had expected', says Przeworski, 'that the communist system, styled by some as totalitarian precisely because it was supposed to be immutable, would collapse suddenly and peacefully' (1991:1). The collapse of Communism was 'a surprisingly rapid process' (Schöpflin, 1992:34). It was, furthermore, equally surprising that the Soviet-type systems 'which had once seemed so well established and firmly grounded, should have caved in as easily as

they did, even if the signs of systemic decay had been visible for much of the 1980s' (Schöpflin, 1993:224). The events of 1989 represented, many political scientists argued, a 'dismal failure of political science' (Przeworski, 1991:X). It was a 'black Friday' for social science (Beyme, 1996:6) in which it became clear that 'many of our fondest categories are simply inapplicable' (Holmes, 1996:24).<sup>2</sup>

But was it really a failure? Those who believe that predictability is the main purpose and criterion of the validity of political analysis would argue that the 1989 East European 'revolutions' defeated political analysts.<sup>3</sup> However, this argument is based on assumption that the primary purpose of political analysis should be to anticipate events rather than simply to explain them. In reality, however, political behaviour is often largely unpredictable, since it does not only depend on some firm and unchangeable 'external factors' which determine people's acts. It is a highly subjective activity about whose future we often have little certainty. This subjectivity of political action too often than not undermines the ambition to find models of political behaviour, which could be generalised with high level of certainty. It disturbs the notion of causality (or 'correlation') between some set of 'objective' variables and certain types of political 'outputs' which follows them. Finally, it makes difficult to advice politicians and guide general public on what to

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<sup>2</sup> Holmes is among a rare group of political scientists who claim that the failure of political science is not a result of their 'failure to predict', but was deeper than this, since the very 'categories' used by political scientists proved inadequate.

<sup>3</sup> 'For this tradition the diminution of predictive failure is the mark of progress in science; and those social scientists who have espoused it must face the fact that if they are right at some point an unpredicted war or revolution will become as disgraceful for a political scientist, an unpredicted change in the rate in inflation as disgraceful for an economist, as would an unpredicted eclipse for an astronomer' (MacIntyre, 1985:92)

do (or: not to do) in order to transform society from reality (what-is) to normative ideal (what-ought-to-be).

Although popular within mainstream behaviourist political science, the idea that we can 'discover' a causal link between macro-structural factors and political behaviour is largely utopian. The self-admitted failure of political science in anticipating the 1989 in Eastern Europe was in its essence the failure of those main representatives of the macro-structural theories who were searching for a 'golden key' to analysing political processes. It was the failure of the idea that political events, even when they are of the utmost importance as the 1989 events were, could always be successfully anticipated.

It is in this light that in this paper I criticise much of what has been written by 'transitologists' in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet bloc. It seems to me that many former Marxists (Przeworski), mainstream 'modernization theorists' (Lipset), 'culturalists' (Huntington) and 'institutionalists' (Lijphart) became 'transitologists', applying their macro-theories to particular cases of East European 'transitions'. However, they somewhat neglected both the context that has changed and the subjectivity of political actors. To use concepts developed within the neorealist theory of international politics, they neglected the importance of structure in which they operated. By doing this, they aimed at preserving the same method of analysis as the one that (by their own admission) failed to anticipate 1989. Thus, they simply re-interpreted the concept of transition, and tried to give it a new meaning.

Transition was no longer a retrospective attempt at analysing transformations, but an anticipatory attempt to predict the future and to offer guidance on how to transform society towards the desirable objective. Transition was no longer primarily defined as “transition from authoritarianism” into something else that we can hardly define in advance, but as “transition to democracy” – thus a journey with the known destination, the one that we can clearly define by using the models of democracy already developed in the case of West European societies.

The first attempt to reconcile macro-structural (economic) theory and 'transition theories' in Eastern Europe was seen in Adam Przeworski's book 'Democracy and the Market' (1991). Przeworski argued that 'in both realms [political and economic] the word 'transitions' best describes the processes launched in a number of countries. These are transitions from authoritarianism of several varieties to democracy and from state-administrated, monopolistic and protected economic systems, again of several varieties, to a reliance on markets. Both transitions are radical, and they are interdependent' (1991:IX).

Przeworski builds a model of successful democratization, asking four questions in his book:

'1. What kind of democratic institutions are **most likely** to last?; 2. What kind of economic systems ... are **most likely** to generate growth with a humane distribution of welfare?; 3. What are the political conditions for the successful functioning of economic systems, for growth with security for all?; 4. What are the economic conditions for democracy to be consolidated?' (1991:X)

All four of his questions relate to future and seek - in fact - predictions as answers.

His conclusion follows the self-definition of his goals. Przeworski entirely relies on various macro-structural theories when he concludes without any doubt that 'the durability of the new democracies will depend, however, not only on their institutional structure and the ideology of the major political forces, but to a large extent on their economic performance' (1991:89). Even more confident is he that 'the main reason to hope that Eastern Europe will escape the politics, the economics and the culture of poor capitalism, that it will soon join the West is geography' and that 'geography is indeed the single reason to hope that East European countries will follow the path to democracy and prosperity' (1991:190). And this is so, Przeworski says, because it is impossible to contemplate a non-democratic country in Europe any longer.

