Why do transitions to democracy fail? A tribute to Pietro Grilli di Cortona

Leonardo Morlino
LUISS Guido Carli University, Rome

1. Introduction

As it is evident from the works by Pietro Grilli (see in this issue the articles by Barbara Pisciotta and by Orazio Lanza) the key questions that has been addressed in these years on the phenomenon of democratizations has also been object of research by him. Especially when his books published in 2000, 2009, 2011 (see bibliography) are considered, complemented by those he edited with other colleagues (see e.g. 2014 and 2016), the quality and originality of his way of doing research on that topic can be fully appreciated.

In this short piece I would like to pay a tribute to the scholar I first met as young, serious, passionate student at Cesare Alfieri in Florence several years ago and to address a topic I guess we could have discussed together at length and would have received his interest. That is: reflecting on the research results and the very phenomenon of transitions to democracy that took place in a number of countries along last decades is it possible to single out the key obstacles to a successful transition to democracy? In the next pages I try to reply to such a question by referring also to another work where I addressed this issue (see Morlino 2015).

2. Approaches to transitions

Before making the attempt of replying to the question I have just addressed, it can be helpful to recall the main theoretical approaches to the topic. The starting point is the widespread negative view on the possibility of achieving accepted theories. The overall prospects were gloomy, to say the least. In fact, one of the most authoritative statements on the issue was made by O'Donnell and Schmitter: "We did not have at the beginning, nor do we have at the end... a 'theory' to test or to apply to the case studies."[1] Several years later, McFaul echoed this statement: "the project of constructing a general theory of democratization may very well fail... The unique patterns generated by the fourth wave of regime change in the postcommunist world suggest that the search for a general theory of democratization and authocratization will be a long one."[2]

Actually with the hindsight we can realize that there are at least three different theoretical approaches to the study of transition to democracy. Thus, first, when asking about the main theoretical results in this field of research we can see that there is a dominant

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[1] O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986: 3).
[2] McFaul (2002: 244).

approach: the only way of conducting research and achieving salient empirical results on transitions seems to develop a theoretical framework where all possible actors and factors are included and, when empirically tested, each actor and each factor turns out to be combined in specific multidimensional configurations. Moreover, when over the years the focus has been switching more and more to democracy as a result of transition, a stronger attention has been devoted to democratic installations and related aspects.

Second, a number of authors made an additional step by trying to find recurring patterns of successful transitions. Among them two (small) groups emerged with different theoretical purposes. On the one hand, there is the goal of singling out comprehensive multidimensional ideal types or even typologies that characterize a small number of specific cases, usually very close in time and space, where the result is the focus on a combination of different set of factors and/or actors. On the other hand, at a higher level of abstraction and with possible regard to a broader area and a longer time span, ideal types or typology are proposed where one or more than one actor or factor is assumed as the key aspect, and the impact of it/them on the process or on the result of it is assessed and consequent patterns built. For example, a typology of transitions where the role of civil society is assessed or the role of international external actors is considered vis-à-vis domestic actors.

Third, for those who supported that theoretical approach suggesting that the search for and detection of key mechanism/s is the most important theoretical result that scholars of comparative democratization can and should achieve, then, the issue is to try to single out what is such a mechanism. Despite the empirical problems and difficulties, at least one key mechanism emerged in the research on transition, which at least contributes to explaining critically successful transitions and indirectly suggests why other transitions are unsuccessful. This is the learning process, that is characterized by the interaction between past, perceived experiences and the present opportunities and involve both leaders and people (see Morlino 2012, chap. 4).

3. Obstacles to successful transitions

With this in mind we can now ask what are the factors, or even the actors, which have prevented a successful transition to democracy by maintaining a non-democratic regime, the previous or a different one,[3] or by stalemating it in a hybrid situation? This question has almost never been explicitly discussed in depth in the literature, except in the work edited by Stoner and McFaul.[4]

First, if the approach that stresses the necessity of developing a more or less detailed theoretical framework is taken (see above and Morlino 2015), then the explanation of the failure is in a specific multidimensional set of reasons that can partially or largely vary from one case to another. Accordingly, the simplest reply is to refer to the lack of conditions and aspects that assured the success of newly achieved democracies. In this perspective, there is not much to say except to analyse the specific cases with a reversed framework vis-à-vis the one adopted for the cases of success.

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[3] As happened in Egypt.

[4] Stoner and McFaul (2013). Stoner and McFaul devoted to this question four chapters on Algeria, Iran, China and Azerbaijan. They are also two very distinguished experts of Russia, but curiously put this country, which was a well-established electoral authoritarianism in 2014, among the successful cases of transition, only considering the collapse of 1991 and the transitional phase of 1993.

