

Introduction

Transition

Conceptual and Comparative History of an Axial Political and Social Concept

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For decades now, the concept of transition has played a key role in explanations about the nature, conditions, and dynamics of historical change in most of European and Latin American states and even societies at large. Although the academic usage of the concept of transition has been fairly scrutinized in social and human sciences, it is still often used uncritically. Much the same can be said of nonspecialized discourses: even nowadays the concept of transition has not lost its centrality in the discourse of international organizations, governments, and the mass media when discussing the processes of political, economic, and social change. The ongoing presence of the concept in contemporary discourses thus justifies the need for further analysis of its historical semantic configurations.

Whither the Scholarship on Transition?

This volume originates from the recognition that the body of scholarly work concerning transitions is presently undergoing what can be accurately described as a “transition” itself. In the past decade, a wave of new perspectives, concepts, and scholars have entered the realm of studying regime changes and socioeconomic transformations. This infusion has revitalized a field that, not too long ago, appeared to have lost momentum. However, comprehending the current shifts in this field necessitates a step back to re-examine pivotal moments in the extensive history of transition studies.

It is commonly acknowledged that the mid-1980s publication of *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule* (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986) is the inaugural

milestone in the history of transition studies, marking the bedrock for what would eventually be termed “transitology.” Prior studies had indeed generated significant categories and theories for examining transitions (Rustow 1970; Maravall 1982); however, the field as a distinct entity had not yet coalesced. As noted by one of the volume’s authors in recent reflections, at the project’s inception, “we had virtually no existing literature to draw upon” (Schmitter 2014: 71). This dearth of an established tradition of studies and reflection on the subject meant that the initial generation of theories did not provoke substantial controversies. While the early practitioners of transition studies recognized the open-ended nature of the processes they investigated, they primarily sought to derive generalizations from case studies centered on the conclusion of dictatorships in Southern Europe and Latin America. Bolstered by the apparent success of certain experiences—most notably the Spanish transition—a framework emphasizing negotiation processes among political elites in Mediterranean Europe was formulated. This framework subsequently became a model of sorts, adaptable to diverse contexts (Colomer 1991; Maxwell 1991).

However, the initial “transitologists” could not have foreseen that the “fledgling efforts” (Schmitter 2014: 71) they were observing in Southern Europe and Latin America in the early 1980s would soon be followed by a cascade of regime changes across various parts of the world. The collapse of state socialism in Eastern Europe ushered in a new historical era, leaving an indelible impact not only regionally but also on a global scale.¹ The pivotal chronotope symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, subsequently accompanied by the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991—together with the unprecedented economic transformations taking place in China—heralded the dawn of a new ideological landscape, characterized by the near-unquestioned dominance of neoliberal discourse. This shift had profound epistemological ramifications, influencing transitions in Eastern Europe and beyond.

Within this context, transitology experienced a surge in momentum and prominence. Its normative influence wielded substantial sway over political, economic, and social actors. At times, the assertions of transitology even seemed to overshadow the assumptions, hypotheses, and guidelines derived from prior model transitions, rendering them relatively modest in comparison (Bönker, Müller, and Pinckel 2002). This marked a Copernican shift: scholars moved from merely observing transitions “from authoritarianism” with a degree of respect and contingency to envisioning them as inherently geared “toward democracy.” Transitions were thus predominantly interpreted through alignment with abstract, stylized, and decontextualized models, a perspective that remained unwavering (Jović 2010). The profound

transformation in academic discourse, often dominated by disciplines like economics, political science, and to a lesser extent sociology, is evident in the concurrent decline of the field known as Sovietology, which despite its numerous biases and limitations, has been acknowledged for emphasizing interdisciplinary approaches and underscoring the significance of contextual factors (Petrov 2015).

During that period, optimism was fueled by the changes unfolding in China. Viktor Nee (1989; 1991) cogently argued in his works that Deng Xiaoping's reforms in the 1980s eroded the power of the Communist Party, reduced the privileges of Communist officials, and fostered increased equality. His writings sparked significant debates on how to conceptualize the ongoing transformations in both Asia and Europe (Szelenyi and Kostello 1996). However, scholars in former socialist Eastern Europe soon countered Nee's assertions, observing that the entrenched Communist elites were adept at reinventing themselves: not only did they retain their power despite market reforms, but they also adeptly exploited their positions, social connections, and intimate knowledge of state mechanisms and public enterprises to establish a commanding role in the processes of economic transformation. This enabled them to ascend as part of the new dominant elite in Eastern European nations.