By saying, in his pessimistic conclusion, that 'the East has become the South' (1991:191) and that if it were not for geography he sees 'no reason why the future of Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Romania should be different from that of Argentina, Brazil and Chile' (1991:190) Przeworski promotes a somewhat universalist approach to explaining political behaviour. This approach assumes that there are certain universal features of human behaviour which 'cause' the same model of reaction to the same 'inputs' regardless of differences between the political participants themselves.

Another excellent - although perhaps extreme - example of this universalist approach based on external ('objective') factors was developed in Tatu Vanhanen's 'Darwinian theory of democratization'. What is common to Przeworski and Vanhanen, as well as to those others who share the concept of 'scientific naturalism'<sup>4</sup> is the understanding that people's behaviour is to a very large degree dependent on factors which are external to themselves. They rarely ever create their own political actions for themselves. Instead, they primarily follow economic, cultural, institutional or - indeed - geographic<sup>5</sup> factors over which they have little or no influence. Politics is a struggle for control over these external, objective factors. If we understand how to do this, Przeworski would say, if we really control economic growth and the institutional setting, it is 'very likely' that democracy will occur. The key to understanding transition lies, therefore, not as much in the participants themselves (not in analysing actions and motives by elites, as O'Donnell and Schmitter suggested) but rather somewhere else - in 'economic growth' or 'geography' for example. Thus, one of the main elements of various 'macro-structural' theories has now been coupled with the 'transition theory' - in attempting to explain what Przeworski would name 'transition to democracy'.

It is of great importance for understanding of transition theory to notice that Przeworski does not actually use the concept of the 'transition from

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<sup>4</sup> This term is taken from Ricci (1984:92) to describe the approach within political science which directly links natural science and politics.

<sup>5</sup> Rousseau and Montesquieu, for example, discussed with great vigour the influence of the 'climate factor' on the possibility of realisation of freedom.

authoritarianism' but rather a new one - the 'transition to democracy'. This change was significant - instead of talking about the past, new post-Communist transition theories re-formulated their objective: it was no longer to explain what has happened, but rather to anticipate what will (or: should) happen in the future. This is a significant difference with regards to the approach developed by O'Donnell and Schmitter.

Whereas O'Donnell and Schmitter developed a cautious approach with no certainty about the outcome of transitions they analysed, the new post-communist transitologists became much more normative and much less cautious in their explanations. For them, the collapse of the 'Communist Democracies' was seen as the beginning of a long age of certainty in which there were no alternatives to Liberal Democracy. Such certainty entirely re-directed efforts of 'transition theories' from analysing the past to constructing the future of changing societies. They redefined the aims of 'transition theory' from explaining how the 'authoritarian regimes' collapsed to how the new 'democracies' were emerging. They became primarily interested in the 'prospects for democratization', advising political practitioners on how to 'consolidate democracy' in Eastern Europe. Even the definition of the concept has changed. Understood within the definition developed by O'Donnell and Schmitter, transition in Eastern Europe should have ended with the first democratic elections (in 1990). But, for the new theorists of post-communist transition, it only begins at that point.<sup>6</sup> For them, transition was no longer only a period in between

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<sup>6</sup> Shin situates the phase of 'transition' between 'decay of authoritarian rule' and 'consolidation'. (1994:143). This is different from O'Donnell and Schmitter's understanding of transition as a period

two clearly defined and relatively firmly structured institutional systems, but it now became a concept of the re-construction of social order, almost from the beginning, from 'point zero'.<sup>7</sup> It was a 'construction' of 'democracy'. Instead of 'transition from authoritarian rule' (as O'Donnell and Schmitter titled their book) it became a 'transition to democracy' (Pridham, 1995). Transition theory thus made its own 'transition': from explanatory (retrospective) to anticipatory (normative). Instead of an uncertain journey from 'known' to unknown it became a 'certain' travel from 'known' to 'known' - from one clear model to another.<sup>8</sup>

For reasons of clarity of my argument I shall with regard to these two types of transition theories call the pre-1989 transition theories 'retrospective' and the post-1989 'anticipatory'. 'Retrospective' transition theory is interested in explaining past regime changes, defining its field as 'transition from' rather than as 'transition to'. It is history, rather than political science, as defined by 'transitologists'. When I criticise 'transition theories' in general, I do, however have in mind the post-1989 (i.e. contemporary) transition theories, which are mainly 'anticipatory'.

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which begins with liberalization of the authoritarian regime and ends with its institutional replacement by an other type of regime.

<sup>7</sup> 'The transition from communism therefore involves not only building new structures but also destroying existing one' (Mandelbaum, 1996:11). On 'building from beginning' see also Schöpflin (1993).

