If the paths from authoritarian regimes (ARs) to polyarchy are diverse, this is not merely because there exist many different AR types (Linz, 1975), but also many different modes of transition. Alfred Stepan, for example, has delineated no less than ten. (Stepan, 1986). Even regimes which apparently shared many similarities, such as the military-technocratic ARs of Brazil and the Southern Cone during the past two decades, were inaugurated by very varied processes, and in quite dissimilar political contexts. There is therefore no reason to imagine that the manner of their demise will be any more uniform. Three very general alternatives may, in fact, be contrasted regarding the mode of transition from authoritarianism to democracy. The first is a controlled process of re-institutionalization ‘from above’ in which the AR closely determines the major parameters of regime reform, and a great deal of legal and institutional continuity is ensured. The outcome of such a process may well be a restricted form of democracy which the opposition finds quite unsatisfactory, though they are unable to do anything to change the situation. At the opposite extreme lies a second alternative, that of complete rupture of the AR, the dismantling of its institutions, and the rapid passage of power into the hands of the opposition. In this second case, the demise of the AR occurs under circumstances in which it is powerless to affect the course of events, or the institutions and leaders which will replace it. Between these two polar cases lies the third hybrid situation of negotiated reform in which neither
power-holders nor opposition leaders are able to determine the course of regime mutation. Though at first this may lead to stalemate, eventually the pressures for some form of understanding between the two sides may reach a point at which they agree to compromise on the rules governing the transition.¹

Bearing in mind the two dimensions of democracy distinguished by Robert Dahl (Dahl, 1971) – participation and opposition – we may imagine two polar types of regime transition away from ARs. On the one hand, there might be increasing toleration for contestation, expressions of opposition, and autonomous organization by social groups. This movement corresponds to regime liberalization, or the inauguration of what Schmitter refers to as a dictablanda (‘soft dictatorship’) (Schmitter, n.d.). By contrast, the transition to what Schmitter dubs a democradura (‘hard democracy’) involves a move toward a regime with greater, but still limited, electoral accountability.

The first part of this chapter is an exploration of how four crucial cases of authoritarian regimes in South America – Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay – attempted to institutionalize, and the different paths that they took in the 1980s. In no case did these ‘Bureaucratic-Authoritarian’ situations lead to stable regimes – though the degree of success in this regard ranged from significant (in Chile) to non-existent (in Argentina). In order to understand why authoritarianism failed, the chapter turns to five types of explanation that have often been put forward by theorists of regime change. It argues that the usefulness of these approaches varies according to whether we are trying to explain the reasons for authoritarian breakdowns or the paths that transitions to democracy follow. In a nutshell, an attempt is made to distinguish the questions of why and how transitions occur. The penultimate section attempts to apply the five theoretical approaches in order to explain the diverging paths these regimes took in the 1980s, and the differential speed with which they reached democracy.

As we shall see, the Southern Cone ARs chose very different paths in their attempts to pursue renewed political institutionalization. Brazil, for example, evolved in the direction of a dictablanda after 1974, while in 1980 Uruguay attempted to inaugurate a democradura, but failed. In the same year Chile’s AR was able successfully to lay plans for its own eventual transformation into a form of democradura. Argentina’s AR, by contrast, remained the least institutionalized of the four and no sustained effort was ever made to transform it from a ‘state of exception’ into something more permanent.