In hindsight, transitology's times of glory were rather ephemeral. Within a short span, what the prevailing ideas of the era had foreseen as a relatively straightforward process took on an unforeseen and notably complex outlook. Authors noted that transitions in Eastern Europe were initially perceived as "(astonishingly) rapid, non-violent and definitive," yet "their consolidations promise to be lengthy, conflictual and inconclusive" (Schmitter and Karl 1994: 185). This assessment led to the emergence of a new, ad hoc category—*consolidology*—which for some briefly rivaled transitology. However, as the new century dawned, a substantial wave of criticism surfaced, highlighting a marked disparity between the forecasts of transitologists and the actual outcomes in former socialist countries. These critiques gained strength from the adverse social impacts of privatizations, monetary reforms, and liberalizations. Consequently, theoretical approaches to transition faced scrutiny due to their teleological interpretive frameworks (Buroway and Verdery 1999). Eventually, certain authors asserted that the transition paradigm had run its course (Bönker, Müller, and Pickel 2002; Carothers 2002).

An evident symptom of this academic shift was the declining acceptance of the term "transition," which began to arise discomfort among experts, prompting its gradual replacement by alternative designations. Discourse on "transformation," derived notably from Karl Polanyi's works (Kornai 2001), gained substantial traction. By embracing the concept of transformation,

scholars were able to recapture the intricacy and unpredictability that once motivated critical analyses of Mediterranean and Latin American countries (Åslund 2007; Kavaliauskas 2012). Simultaneously, they could delve into the continuities within state institutions and examine the influence wielded by external actors like the IMF and the European Union (Ther 2016).

Interestingly, the stark contrast between theoretical expectations and the realities experienced in Eastern Europe contributed to the strengthening of a term that, unlike transition, emphasized the weight of the past—“postcommunism” (Kopeček and Wociślik 2015). With the gradual abandonment of the once-optimistic discourse surrounding “transition countries,” scholars began spotlighting numerous “phenomena or situations that can no longer be seen as transitory but which have instead become embedded in Eastern Europe” (Knudsen and Frederiksen 2015: 1). More recently, authors have characterized the political regimes emerging after the fall of state socialism as residing within a “gray zone” of corruption and authoritarianism, while some opt for the term “zombie socialism” (Chelcea and Druță 2016). Regardless, the prevailing image remains one of incompleteness, indeterminacy, and uncertainty—a persistent void, *un passé qui ne passe pas*. Often, scholars perceive these states and societies as going through a stationary and in-between phase, leading to their classification as “hybrid regimes” (Bogaards 2009; Gilbert and Mohesni 2011), occasionally also being catalogued as “neopatrimonial states” (Fisun 2012). In recent years and despite lingering memories of socialist eras, as the concepts of postsocialism and postcommunism wane due to the mere passage of time the idea of transition appears increasingly obsolete (Sampson 2002; Todorova and Gille 2010; Müller 2019).

On the surface, it might appear that the exhaustion of the transition paradigm is limited to its initial case studies. After all, Southern and Eastern European nations, along with the Latin American countries central to the discourse on transition, are no longer undergoing such processes. However, the concept remains pertinent for many who presently employ it to elucidate more recent episodes of regime change, such as the Arab Spring (Olimat 2008; Oud Mohamedou and Sisk 2017). Moreover, the semantics of transition have expanded their reach into other domains like sustainable development (Markard, Raven, and Truffer 2012). Nevertheless, the revival of transitology faces significant hurdles, primarily because many of its fundamental assumptions from its heyday have become increasingly disconnected from a historical context marked by substantial political and ideological shifts.