<sup>8</sup> How different these two understandings of 'transition' are may be seen in Mueller's (1996) and Gati's (1996) usage of the same term. While Mueller believed in 1996 that 'most of the post-communist countries of central and eastern Europe have essentially completed their transition to democracy and capitalism' (Mueller, 1996:102), Gati concluded in the same year that they are not even on the way to transition to democracy but rather are engaged in constituting 'semi-autocracies' (Gati, 1996). Such a radical difference in 'diagnosing' the current situation in East Central European countries' is the result of entirely different understandings of 'transition'. While for Mueller, transition is limited to abandoning the 'authoritarian' system, for Gati it has the more substantial meaning of achieving self-defined goals.

### 'Scientific' approach to analysing 'transition' (Vanhanen's Social Darwinism)

By this metamorphosis, transition theories made their return to traditional sociology as expressed by macro-structural theories of democracy as its most distinguished part. The core of these theories lies in a 'scientific' ('objective') approach to analysing social reality. Science is searching for scientific laws and universal explanations of the inter-relationship between causes and consequences. 'Universality' and 'objectivity' are the claims of any science and are imported in to political science from the natural sciences.<sup>9</sup> One of the imports from natural sciences is also a notion of linear and 'natural' move from 'lower' to 'higher' levels of 'mankind's ideological evolution' (Fukuyama, 1992:7), i.e. of a historical 'progress' which is in fact what the transition from 'authoritarianism' to 'democracy' is primarily about. From their 'backward' phase, societies are now developing to fully-fledged democracies. And 'it is possible to speak of historical progress only if one knows where mankind is going' (Fukuyama, 1992:7). The knowledge of the goals and models of this 'historical progress' belongs primarily (although not exclusively) to (political) scientists – transitologists.<sup>10</sup> They know how to build a democracy, and therefore are invited to

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<sup>9</sup> In its essence, the 'scientific approach to social reality' is explained as belief 'that the study of reality could qualify as scientific only if it used the methods of the natural science' (Voegelin, 1952:4)

<sup>10</sup> Transitology is indeed rarely ever defined as a discipline of "arts and humanities" (or "liberal arts"). As the dominant stream within the field of political studies, in Eastern Europe it moved the whole discipline away from its previous links with humanities (philosophy, history, etc.) and closer to "social sciences" (macroeconomics, sometimes sociology but with emphasis on public opinion polls and quantitative methods, etc.). Studying of electoral systems and of the achievements (and sometimes failures) of transition became a *must* for all new students of politics. In some cases, even links with political theory and philosophy (for which East European political thinkers were rather well-known during the pre-1989 period) were deliberately severed. This is all too logical from the point of view of scientific ambition of the post-1989 transitologists.

advice political leaders on what to do.<sup>11</sup> The expertise they can provide was in the 1990s seen as essential part of the process of political and economic transformation of all East European societies in their attempt to become 'consolidated democracies'.

But in order to know all this, political scientists must know what 'democracy' is. The 'transition theories' - and 'theories of democratization' - are somehow premised on such knowledge. Too often they see their main goal in defining concepts such as 'authoritarianism' and 'democracy' as well as in suggesting which 'objective factors' may bring about the final outcome.<sup>12</sup>

The mainstream post-1989 transition theorists offered too often a universalist and 'objective' meaning to concepts such as 'democracy' and 'authoritarianism'. Their definitions of democracy vary, depending on how they rank various factors of democratization, such as participation, competition, elections, individual freedom and autonomy and equality. The presence of these factors makes one country a democracy, just as the absence of one or all of them makes it a non-democracy, an authoritarian or semi-democratic state. Since democracy is a universalist (or at least a near-universalist) concept, we are able to compare countries cross-culturally and cross-temporarily and even to rank them on the scale of democratization. Such a measurement will, they believe, reduce our potentially biased assessments of various

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<sup>11</sup> Some of the authors of the project 'Transition from Authoritarian Rule' will be 'leaders in the very processes of building democracy' (Lowenthal in O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986:X)

<sup>12</sup> 'For instance, it may be useful to single out certain circumstances as background factors and to proceed step-by-step to other factors that may become crucial in the preparation, decision, and consolidation phases of the process' (Rustow, 1970:345)

societies and will instead promote clear indicators of how far a country has gone in its 'transition from authoritarianism to democracy'.<sup>13</sup>

Some of the post-1989 transition theorists - Fukuyama for example - revive the concept of 'Universal History'. In Fukuyama's own words, they are 're-assuming a discussion that was begun in the early nineteenth century, but more or less abandoned in our time' (1992:XIV). Such a Universal History is possible, however, only because 'natural science [is used] as a regulator mechanism to explain the directionality and coherence of History' (1992:XIV). For Fukuyama 'modern natural science is a useful starting point because it is the only important social activity that by common consensus is both cumulative and directional, even if its ultimate impact on human happiness is ambiguous' (1992:XIV). Finally, Fukuyama uses the language of natural science (more precisely: of Darwinism) when saying that Liberal Democracy is the 'end point of mankind's ideological evolution' (1992:XI). It therefore comes as no surprise to read that 'modern natural science has provided us with a Mechanism whose progressive unfolding gives both a directionality and a coherence to human history over the past several centuries', and that this mechanism 'is truly universal' (1992:126). This universalism is seen in the 'logic of modern natural science... [which] seems to dictate a universal evolution in the direction of capitalism' (1992:XV).

