

CHAPTER 2 TRANSITION AS A TOPIC FOR SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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As the crucial events of 1989 unfolded in Central and Eastern Europe, the term "transition" has become popular among social scientists and opinion leaders alike. There was indeed a widespread feeling that the whole region was going through a process of change leading to democracy and market economy. Transition seemed an appropriate concept since both the beginning and the endstage of the ongoing sequence of change were taken for granted: post-totalitarian societies were on their way to "normality" identified with a Western way of life. The very idea of "shock therapy" which originated in Poland and surfaced as a policy option in other countries, including Russia, could not have made sense if it had not been for accelerating a transition that had to be as brief as possible.

When it dawned upon many of us that there would be no quick jump to Western style democracy and economic life, and that dogmatic application of economic liberalism was based on a simplified view of Western societies, the concept of transition was submitted to a reappraisal and criticisms were raised. Is it wise indeed to use a word strongly suggesting that a goal is in sight? Is it still appropriate to talk about transition if we are unable to answer the question: transition to what?

Although it is obvious that the notion of transition has lost its political appeal, I would argue that the concept still has a theoretical value for sociologists. History is full of periods which can be defined as transitional and a case was even made for considering the emergence of sociological thinking as the product of such transitional period. As Robert Nisbet put it, the intellectual creativity of the classics of sociology was stimulated by the feeling of being torn between the stable order of tradition and the turbulent new world of capitalism and democracy (1966, 1980).

To be sure, transitional periods are usually labeled as such afterwards, with the insight of history. If the historians of the *Annales* school were led to define the period stretching from the VIIth to the XIIth century in Western Europe as a time of transition between the last wave of Barbarian invasions and the re-

emergence of the use of money in transactions, it is because they saw it as the prelude to a new impetus in economic life that could be documented (Duby 1973).

As soon as history accelerated, however, the magnitude of some changes could be perceived during a lifetime. Contemporaries of the events under consideration had a clear sense of living through a time of unusual turmoil. Even if they did not use the word "transition" they were aware of the fact that they were led away from a familiar reality and into something difficult to define but entirely new. This means that periods of rapid change in which people have to adjust quickly and repeatedly to new realities since the world of their everyday life is crumbling, can be seen as transition periods. It makes sense to use the term "transition" even if no final stage can be described, because such periods have characteristics of their own.

It is true that historians are usually better intellectually equipped than sociologists to describe transition processes if we have in mind causal analysis. The generalizing ambition of sociologists makes them prone to sharpening contrasts by way of typology rather than presenting step-by-step descriptions of chains of events. But transition can be described as a state of social relations as such. If we think of transition as of a time in which all patterns of social interaction are highly unstable and behaviors have to adapt accordingly, then the sociological tradition offers us undoubtedly various analytical tools and various perspectives can be distinguished:

Transition, Seen from the Micro-Level

Turning to the authors who are now considered as the pioneers of sociological thinking, the works of Alexis de Tocqueville are of special relevance in this respect. Tocqueville was not only a theoretician of social change but, more specifically, the theoretician of the transition. Born in 1805, he died in 1859. In his family, the French Revolution was still fresh in their memories. At the end of his life, he made clear that he saw the recent history of his country as an uninterrupted succession of revolutionary upheavals: a 60 years long « time of trouble », to borrow this expression from Russian history.

It is quite clear from all his writings that he saw these six decades as a period in which the aristocratic and the democratic model of society were engaged in an inconclusive competition. As an end to that process, he has the vision of an individualistic middle-class society. But his ambivalence towards the social change of his time brings him to focus on the process rather than on its ultimate result. And this provides us with some brilliant analyses of transition as it is perceived by the individual who has to live through it.

Normative Uncertainty

The paradigmatic example of the micro-macro link in the analysis of a transition situation is the comparison of the master-servant relationship in the

United States, England and France presented by Tocqueville in his *Democracy in America* (1840). In England, which was still very much an aristocratic society in that time, masters and servants belonged to different classes located in a stable hierarchy. This aristocratic order was the source of well-defined rules of behavior which were taken for granted at all levels of the social scale. Hereditary inequality was accepted as a fate. In the United States, the consensus on a democratic type of social order created a new situation. The relationship master-servant has a mere contractual basis. Authority and obedience are kept within the limits of the contract. These are new rules of behavior, completely different, but they are no less well-defined than the old ones. Between these two well-established types of societies both of which providing clear norms of behavior, there is in France a transitional type in which neither the aristocratic nor the democratic model is clearly on the winning side. The competition of two contradictory principles is a source of normative uncertainty. The master and the servant are each torn between the aristocratic logic of hereditary fate and the democratic logic of the contract. As a consequence, an accepted balance of rights and duties does not exist anymore. One of the protagonists tends to neglect his duty of honest retribution and protection; the other tries to evade his duty of obedience. In Tocqueville's analysis, these are the symptoms of a situation in which people no longer know who they are, what they can and what they have to do. And this is of wider relevance. Each situation of normative uncertainty becomes a source of individual stress and collective tensions. When no better future is clearly in sight, there might be the temptation to "escape from freedom"; in other words, one might long for the stability of the past in spite of its shortcomings and even cruelties.