A defining aspect of the current landscape is the increased challenge to neoliberal discourse and the emergence of critical perspectives emphasizing the subordinate status of former Eastern European socialist countries within the structures of global capitalism post-Berlin Wall’s fall (Gagyí and

Sláčálek 2021). A similar trend has extended to Mediterranean Europe, once hailed by optimistic scholars of transition but transformed into a new semi-peripheral zone within Europe after the 2008 global economic crisis. In the years that followed, Greece, Spain, and Portugal—previously pivotal players in what Samuel Huntington termed the “third wave” of democratization (1991)—swiftly transitioned from being role models to becoming second-tier nations grappling with profound recessions, soaring unemployment (particularly among the youth), and externally imposed austerity measures. These developments intensified perceptions of systemic crisis and fueled the emergence of alternative discourses and initiatives for political and social reform trying to mitigate economic downturn through alternative measures (Pappas 2013; Accornero and Ramos Pinto 2020; Flescher Fominaya 2020).

Hence, arguably recent years have witnessed a relative convergence of trajectories between nations once heralded as trailblazer models and those formerly labeled as experiencing failed or disappointing transitions. A notable symptom of this is the emergence in Southern Europe of concepts like “post-Francoist democracy”; much like postcommunism or postsocialism, these notions underscore the legacy of past authoritarian regimes in contemporary democratic politics, paving the way for critical evaluations of the agreements and compromises that initially catalyzed transition processes (Fytili and Cardina 2023).

The parallel shifts in experiences have also significantly influenced academic discourse. Initially, the critique of neoliberal transitology in East and Central Europe emphasized the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to widen the analytical scope (Hahn, Humphrey, and Verdery 2002). This pursuit of alternative analytical frameworks notably led to the growing popularity of path dependence-centered approaches (Dobry 2000; Wiarda 2002). Subsequently, some scholars began focusing on discourse analysis and delving into the political ideas underpinning the reform policies of the 1990s (Blokker 2004). Simultaneously, others investigated the use of historical narratives during transition and the construction of memories of communism in postsocialist societies (Mark 2010). More recently, in response to the tendency to view economic reforms as externally imposed, scholars have highlighted the hybrid nature of these processes and explored the contributions of local actors to the development of neoliberal economics (Bockman 2013). In the Balkans, the necessity of reclaiming the historicity of political processes has been underlined to counter previous tendencies to perceive transitions from socialism as a form of “Bolchevism in reverse or inverted mirror of Soviet communism” (Petrov 2015: 17). In Mediterranean Europe, the trajectory has been different but has yielded somewhat similar outcomes, as the legacies of authoritarianism have propelled scholarly interest

in memory studies among many researchers in Portugal, Greece, and Spain (Aguilar 2002; Loff 2014; Kovras and Stefatos 2015). Additionally, the interest in transitions has prompted investigations into the historical origins of Southern Europe's distinct political cultures (Fishman 2019).

Summarizing, the study of transition processes has undergone substantial revitalization in the past decade: new interpretative frameworks and research interests, particularly within discourse analysis, memory studies, and the history of political ideas, have significantly reshaped the field. These inquiries, often delving into language, ideas, perceptions, and representation technologies, outline the contours of a new paradigm that converge around a claim for historization as a means for critically renewing inherited views from political science. This fresh approach sets the stage for more systematically and theoretically informed methodologies, drawing on the methodological and heuristic tools from the history of concepts and the history of political languages.

The Scope and Span of a Conceptual History of Transitions

The history of transition studies still deserves attention, primarily because its evolution left traces beyond the academic world, permeating language and discourse in political contexts, particularly during regime changes in Southern and Eastern Europe. This scholarly framework not only influenced theoretical premises but also shaped the rhetoric of political leaders and ideologies, significantly impacting public opinion and influencing the execution of reform programs.

Transition has transcended academia to become a legitimate concept in political discourse, playing a pivotal role in contexts of crisis and regime change. Although initially associated with political change post-Cold War, the concept of transition has been integrated into various processes of change from authoritarian regimes. Actors involved in these transformations have employed the concept to give meaning to their actions and the broader outcomes of their endeavors. Consequently, the political utilization of this concept has intertwined with its academic development, fostering a dialogue across what might otherwise be considered distinct discursive spheres.