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<sup>13</sup> In general, social scientists believe that 'the methods used in the mathematizing sciences or the external world were possessed of some inherent virtue and that all other sciences would achieve comparable success if they followed the example and accepted these methods as the model' (Voegelin, 1952:4).

The main representatives of the post-1989 transition theories believe that democracy is a 'natural' form of government and will therefore necessarily find the way to its final victory over 'totalitarianism'.<sup>14</sup> For Mueller, democracy and free market both emerge from what is elementary and almost biological in human nature. It is a 'natural tendency' and therefore not difficult to achieve. It is easy to return to one's own nature. Democracy is 'at base a fairly simple thing - even a rather natural one' (Mueller, 1996:117). It is therefore rather natural that the logic of the natural sciences may help to explain how democracy emerges.

In attempting to 'transplant' the logic of natural science into social reality, few have surpassed Tatu Vanhanen. His intention was to 'show that the process of democratization follows similar basic rules in all countries of the world and that knowledge of these rules provides a solid basis for formulating political and social strategies of democratisation' (1991: VII). Since this is so, there must be a unique criterion to measure democratisation in all countries in the world. Vanhanen argues that 'there is and there must be a common factor able to account for the major part of the variation of political systems from the aspect of democratization and that a scientific understanding of democracy could be based on this common factor. This argument is based on the idea that, as a consequence of natural selection, all species have species-specific behavioural predispositions that are common to all members of the species in the same sense as common morphological characteristics. This means,

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<sup>14</sup> The return of the debate on "nature" and "natural" is not surprising, taken that 1989 for East Europeans symbolises also the year when Liberalism and Conservatism as political doctrines claimed victory over Marxism. Debating the character of Human Nature comes naturally to these two political ideologies.

in the case of political behaviour, that there must be universal political behaviour patterns that have remained more or less the same across all cultural variations' (1991:47).

'The central idea of this study is that we should be able to explain both the existence and the lack of democracy by the same explanatory principles, because human nature is a constant and because similar behavioural predispositions can be assumed to be shared by all human populations. The explanatory principles of my theory of democratization are based on an evolutionary interpretation of politics derived from the Darwinian theory of natural selection. The theory of democratization formulated in this study makes it possible to present research hypotheses on democratization and to test them by empirical evidence, as well as to make predictions on the prospects of democracy in single countries' (1991:VII), since 'the Darwinian theory of evolution by natural selection may provide explanatory principles that can be used to explain the necessity and basic rules of politics' (1991:47)

Vanhanen believes that politics is to be compared with nature and that therefore social science must use instruments developed within natural science in order to explain political behaviour. He sees political structures as 'mechanisms or organs used in the political struggle for scarce resources' which 'have evolved in this struggle and become adapted to varying environmental conditions.' (1991:3) For him, differences between political systems are due to 'environmental conditions'.

'My argument is that, at the global level, all countries are comparable with each other to vary much from one country to another... Racial, cultural, ideological, developmental, and historical dissimilarities among countries may be great, but they cannot eradicate the similarity of human nature on which regular patterns in politics are based' (1991:5).

Since this is so, Vanhanen creates mechanisms which would enable us to compare all countries of the world. Such a mechanism he offers through his index of democratization (ID), which should tell us which states are more and which less democratized. The ID is a quantitative indicator of a degree of competition and of participation in a society.

“It seems plausible to regard a political system the more democratized the higher the degrees of competition and participation are.” (1991:17).

Implementing his index on 147 countries, Vanhanen ranks them according to obtained values of the ID.

“The ranking of countries by ID illustrates the continuum of political systems from autocracies to democracies. The countries with the highest ID values can be regarded as democracies and the countries with the lowest values as autocracies” (1991:31).<sup>15</sup>

What makes Vanhanen paradigmatic for the type of analysis of democratization that emerged after the 1989 East European ‘revolutions’ was not his Darwinist approach as much as his conclusion that ‘politics can be interpreted as an expression of the universal struggle for existence in living nature’ (1991:48) - ‘it is so because we live in

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<sup>15</sup> Vanhanen himself says however, that his index of democratization failed to produce a clear classification between ‘democratic’ and ‘autocratic’ countries in any obvious sense. But, instead of questioning the entire approach he uses, Vanhanen lowers the requirements for one country to be treated as a democracy. He admits that such a criterion is “certainly arbitrary to some degree”, but he still does not give up. As far as the ID value is concerned, Vanhanen suggests 5.0 index points as the minimum threshold of democracy. Democracies are, he argues, only those countries which have passed all three thresholds of democracy. Also, in between the democracies and non-democracies the group of ‘semi-democracies’ should be included. Finally, Vanhanen classified 61 countries in the world as ‘democracies’, five as ‘semi-democracies’ and 81 as ‘non-democracies’ in 1988. Transition is a process in which these ‘non-democracies’ and ‘semi-democracies’ are to become ‘democracies’.