Status in Congruency

The situation on the French countryside, in the XVIIIth century, as described by Tocqueville in *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (1856), leads us to the modern concept of status in congruency that appears in the works of Lenski (1954). The landowners abandon the rural life and concentrate in the towns. They still have feudal rights but these rights are no longer balanced by corresponding duties. The peasants enjoy more civil liberties than in neighboring countries and have access to land property, but they suffer from the widening absenteeism of the noblemen who stopped protecting them as soon as they no longer had a stake in the peasants safety. On both sides, the coherence of the old feudal status is disintegrating. Accounts of life on the Russian countryside at the end of the XIXth century give us similar examples of the highly disturbing effects of a partial emancipation of the peasantry combined with a widespread absenteeism of landowners (Sokoloff 1993). But here again, the lesson of the past is of even wider significance. A status can be said to be balanced if there is a more or less stable relation between the

costs and the rewards it brings to the individual. In such a case, the status has all the making of an institution; it is widely accepted and even taken for granted. When the balance deteriorates, the rules that define the status are no longer recognized as legitimate. And whenever the advantage of a social position is offset by its precarious character, the latter weighs more on the way the individual defines his situation: it becomes, sometimes unexpectedly, a source of discontent.

Relative Deprivation

Tocqueville's comparative analysis of the situation of the peasants in the XVIIIth century can also be seen as a study in relative deprivation. It is not, as Tocqueville claimed, where the peasants' condition was the worst that the revolutionary spirit spread; quite the contrary: it is where noticeable progress had already been made. Beyond the case in point, there is of course a more general principle of social and political change that both the Tsarist autocracy and the Soviet regime have experienced more or less the same way: the most dangerous time for any government that tries to generate changes from above is when reforms are actually set in motion. Improvements which were previously beyond imagination are rapidly taken for granted and stop being a source of satisfaction. Attention focuses on what is still to be gained. In other words, the level of aspirations raises quickly - so quickly that no reformer can catch up soon enough. The result has been called the "Tocqueville effect". To put it briefly, a people who had suffered a lot without complaint for a long time, start to rebel when its suffering begins to be alleviated (Tocqueville 1856). At this stage, the rise of aspirations brings about a corresponding escalation of demands.

The Reference Group

The mechanism of relative deprivation which is clearly at the core of the process was rediscovered in the 40's by Samuel Stouffer and his associates (1949) and integrated by Robert Merton in the reference group theory (Merton 1968, pp. 288-290). And this helps to understand the particular relevance of the concept of relative deprivation in today post-communist countries. Individuals do not consider themselves deprived by comparing themselves to the population at large, or by comparing circumstances of the moment with a more or less distant past, but by comparing their personal situation to that which supposedly prevails in their reference group at a particular time. The term of reference is not a stable standard: it is a variable both in time and scope. When new forms of social differentiation emerge, like private appropriation of collective property or restitution of real estate, they provide new ground for relative deprivation. According to this view, better access to information is paradoxically an additional source of discontent. The reference group is

enlarged: new categories of people enter into it; the higher visibility of the ruling elite and conspicuous patterns of differentiated consumption contribute to shape a new definition of the situation. On the other hand, privileges of the past are no longer taken into account and fear of the police State no longer inhibits protests.

Transition, Seen from the Macro-Level

From Tocqueville to Merton, a line of theorizing on the basis of observations at the micro-level seems to justify the use of transition as a category of sociological analysis. Another perspective is provided by a certain brand of elite theory that can be called "the Machiavellian theory of power". Relevant names in this respect are those of representatives of the "first Italian sociology": Gaetano Mosca, Roberto Michels and Vilfredo Pareto. These various authors have in common the idea that every political regime is an oligarchy and that every complex organization exhibits a built-in tendency to oligarchization (Michels). In all societies they are basically two classes: the rulers and the ruled, "The first class ...performs all political functions, monopolizes power and enjoys the advantages that power brings" while the second "is directed and controlled by the first"; of course, the way the ruled are directed can be "more or less legal" or "more or less arbitrary and violent" (Mosca 1896, 1939, p. 50). What differentiates the various oligarchies is the "political formula" on which they are based. That political formula is a combination of theories, principles and ethical norms that can be accepted by the ruled (Mosca, 1936). Other differentiation criteria are the strategies used by the ruling class to stay in power (Pareto, 1916). Along these lines, a sobering definition of democracy can be proposed. It can be argued that the political regimes which can be said to be democratic are not regimes where "the power belongs to the people" but rather regimes in which rival elites in need of legitimacy are in competition for popular endorsement along well defined rules; the legally established restraint in the use of power and the ways to gain access to the top decision-levels are also relevant criteria (Aron, 1965).

Transition and the Political Formula

In this perspective, a society is in a transitional situation when a long accepted "political formula" has lost its credibility. According to Mosca, this can happen when it is no longer attuned to the level of moral and intellectual maturity of a people at a certain stage of its history (1936). Basically, we have to deal here with an argument based on internal contradictions, not far from the Marxian notion of the widening gap between the economic infrastructure and the symbolic superstructure. There is, however, an element of legitimacy added to it. The crisis of the "political formula" can be seen as a crisis of legitimacy.