Recognizing this multilayered construction of the concept of transition serves as the foundation of this volume. During authoritarian regime crises, this concept was widely utilized by diverse actors, often irrespective of their ideological affiliations. Its widespread adoption across various discursive realms necessitates an exploration of its multifaceted, contested, and evolving meanings—as an academic category, a term used by governments and experts, an idea employed by ideologues and party theorists, and a notion disseminated and reproduced in the broader public sphere. The early experiences in

Mediterranean Europe highlight that the conceptualization of societal transformations as a transition did not necessarily depend on the contributions of transitology or academic frameworks. However, these experiences quickly became the subject of scholarly analysis both domestically and internationally, becoming entangled within a broader network of political, social, and scientific meanings, often independent of their initial conceptualizers. Conversely, the cases in Eastern Europe reveal the influence of imported analytical models used by experts and professionals to frame difficult and often unpopular policy decisions and to underpin processes of economic and institutional change by using globally trending tropes. These processes have not only influenced the later development of political cultures and collective memory in both regions but have also contributed to a critical shift in scholarly examinations of past transitions and the stances taken by radical political actors.

The rise and decline of transitology has intersected, to some extent, with the growing synergy between conceptual history and the history of time (Koselleck 2002; Fernández Sebastián 2011; Hartog 2016; Edelstein, Geroulanos, and Wheatley 2020). In recent times, transition has been reimagined not solely as a temporality (Hirschman 2021), but also as an essential concept for embracing the experience of time in the modern era, as it both naturalizes the conclusion of historical processes and obscures or erases their starting point, thereby defining the essence of change from one state to another (Blix 2006).

Despite the interpretive prowess of conceptual history, reflections on transitional processes have seldom incorporated conceptual perspectives (Petrov 2008; 2015). On its part, the concept of transition itself has not undergone comprehensive historical scrutiny, aside from brief and somewhat schematic attempts (Fuentes 2008; Guilhot 2002; Lukić and Maslov 2014). By delving into the task of historicizing the concept of transition in its multifaceted discursive usages, this book presents a significant contribution to the conceptual history of transition. Through a comparative approach to national case studies from Southern and Eastern Europe, it converges on the study of historical semantics, the history of ideas, and the analysis of political discourse within postauthoritarian contexts.

Issues for Comparatively Studying the Concept of Transition in Southern and Eastern Europe

The volume offers a comprehensive examination of the evolution of the concept of transition during the latter half of the twentieth century across Southern and Eastern Europe. The chapters scrutinize both academic and nonacademic applications of the concept, its dissemination in social and

cultural contexts, and its adaptations and evolutions within chosen national contexts. While some contributions focus on a single national context, most adopt a comparative approach, analyzing two case studies from a parallel, connected, perspective.

This study refrains from transregional comparisons due to several reasons. Firstly, it aims to compare countries undergoing similar processes of change, separating transitions occurring in the 1970s and 1980s within Southern or Mediterranean Europe from those taking place in Eastern Europe from the late 1980s to the 1990s. Secondly, acknowledging the inherent instability and porosity of regional frameworks, the study avoids reinforcing national stereotypes by not presenting countries as representatives of their respective regions, particularly regarding areas like the Balkans or the Baltic countries, which are often placed in a liminal and unclear position.

Four thematic axes underpin the chapters in this volume.

- 1) The relationship between the concept of transition and other concepts emerges prominently.
- 2) Another central theme explores the intertwined temporal dimensions of the concept, how transition draws from and contributes to meanings about the past, present, and future.
- 3) The role of experts in constructing transition discourses constitutes a third theme.
- 4) Lastly, the limitations of the concept of transition in capturing the multifaceted meanings of historical processes defined as transitions is also examined.

1) As the contributions suggest, *transition* is a concept that organizes the semantic fields of other fundamental political and social concepts in each of the national contexts discussed. It occupies a central position, conditioning the usage and meanings of these concepts. *Revolution* is one such concept deeply affected by the influence of transition, as highlighted by Pablo Sánchez León. In processes of transition in Portugal and Spain, the field of transition “effectively displaced the semantic territories previously occupied by revolution and civil war, appropriating facets of their conceptual essence” (19). In Spain, especially, it diluted the radical political and ideological components inherent in the concept of revolution, a phenomenon mirrored in other Mediterranean countries aligned with the Western capitalist sphere during the Cold War.