a world of scarce resources where competition and struggle are the major ways to distribute those resources.’ (1991:48). Because the resources are scarce, and since everyone has the same right to them, the competition between human beings for these resources is inevitable. People struggle for power because ‘power can be used to get scarce resources’ (1991:50). For Vanhanen, the level of democratization is determined by the ability of the powerful groups to compromise about the distribution of power. “Democracy emerges as a rational compromise between strong competing groups” (1991:51).

Vanhanen is perhaps among the most radical, but nevertheless to a large degree typical author of the new, post-1989 transitology. His model includes the ‘normal science’ methods and is based on the notion of universalism, as well as on the possibility of comparing and measuring social and political phenomena ‘objectively’. In addition, Vanhanen’s approach too is based on a dichotomy between the idea of progress (i.e. “democratization” and Westernization) and ‘backwardness’ (the old “communist”, “Balkan”, or “East European” practices). Neo-transitology, therefore, to a large degree means also a return to the link between natural sciences and politics. For Vanhanen, the natural sciences are superior and without them we cannot really understand social phenomena. Politics is ultimately a struggle for survival, in which people fight over scarce resources. Those who are fitter - win. The same rules apply to nature and to society. Democratization will ‘take place under condition in which power resources are so widely distributed that no group is any longer able to suppress its competitors or to maintain its hegemony’ (1991:191). Since

democracy is 'assumed to emerge as a more or less unintended consequence of resource distribution' (1991:192), the will of the participants is of little importance. This conclusion of Vanhanen is significant for at least two reasons. One is that it can help us understand the reasons for political apathy in post-1989 societies. If the will of individuals is unimportant, then one should ask: why should they participate at all? What is their role? What sense does it make for people to participate in politics, when the outcome is already known. Secondly, Vanhanen touches upon – but does not really identify – what I call *liberal paradox* of post-1989 transitions. The paradox is that liberalism, which has the value of freedom and individual autonomy at its very core, at the same time claims that “there is no alternative”. Is freedom possible if there are no alternatives? Vanhanen's blunt conclusions about the futility of any resistance to the dominant ideological trends make these questions inevitable. He, of course, does not ask them.

For him, the 'positive outcome' of the process of democratization is indeed inevitable: 'in the end the competing groups will have to accept the sharing of power and to institutionalize it because none of them is any longer able to establish a hegemony and to suppress its competitors' (1991:192). The very process of 'adaptation' is difficult, says Vanhanen, but it is just a temporary process that leads to a known end. Even more so, this very process of democratization is likely to be similar in all societies, since people are similar and they share same 'behavioural predisposition'. Their actions are determined by the similar set of variables. Finally, they all struggle for the same thing – survival through controlling scarce resources.

'The prospects of democratization depend on whether the distribution of crucial power resources increases or decreases' (1991:194). Since 'technological inventions and developments have been the principal causal factors behind these trends of change' (1991:194), 'it is plausible to predict that democratization will also continue in the world' (1991:194).

Vanhanen is an example of the most 'scientific' approach to the analysis of politics, the one which dominated in analyses of post-1989 'transitions' in Eastern Europe. He himself lists hundreds of similar attempts to find a universally valid criterion of democratization.

The post-1989 transition theory largely follows Vanhanen's recommendations. It is based on assumption that there is a universalist trend in history, the one which inevitably brings societies from their 'backward' phase of authoritarianism to the developed phase of liberal democracy.<sup>16</sup> Transition is traveling on this journey - from one level to the next. This journey means 'progress' and 'development' rather than 'regression' or 'repeating of the same'. It is also clear that 'democracies' (defined by the political scientists and understood as 'liberal democracies') are closer to human nature and to its inclination to freedom and human rights. Such a view is, finally, accepted by the political actors that dominate the international political and economic institutions. There is a universal set of values, which belong to every

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<sup>16</sup> The very first sentence in Schöpflin's book says that 'the political traditions with which Eastern Europe entered the contemporary period can be generally characterized as backward.' (Schöpflin, 1993:5).

person as a person equally and must not be dependent on anyone's wish to respect them. The concept of human rights is a universal concept: if they are violated by state, this state could (and should) be isolated or even militarily attacked by an international force to overthrow 'totalitarianism' and install (or restore) 'democracy'.