Second, if alternatively we are able to single out patterns or models of transition with reference to specific set of few cases, then this is what Stoner, Diamond, Girod and McFaul actually do in the introductory chapter of Stoner and McFaul's work.[5] In doing this they stress how a failed transition is usually an elite-led one, that the lack of three domestic factors, such as mass mobilization, indigenous civil society organizations and independent media and communications technology, is crucial to explain the failure, and that the absence of any external international help for a number of reasons[6] is also a salient aspect.

The third theoretical path to reply to the starting question seems the most relevant and revealing one. In fact, if attention is devoted to the analysis of key mechanisms of change or, in an opposite perspective, to the mechanisms of continuity, then a few considerations are in order. To start with, when singling out the learning process as a such key mechanism at the core of transitions, the actual question is how elites and people change their minds, or do not, and choose or resist to the democratic path. The basic reply to this question is: through trial and error. Elites and people learn the negative effects of non-democratic arrangements and, with or without the help of external institutions and governments, they can come to try out democratic solutions that eventually appear more favourable and acceptable for everyone interested.

Maintaining this perspective, however, prompts a number of other important reflections. First, the learning process we have just mentioned may also work the other way: elites and people may follow other lessons and accept non-democratic solutions, or simply obey them. If we look back over past experience, it is very well known how, in the early 20th century and later on, Southern European or Latin American elites learned to stop changes toward a democratic direction by reflecting on their own experience or that of other nearby or related countries.

Second, there are ideologies and beliefs that retain strong identities and consequently set up serious, tough obstacles to changes in the mindset of people. The two strongest obstacles of this kind that we saw at work are religion – in recent years the Islam religion has been especially effective in this – and ethnic identities, particularly in several African countries. Such obstacles have usually been well institutionalized for years. This implies that beliefs and identities are powerfully strengthened by vested interests that support them. Of course, there are exceptional cases where a democratic, charismatic leader or small groups are able to overcome these obstacles. In South Africa in early 1990s Nelson Mandela was able to create a democracy in a situation where vengeance and conflict would have been broadly understandable and expected. With his moral authority and leadership abilities, he was able to win over other elites, the leaders closest to him included, and even to bring about a change in people's attitudes on the political direction to undertake. More recently, during the Arab Spring and later in Tunisia a democratic elite was able to find and follow a very narrow path by managing to have a mainly secular constitution approved in January 2014 and laying the foundations for a fragile, but possibly viable democracy.

Third, an unfavourable international context, such as being related to and dependent economically on a non-democratic country – as happened in 2014 in the Middle East and the Eurasian area with post-communist countries – and the related existence of an appar-

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[5] Stoner, Diamond, Girod and McFaul (2013), introductory chapter of Stoner and McFaul's work.

[6] In the cases they analyze, the presence of oil altered the willingness of international actors to promote democracy (see Stoner, Diamond, Girod, McFaul, 2013, section on external influences).

ently successful non-democratic alternative, such as a number of non-democratic regimes in Middle East or Russia, form the basis for the failure of transition, if started.

Last, we should recall the most obvious aspect. The most robust basis for a failed transition is set up by the absence of a democratic elite. In other words, even a charismatic leader or a minoritarian elite – although, of course, not strongly minoritarian – can manage to bring about a successful transition within a favourable context (see above). But the absence of that leader or elite and an unfavourable cultural and international context dooms any transition to failure. It is a platitude to recall that, despite the positions of a very minoritarian elite, the largest part of the elite and the people who were active during the Egyptian transition were not democratic, and the goals of some of them were religious ones, although characterized by varying degrees of fundamentalism.[7]

4. Concluding remarks

Thus, especially on the basis of experience in the most recent years, singling out obstacles that make successful transition impossible can be done in connection with the different theoretical approaches and related goals that are set up. Thus, if referring to a theoretical framework, the failure is explained by the lack of conditions and aspects that assured the success of newly achieved democracies. If singling out patterns or models is the theoretical goal, then a failed transition is an elite-led one and the lack of mass mobilization, indigenous civil society organizations and independent media and communications technology, as well as the absence of international help, are key aspects, above all in the recent postcommunist transitions. If the focus is on key mechanisms of continuity, then, in order to better understand the basic reasons of failed transitions, four aspects should be kept in mind: 1. the learning process, which was considered the key mechanism of change, may also work in the opposite way: elites and the people can work and opt for non-democratic solutions; 2. the two strongest obstacles to change are religion and ethnic identities, powerfully strengthened by vested interests; 3. an unfavourable international context and the related existence of a successful non-democratic alternative lay the basis for the failure of transition, if started; and finally, 4. the most robust basis of a failed transition is set up by the absence of a democratic elite, which may also be a minoritarian one.

Let us bear in mind that this is only the beginning of a reply. For more satisfactory results additional research and analysis will be necessary. There is no doubt that if Pietro would have become interested in this question he would have contributed a lot to much better results.

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[7] The cognitive heuristics Weiland (2012) discusses in his analysis of the Arab Spring is actually what I label the "learning process" here (see above and also Bermeo 1992 and Pridham 2000).

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