In Portugal’s case, the complex interplay between discursive uses of transition and revolution, both within and outside academic spheres, had implications for core concepts like democracy. Rita Luis’s chapter sheds light on

how transition became dominant in literature concerning Portugal's shift to multiparty politics, yet it did not replace revolution in popular memory. The tensions between the semantics of revolution and democracy created a space where *democracy* became an "‘essentially disputed’ macro-concept ... saturated with conceptual conceptions, sometimes irreconcilable, with varying weight over time" (56), all of which has had long-lasting consequences on the political culture of the country.

The dynamics of transition, revolution, and democracy took on unique forms within countries in the former Soviet sphere, reflecting distinct socialist political cultures. In the Baltic republics of Lithuania and Estonia, as detailed in the chapter by Juhan Saharov and Justinas Dementavičius, the semantics of revolution were propelled by official discourses during Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* in the late 1980s. This discourse fostered semantic innovations centered around the language of self-management, drawing on traditions of popular participation in economic management that extended beyond conventional parliamentary pluralism. Subsequently, this language evolved and adapted to a more normalized discourse on democratization, albeit in different ways in Lithuania and Estonia, aligning with their unique contexts and political cultures.

Furthermore, the contributions in this volume underscore how transition became intertwined and sometimes overshadowed by other concepts that better condensed the political and social experiences of societies undergoing profound change. In the chapter by Benno Nietzel and Marcus Böick, the discourse of authorities in the German Democratic Republic during the early stages of transition blended revolutionary rhetoric with a necessity to maintain order. Despite citizens adopting a discourse of revolution during the German unification polemics, the initial linguistic upheaval challenging established political communication eventually succumbed to a discourse emphasizing *unity*.

Transition not only strains the semantic fields of order and unity but also extends to concepts of peace and reconciliation. It serves as a framework shaping the key debates arising from regime changes, often articulated around opposing concepts such as consensus versus rupture, progress versus reaction, and more overtly ideological and contextual concepts like fascism versus antifascism, communism versus anticommunism. Therefore, examining the concept of transition allows us to elucidate the cultural lexicon through the lens of one of the most pivotal concepts of that era.

2) The concept of transition, as depicted across the contributions in this book, resonates strongly with *temporality* and *temporal perceptions*. Transition fundamentally embodies a temporal framework, encapsulating assumptions of an inception or commencement, progression or breakthrough, and

ultimate consolidation or endpoint (Carothers 2002: 7). Beyond these key phases, the concept delineates a vision of time segmented into stages or phases to be traversed, reflecting perceptions of temporality ingrained in modern culture long before the emergence of transitology in political sciences. It has been claimed that the notion of transition provides for “the mechanism of evolution itself within a given epoch” (Pombeni 2015: 3), thus allowing to separate different contexts.²

In this sense, within the ideological framework of scientific socialism, the concept of transition held significant sway, particularly in discussions about the shift from one mode of production to another. Agustín Cosovschi’s chapter delves into its vital role in the social imagination of Eastern European societies during the Cold War era, particularly in former Yugoslavia. Here, the paradigm of socialist self-management aimed to combine workers’ democracy with heavy industrialization, facilitating a more efficient and swift transition to communism. Yet, the crisis that marked the late 1980s ultimately led to the collapse of this comprehensive semantic of transition, precipitating a crisis in the political lexicon and prompting new debates among intellectuals and social scientists.

Portugal presents an intriguing contrast in this regard. In this Mediterranean country, socialism was idealized as a telos for popular economic participation, irrespective of the trajectory of political transition itself. Similar to other Southern European contexts, when revolution was swiftly dismissed as a horizon of expectation, the semantics of transition gradually transformed as it became regarded as a superseded past attempt to be observed from a distant vantage point. In Magda Fytili’s chapter, she explores how this period, initially seen as self-contained, eventually lost its insularity, integrating into a broader historical narrative through social memory and the institutionalization of new historical interpretations. Thereafter, as she eloquently shows, Spain and Greece have witnessed significant shifts in the meaning of transition, evolving from signifying the passage from dictatorship to democracy to becoming “a frame for making sense of the troublesome present and uncertain future” (156).