Within this context it does not surprise that much of what is contemporary transition theory and mainstream political science are searching for a set of 'objective factors' which could enable us to explain, measure and finally - to construct the process of 'democratic transition' in Eastern Europe.<sup>17</sup> This is again where these theories come close to macro-structural theories of democracy. For theories of modernization the decisive objective factors are found at the level of economic development and the inevitable improvement of education and urbanization which are the consequences of this development (Lipset, 1959).<sup>18</sup> For Almond and Verba (1963) the 'civic culture' determines the prospects for democratization in a country. For Lijphart (1994) institutions matter the most. For other authors international forces simply imported democracy into Germany after the Second World War just as the European Community (Union) proved to be the decisive factor in South-European democratization in the late 1970s. For Lipset and Rokkan (1966), and Moore (1966) social structure has the utmost importance.

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<sup>17</sup> Indeed, many of those who discuss transition are actively involved in policy advising. For example, Francis Fukuyama, Michael Mandelbaum and Charles Gati.

<sup>18</sup> For relationship between economic factor and democracy see also: Lindblom (1977), Friedman (1962), Riker (1982) and Almond (1991)

The same search for the objective factors which determine the course of democratization re-emerged in the renewed transition theories. They try to 'give these events their appropriate political, sociological, economic contexts in order to reconstruct the mechanisms which lie behind events and to explore how they may have influenced each other at levels below the surface' (Schöpflin, 1993:1). Huntington (1993) finds the cultural argument the most convincing. Przeworski (1992) relies upon economic and institutional elements. Schöpflin combines various approaches, but most of his explanation is based on modernization theory. But each of these authors is searching for the main 'key factor' which will offer an explanation not only of current events in Eastern Europe, but of the 'prospects for democracy' in these countries.

In their attempts to find a correlation between (objective) 'causes' and 'consequences', the contemporary transition theorists too often neglect the subjective. In fact, they still rely on Durkheim's recommendation not to take political actors seriously:

"I consider extremely fruitful this idea that social life should be explained, not by the notions of those who participate in it, but by more profound causes which are unperceived by consciousness, and I think also that these causes are to be sought mainly in the manner according to which the associated individuals are grouped. Only in this way, it seems, can history become a science, and sociology itself exist' (Durkheim, in '*Revue Philosophique*', Dec 1897).

On the contrary, what I would suggest here as the main basis for criticism of such an approach was formulated by Peter Winch in his following words:

'Even given a specific set of initial conditions, one will still not be able to predict any determinate outcome to a historical trend because the continuation or breaking off of that trend involves human decisions which are not determined by their antecedent conditions in the context of which the sense of calling them 'decisions' lies'. (Winch, 1958/1990;93).

When it comes to social activities, Winch says, predictions are more often than not bound to fail because there is very little of causal relationship between events. Instead of causes, there is a variety of motives and reasons for people's political actions. Political actions are not 'things' and cannot be understood by analyzing 'objective factors' as their causes. They are not only different in complexity, but fundamentally different in kind from 'natural phenomena' ('things'). They are subjective actions and in order to understand them, the subject cannot be discounted as 'more likely than not to be misguided and confused' (Winch, 1958/1990:95). To understand social actions, we cannot simply rely upon statistical data, correlation and comparison between 'similar' events in a cross-cultural or cross-temporal perspective. To understand social events is 'grasping the point or meaning of what is being done or said' (Winch, 1958/1990:115).

Theories of "transition to democracy" (anticipatory theories) are based on the notion of rationally acting people who have decided to 'build' democracy since democracy is in their interest. Since liberty, democracy and the free market have a universal value, it is 'natural' that everyone co-operates in realising the common (or 'public') interest. Democracy is, therefore, not only a 'natural' end of 'Darwinian' understanding of social behaviour, but also a product of voluntary collective action

in which everyone's participation is based on 'rationally' recognized interests. And if this is so, 'democracy' has been, is and will be a *spiritus movens* of political actions. Its rationality and 'naturalness' is the main guarantee for its ultimate victory over various forms of non-democratic rule. Democracy is thus - in the long term - inevitable. It is inevitable not only because it is practically more and more difficult to control complex societies, but because people (as rational political beings) will never give up their primordial nature. It is not, thus, (only or even primarily) interests that drive their actions - it is their nature that makes them interested in democracy. People will never give up being "natural". What makes them "people" is their freedom-loving nature.

The optimism of transition theories about the final outcome of political changes is based on this assumption. They might accept that in reality the 'data' do not give many reasons for such optimism.<sup>19</sup> But they will reply to this that the East European societies are undergoing only their first phase of transition, undertaking only the first steps (Agh, 1994), the early stages of democratization in which democracy itself is not yet consolidated. They will accept that in this 'early phase' of transition new democracies confront problems which 'developed democracies' do not have to face. These problems might be severe but will still be treated as no more than 'children's illnesses' of democracy. In the long term, however, East European societies are inevitably becoming democracies, if not for other reasons then because there is no

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<sup>19</sup> Gati warns against the discrepancy between reality and optimistic descriptions of this reality (1996). However, his answer to the question why this happens does not go sufficiently deep. He believes that this is because Westerners and Easterners ask themselves different questions and therefore measure the 'success of transition' by different criteria.

viable alternative to liberal democracies (Fukuyama, 1992), at least not in Europe (Przeworski, 1991). Even when people get disillusioned about the nature of political system in which they live, or about politicians they themselves have voted into offices – they will conclude that these politicians have betrayed the original will of the people, rather than question ability of individuals to make the right choice.

