1 Transitions to Liberal Democracy

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THE PROBLEM OF TRANSITION

One result of the upheavals in Eastern Europe over recent years is that we can now describe most of these countries as being strung out ‘somewhere on the road’ to liberal democracy. This rendering of where they now stand – and where they are heading – is vague, and it may be preferable to turn to the more exact terminology of political science. Yet not too much help should be expected, as becomes apparent in referring to the two terms that are particularly appropriate in discussing current changes – ‘transition’ and ‘consolidation’.

Both convey the idea that discrete stages are involved and that each has a set of well-defined features. However, neither can be used in a precise way; so much is evident in seeking answers to questions that inevitably arise in analysing changes in Eastern Europe from one form of regime to another as well as in examining developments within a regime. When did a transition begin and how long is it likely to last? What are the different phases to be expected within a stage of transition? Are any to be counted as critical in affecting the future course of events? How can the decisive move from transition to consolidation be determined? Problems of clear demarcation abound: the beginnings of a transition may well, for instance, be located within the former regime, and so, too, can traces of transition persist even after a new regime has become consolidated.

Care has to be taken in applying ready-made labels, since the processes involved are not always self-evident, and no country will follow precisely the same course. At best we can say that during a transition the situation is still open-ended: there are several feasible outcomes, a partial reversion is one possibility, and only one route of several may lead to the consolidation of a liberal-democratic regime.
EASTERN EUROPE AS AN ‘AREA’

Little assistance is to be found in the broad literature on comparative politics in studying actual transitions beyond assembling useful pointers as to how a framework for analysis should be constructed.¹ That is understandable considering the difficulties in trying to generalise about countries with vastly different historical experiences and problems. Not so long ago ‘area specialists’ were regarded as somewhat parochial in their endeavours by the ‘true’, generalising comparativists. Times have changed, and many would argue that it is only in comparing transitions in political systems which have several characteristics in common that comparative politics is on sure ground. If it is the case that within-area comparisons have the greatest validity, then it follows that across-area comparisons are likely to be of limited use. The experience of transition in Latin America, say, will not have many lessons for Eastern Europe.

Yet what constitutes an ‘area’? Precise delimitation of an area presents problems and is bound to involve some arbitrary judgements. The division of Europe into East and West was a product of political developments after 1945; yet, despite the sharpness of the rupture, neither Eastern nor Western Europe is entirely homogeneous, and now, with the disintegration of the communist world, the idea of Mitteleuropa has again become significant. We should not expect to find a complete conformity among the countries in Eastern Europe, although there are three principal defining features: the impress of communist political rule, similarities in socio-economic structure, and the close correspondence in the timing of the transitions. The experience of a uniform type of regime is a leading criterion, and Eastern Europe stands out in this respect in contrast to other areas – Western Europe after all included countries which for a long period were decidedly not liberal democracies. Communist rule entailed the general imposition of a particular type of planned economy as well as a fundamental restructuring of society. The third feature – the fact that the communist regimes all began to crumble at around the same time – is especially important, since it allows direct comparisons to be made without having to take into account intervening changes in external circumstances.²

TRANSITION – TO WHAT?

The concept of transition does not prejudge the final direction a political system will take – or at least ideally it should not do so. However, the