3) Throughout the volume, the role and influence of various agents in shaping narratives and historical interpretations of transition processes emerges as a recurring theme. The concept of transition not only intricately intertwines various temporalities, retaining past meanings that shape the present experience of change; it also defines itself by the absence of violence in the shift from one regime to another. This emphasis on orderly processes highlights the role of politics and, significantly, underscores the domain of law. Across transitions, the proclamation of a constitution marks a pivotal moment delineating the transition between regimes. In [Chapter 7](#),

Michał Stambulski and Jakub Szumski examine the contribution of lawyers in Poland during transition. They emphasize that constitutionalists played a crucial role by presenting a narrative of continuity in the state and the rule of law, supporting a nonrupture-based transition. At the same time, the authors illustrate how diverse backgrounds and positions among Polish lawyers led to distinct viewpoints and interpretive legacies concerning the postcommunist democratic order, with differing perspectives on law's role in sanctioning or promoting change.

Experts, historians, and social scientists have sought to comprehend these transitions, identifying primary actors driving transformation and examining their own intricate roles within these processes. However, there's a tendency in elite-centered approaches to downplay the active role of the majority of citizens. This parallels the treatment of similar questions by scholars studying revolutions. The observation made by Reinhart Koselleck about revolutions also applies to transitions: they contain future projections and prophecies, accelerating historical time, and their success or failure hinges on the disparity between projected goals and actual achievements.

4) Concerning the limitations of the concept, similar to the language surrounding revolutions, the vocabulary of transition might evolve into the language of an ongoing, never fully realized process, possibly solidifying as a state of permanent transition or *transitoriness*. Chapter 8, by Adam Fabry and Zoltán Pogátsa, navigates through different periods perceived as transitions within Hungary throughout the twentieth century until the present day. This analysis not only sheds light on Hungary's current political, economic, and social context concerning its "repeated transitions" but also highlights the heuristic limitations of applying the term transition to diverse and disparate experiences.

Taken together, the insights provided by this volume and its contributions illuminate the tensions inherent in employing the concept of transition to homogenize processes that are ultimately unique and singular. The authors collectively underscore the diverse gaps that the concept of transition generates within different national contexts, emphasizing the disconnection between theoretical models and the lived realities on the ground. This disparity often manifests as a breach between anticipated expectations and actual outcomes.

The once-prevailing normative fixation on the concept of transition resulted in the imposition of transnational academic, scientific, and policy models that struggled to adapt to individual national contexts. This predicament aligns with the challenges faced by concepts perceived as "out of place" when applied beyond their original contexts (Schwarz 1977).

Echoing tensions observed in the conceptual and intellectual history of semi-peripheral societies, the analogy drawn by the Romanian writer Tito Maiorescu about “forms without substance” (*forme fără fond*) underscores the challenge of adopting Western institutions without fully aligning them with the underlying cultural, societal, or contextual realities (Boia 2011: 66–70).

As summarized in the “Afterword” by Augusta Dimou, these tensions, prevalent in political, cultural, and social dimensions, often lead to a pervasive sense of incompleteness in transition processes that can breed frustration, exhaustion, and disenchantment among the citizens of societies undergoing such profound transformations. Ultimately, the concept of transition falls short in encapsulating the experiences of those who are the primary participants in these transformative processes. For them, the concept that labels these processes will continue to elicit contradictory feelings, memories, and expectations. This complexity highlights the critical importance for scholars to delve deeper into the historical context and evolution of this concept.

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Notes

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1. Recognizing the myriad debates surrounding the various names attributed to the region and the weight of labels in shaping political and cultural landscapes, we have chosen to employ the toponym “Eastern Europe.” This term was widely utilized by both local and foreign entities to delineate a relatively cohesive region in political, social, and economic terms during the Cold War era—the period that serves as the departing point for the majority of chapters in this book that focus on former socialist states. See the earlier volume in this book series (Mishkova and Trencsényi 2017).
2. “[I]f periods are both self-contained and radically distinct, it becomes necessary to imagine, at their borders, a brief temporal span that bridges the gap, a sort of gray zone that distributes the process of transformation over time, to avoid the impression of a sudden incomprehensible rupture—today the Middle Ages, tomorrow the Renaissance” (Blix 2006: 53).

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