Transition theories define the universal goal of mankind - ‘liberal democracy’ - leaving little or indeed nothing to be said by the participants themselves. They construct ‘indices of democratization’ suggesting that Italy is the most democratic country in the world (Vanhanen, 1991), and that - therefore - it represents the example for all other countries, especially for those that are in a transitory phase to democracy.<sup>20</sup> It is rational to follow this model. It is irrational to deflect.

‘Liberal democracy’ is commonly accepted by transition theorists as well as political practitioners as the model that should be followed in East European societies. It is also recognized as a blue-print by many in the East. But, as universal, this model has significant difficulties in adapting to the specificity of East European societies. It was the concept of ‘it-is-rational-to-follow’ policy that made many believe that Eastern Europe was ‘backward’ (Schöpflin, 1993: 5) and therefore it should be guided on how to transform its political and economic system. It is, equally, this principle that encouraged the growing illusions, disappointments and misunderstandings on both sides of the former Berlin Wall after its fall. Because of the ‘universalist’ and

'objective' criteria for the measurement of democracy today many see constructing a hot-house in which the 'transplanted tree' of 'democracy' should be guarded as their 'mission' in East European democratization. And it is precisely because of this that many in the East resisted such a mission. Finally, some transition theorists (for example Mandelbaum) are rather explicit when they compare the post-Cold War Eastern Europe with any other post-war situation in which there is a clear winner:

'The armies of the winners did not, it is true, occupy the territory of the losers. Still, given the nature of the conflict and the way it ended, it was logical for the losers to adopt the institutions and beliefs of the winners. It was logical in particular because the outcome represented a victory of the West's methods of political and economic organization rather than a triumph of its arms.'  
(Mandelbaum, 1996:3)

It is because the 'transition theorists' have a 'universal' model of future and desirable society ('liberal democracy' of the West-European type) that they judge the others as 'backward' and 'irrational' if they deflect. It was because of this that they expected the East European societies to imitate the West.<sup>21</sup>

This approach might well be a part of political game played by powerful political actors, who feel that it is in their interest to control the world by imposing their own

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<sup>20</sup> For Vanhanen's reputation is certainly not helpful that Italy was in the late 1980s and early 1990s in deep political crisis of its political system – exactly at the time when he declared it the most democratic country in the world. Italian party system collapsed at that time.

<sup>21</sup> As Mandelbaum says, 'imitation is not only the sincerest form of flattery; where intense competition is the rule, it is the best formula for survival' (1996:30). Or, as Mueller points out, commenting on the East European transitions: 'Imitation and competition are likely to help in all this' (1996:138)

models everywhere else. But when political analysts do the same, they always lose their *raison d'etre* - the understanding and explaining of political actions.<sup>22</sup>

Political actions cannot be understood – and therefore they also cannot be explained – without following the way the actors understand themselves in the world in which they live. We may find as many different reasons for action as there are people on Earth. Some of them will look strange and unacceptable to us. But, the main objective of political analysis is to understand and explain as much as possible of these reasons and the subsequent actions they produce. It is of little help to say that some of these reasons do not make sense to us – what is important is whether they had made sense to those whose actions they motivated.

To rely on some “universal nature” of men and women is also wrong. Pluralist character of liberal democracy (including here the notion of individual autonomy, which is one of the key demands by liberals) does not allow generalizations of this sort. Since people change their views on what is their ‘interest’, who they are and where they are heading to, they will change their actions accordingly (Pizzorno, 1984). To say that one or another type of behaviour is ‘inevitable’ - is to say that we know the future and thus also that we may control people’s behaviour by controlling

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<sup>22</sup> I argue that the West European inability to understand the Yugoslav crises and the behaviour of its participants has its deepest roots in the ‘objective’ approach, which did not even attempt to understand why the actions made sense to the actors themselves. Between the ‘universalist’ approach represented by ‘the international community’ and the Yugoslav political actors there was a constant misunderstanding.

the forces which 'cause'<sup>23</sup> it. This is an illusion. Even for the most 'totalitarian' regimes and under the utmost autocratic leaders such an attempt to control people's actions has proved to be illusory.

People do not act because they follow some 'objective' rationality, 'destiny' or 'inevitable path of history'. They act because it makes sense to them. They have reasons and motives for their action. What sometimes seems perfectly 'irrational' by 'objective' criteria suggested by transition theorists, may at the same time make perfect sense to participants. Pluralism makes both universality and generalizations of this nature impossible. In arguing for universalism we deny the essence of freedom. This makes us question the liberal character of post-1989 transitology.

## **Conclusion**

The mainstream political science (of which the transition theory is representative, when it comes to analysing events in the former Eastern Europe) has been searching for the tools of measuring democracy since democracy first emerged in modern sense and political science established itself as a 'science'. In fact, the search for the 'objective' tools of political analysis has been the main activity of mainstream political science approaches. Those who argued that the science of politics is a separate discipline of social sciences, and not merely an area where 'political

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<sup>23</sup> 'To cite a cause is to cite a necessary condition *or* a sufficient condition *or* a necessary and sufficient condition as the antecedent of whatever behaviour is to be explained' (MacIntyre 1985:82).

philosophy', 'political sociology', 'political economy' and the 'history of politics' overlap, have been constantly constructing models, variables and other 'scientific' tools to develop the discipline.

This is especially the case with comparative politics and theories of democracy. From Montesquieu and Condorcet to Vanhanen and Przeworski, comparative political science has attempted to explain why some countries are 'democracies' while others are not. There have been myriads of explanations based on geopolitical, cultural, economic, institutional, biological, historical and other factors. Most of the explanation included more than one of the factors, building more or less complex 'objective explanations' of differences between various political systems. 'Objectivity' was understood not only as the most important task of scientific explanation, but as a *conditio sine qua non* for political science.

Three important books (all published immediately after 1989: Vanhanen's in 1990, Przeworski's in 1991 and Fukuyama's in 1992) which have been analysed in this paper reveal 'transition theories' as the legitimate heirs to the 'scientific tradition' within political science. Przeworski links macro-structural 'theories of democracy' and 'economic theories of democracy' with the transition theories of O'Donnell and Schmitter, changing the very definition of transition. In his interpretation the future and not past becomes the focus of theories of transition. Fukuyama re-actualised the old debate between Hegel and Marx over the 'causes' of people's actions. He offers a 'universalist' answer based on Hegel's 'struggle for recognition', while interpreting

1989 as a defeat of the Marxist materialist concept of history. He is also a representative of the 'experts' approach, which is necessarily oriented to predictions about the future.<sup>24</sup> Finally, Vanhanen is the clearest example of the linkage between natural science methods, universalist conclusion, comparative politics and orientation to predictability in post-1989 political science.

Contrary to these authors, I argue that the self-admitted failure of political science is not at all in its 'failure to anticipate' events, but in its belief that this should be possible and that anticipation of future events is the aim of political science. Political science has always had a problem when and if it focused on predicting the future. It should instead focus on attempting to understand and explain events retrospectively. I therefore argue that this 'failure' is the result of a specific definition of the aims of political science which is particularly obvious in its sub-disciplines such as 'theories of democratization' and 'transition theories'. As probably the most 'scientific' of all political scientists, 'transitologists' and 'democratologists' are indeed likely to fail as long as they believe that 'it is possible to present research hypotheses on democratization and to test them by empirical evidence, as well as to make predictions on the prospects of democracy in single countries' (Vanhanen, 1991:VII). The failure of political science in their predictive ability is a consequence of its foundation on 'objective' and 'scientific' criteria which originate from the natural sciences. Political processes, I argue, cannot be explained by application of the

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<sup>24</sup> MacIntyre is here again helpful: 'For the central function of the social scientist as expert advisor manager is to predict the outcomes of alternative policies, and if his predictions do not derive from a knowledge of law-like generalizations, the status of the social scientist as predictor becomes endangered.' (MacIntyre, 1985:89)

'principles of the Darwinian theory of evolution by natural selection to the study of political systems' (Vanhanen, 1991:3), nor can they rely on 'objective factors' in order to understand human behaviour. People are not neutrons or protons and in principle they do not act as agents of various 'concepts' such as class interests, nations, level of wealth, generations or culture. Although all these elements indeed provide them with a context in which they act, people have their own and different reasons for their political actions. Sometimes they have no reasons, or they cannot define them – even for themselves. They are actors who interpret their world and act on the basis of that interpretation. It is therefore impossible to understand their actions without focusing instead on their own, subjective stories about why they act as they do. And since both 'objective factors' and people's understanding of their importance change, our ability to predict events in politics often proves to be a *mission impossible*.

The best we can do as political analysts is to aim at explaining why what happened in the past did happen. 'Anticipatory' transition theorists go far beyond it. They 'know' not only where the changing societies of Eastern Europe started from, but also where are they moving to. Then, they define conditions which should be satisfied if one country is to be recognised as 'consolidated democracy'. They also advise about the political steps the country should take while 'traveling' from one to another system. Some of them also tell us that the very outcome is 'inevitable', if not for other reasons then because there is simply no alternative to liberal democracies. There might be some setbacks and even 'counter-waves', or 'restoration' on this journey, but in the long-run they will embark on 'democracy'. Authoritarianism is

simply unsustainable in the long run. By claiming this, they in fact tell us that they know the end of history and the historical necessity. By doing this, they often became missionaries and come dangerously close to various political 'visionaries' politicians. In doing so, their attempt to stay 'objective' more often than not then ends in another great failure.

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