In that sense, we have now every reason to believe that the Soviet "political formula" lost its credibility in the 70's. And such is the irony of history that Marxist analysis is very relevant to that situation. If it was possible to speak of the contradictions of capitalism in relation to the process of industrialization, it was then the time to speak of the contradictions of socialism in relation to the accumulation of knowledge and access to information.

Transition and the Strategies of Power

As Pareto would have put it, a ruling class that loses its ability to fight for its privileges is doomed. It is worth mentioning, however, that there is an obvious relation between a certain "political formula" and the resources of the rulers. A long established formula gives priority to some abilities and favors, generation after generation, the ascension to power of men and women who possess such abilities. When that formula is being seriously shaken, it has a direct influence on the political and moral standing of the members of the ruling class. These are not only abstract principles who lose their credibility but also the people who embody them. The typical member of the ruling class becomes the target of contempt or derision. In a transitional phase of history, a fraction of the ruling class sees an advantage in trying to get rid of the most discredited part of the establishment. There are reasons to believe that the political transition follows that pattern in various post-communist countries.

Transition and the Circulation of Elites

When a political formula has lost its appeal, the "circulation of elites" (Mosca, Pareto) becomes a crucial mechanism. Either the ruling class manages to rejuvenate itself by incorporating able outsiders or a new elite emerges. As Mosca saw it, aristocracies who had the best abilities to survive were open aristocracies, ensuring a gradual process of renewal of the ruling elite. On this, Mosca is as much the heir of Montesquieu than Tocqueville who admired the openness of the British aristocracy in sharp contrast to the tendency of the French nobility to evolve to a caste system. According to such view, the middle-class has a vital mediating role to play between the various segments of the population (Mosca 1936). It has been pointed out time and again that the absence of an active middle-class was a serious obstacle to the reform of Soviet-dominated systems of government. All the same, it is where such a new middle-class has the best opportunity to emerge that reforms seem to proceed the most smoothly.

Keeping in mind this body of "Machiavellian theory", we can call "transition" a period of history in which a ruling class no longer has the strength to stay in power on the basis of a well-established political formula. Various scenarios can be described, ranging from the military putsch to the round-table process, but there are basically two models: the renewal of the elite or the reproduction

of the elite around a new principle. A good case can be made for considering various reforms or transfer of property in post-communist countries as strategies of substitution of an economic basis of power to a political one. It is as if we were witnessing Marxism-Leninism applied in reverse: since political power no longer automatically ensures control of the means of production, the safe bet seems to get a direct hold on economic resources with the hope of preserving a power basis. An important question has to be raised in this respect. Are the former organs of political repression following the same pattern? In other words, is a covert process of partial privatization of these organs to be considered as part of the transition? And does it account for some phenomena brought under the label "mafia"?

To come to a conclusion, two distinct models seem to be in competition at the moment: a covert process of elite reproduction and a timid process of elite circulation. The strategic variable which gives prominence to the first or to the second of these two processes seems to be the adaptability of segments of the old elite still vying for power in a transformed environment. It certainly makes sense to call this kind of "struggle for life" a transitional situation because the old political formula had to be abandoned but the end stage of the process - whatever it will be - obviously has not yet been reached.

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CHAPTER 3 POST-TRANSITOLOGY OR IS THERE ANY LIFE AFTER TRANSITION?

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1989 witnessed not only the collapse of communist regimes all over the East European and former Soviet Union countries, but also the emergence of a new discipline in social sciences, which has very quickly earned the nickname "Transitology". Its main object of interest was a transition. The term "transition" - which is still the most frequently used when speaking about developments in this region (Mandelbaum 1996) - allowed one to see the processes of systemic change triggered off with the change of political regime as a route with well-defined points of departure and arrival. The societies of the former Soviet bloc were departing from Communism and starting a journey westward. Their goal was a democratic political system with a free market economy.

Certainly, there have been important differences among "transitologists" in the usage of this general approach. Some of them have focused on the past, trying to estimate how far a given society has moved away from Communism, yet others have concentrated on the future, analyzing the prospects of a successful transition to liberal democracy. In both cases, however, attention was paid mostly to threats and obstacles which could hamper the transition. The very idea of transition as the base for analyzing post-communist societies was taken for granted (1). Nobody has asked question: what are the heuristic advantages of using it or is it the concept for the analyses of changes taking place in post-communist countries?

Paradoxically enough, the question escapes the attention of even those scholars most discontented with the transition concept. For example, Stephen Holmes starts his recently published essay with the statement that the

"overused term >transition< should probably be junked, implying (...) that we somehow know where we headed" (1996, p.22).

Then, reflecting on the factors which obstruct or blur the understanding of developments in postcommunist countries, he points to the fact that:

"some of the problems lie (...) not in the thing itself but in our approach, in our own concepts, presuppositions, and biases" (p.25).

And he concludes: