

REVIEW ESSAY

Negotiated revolutions or evolutionary regime transitions? The Czech Republic, South Africa and Chile

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1. Global democratisation

By the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s democratisation appeared to be a world-wide trend. The fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 was the direct culmination of a series of events and processes within Central Europe as well as the international political economy – all pointing towards a broadening of autonomy and liberation from the shackles of oppression:

- The systematic disintegration of the Soviet Union (starting in Lithuania, the hotbed of nationalism, spreading to Uzbekistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Latvia and further).
- Poland's Communist Party lost its grip on power. For the first time in the post-war history of Europe a Communist government had handed authority to a non-Communist opposition. Shortly thereafter the ruling Hungarian Socialist Party decided that it would no longer be officially called 'Communist'.
- The collapse of important symbols of Communist rule contributed to the momentum of the process of democratisation. By October 1989 Czechoslovakia opened its borders to East Germans, allowing them to cross into Hungary and from there via Austria to West Germany – paving the way for the crumbling of the Berlin Wall.

The collapse of the Wall coincided with other liberating factors elsewhere. On the other side of the globe in Southern Africa a range of conditions and causes opened the way for political transition in South Africa:

- The international success of the anti-Apartheid struggle, obtained by means of effective disinvestment campaigns, cultural/sport/academic boycotts and extended lobbying in international council chambers, forced the South African government to negotiate the political future of the country.

- The South African economy started to weaken within a rapidly deteriorating world and regional context, forcing the major role players to reconsider their confrontational strategies.
- At the same time the Soviet Union and its allies, faithful backers of the struggle against oppression, were no longer in the position to support the armed revolution.

On the Latin American sub-continent the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet lost a plebiscite in 1988. International pressure ensured that the vote was relatively fair. At the same time, the outgoing military junta implemented a series of measures allowing it to delay much needed reforms, providing substantial legal protection for gross human rights violators, and allowed the former dictator, Pinochet, to retain considerable political influence. This very partial revolution was marked by the persistence of deep social divisions and the process of political change largely being driven by elite consensus (Lawson 2005: 223). This process of elite pacting in some respects mirrored that of South Africa (cf. Przeworski 1991); in both cases, economic elites retained much of their power, albeit in South Africa, the largely racial division of wealth made some economic redistribution inevitable.

It was as if the world of the early 1990s was naturally moving toward democratisation on multi-party lines and the opening up of previously closed political structures, a process that at the same time was marked by the durability of powerful elite interests and a failure to bring about greater social equality. This is the background to the book by George Lawson, *Negotiated revolutions. The Czech Republic, South Africa and Chile*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2005.

2. A brief review of Lawson's book

This book is a comparative study of transitions from authoritarian rule to multi-party democracy in three states: South Africa, Chile and the Czech Republic. Lawson notes that whilst revolutions represent an essential part of the modernisation process, they are often open-ended and assume many different forms. He suggests that the transitions that took place in the three countries represent one such form: negotiated revolutions. The opening, theoretical chapter briefly alludes at an international sociological approach that brings together the best in historical sociology and industrial relations. Lawson hints at the emerging critique of neo-liberal rational choice models within the latter discipline, which echoes long standing sociological concerns in this regard.

The second chapter explores the different ways in which revolutions have been studied, including radical, structuralist, Weberian and neo-liberal approaches, and more recent accounts that see revolutions as the product of systemic crises, structural openings and collective action. As noted by Hobsbawm, revolutions involve both the destruction of the old order, and the

‘destructive creation’ of a new one. This entails the establishment of a new political and economic order, following on the establishment of a new socio-legal regulatory framework once the revolutionaries have taken control of state power. Where these processes are partial and incremental, then the process of revolutionary change is incomplete. And this is the main critique against Lawson’s book: it is conceptually inept, theoretically inconsistent and factually unsubstantiated to use the concept revolution in the case of the transitions of South Africa, the Czech Republic and Chile.

Chapter 3 represents an overview of the Czech case; it owes a great deal to Timothy Garton Ash’s insightful accounts of the 1989 Central European transitions. Change in the Czech Republic was rather more rapid than in Poland, Hungary and the former GDR; through a combination of popular protest and elite negotiations, leading to the ousting of the communist government and free elections in which the former ruling party performed poorly. To members of the old communist elite, the 1989 uprising represented little more than a disorganised rabble of intellectuals that could have easily been put down had the will existed. In contrast, the opposition narrative is one of a new coalition of grass-roots groupings, opening the way for a new international politics centring on the concerns of the masses and their movements. It is argued that both discourses contain an element of truth; crucially, both sides ascribe a central causal role to international events. Again, whilst the opposition lacked the desire or resources to violently confront the government; the communists, divided and increasingly bereft of Soviet support, saw their coercive capacity drain away. The resulting settlement reflected the desire of the bulk of the Czech opposition to return the country to Europe, catching up with its Western neighbours. There seems little evidence of a utopian strand to the opposition, as encountered in the former GDR. Strong Western support for the changes and a lack of interest in utopian alternatives made for a peaceful and uncontested transition to a market economy. Weak political parties and the persistence of personality politics has meant that, despite the suffering caused by radical economic adjustments (and their general unpopularity), there has been little pressure for a social democratic alternative. Changes in government have not made for further policy shifts in this regard. Surprisingly, the chapter says relatively little about the velvet divorce that saw Slovakia gaining independence at the beginning of 1993, and the effect of this on politics in the Czech rump state.

The following chapter looks at the South African case. The author provides an interesting overview of the process of collective action and negotiation. Regrettably, he underplays the role of the apartheid security forces in seeking to derail the transition, not only through heavy-handed action, but through the covert backing of Inkatha militias and sections of the Azanian People’s Liberation Army, and the links between covert operations and large-scale organised crime. More generally, it seems that at times the author has been rather

overwhelmed by events, and appears uncertain as to their relative importance. In reviewing the post-transition period, the author provides a more measured look at the relative successes and challenges of South Africa's first democratic government. Economic growth has failed to offset gross racial inequalities, whilst the process of transformation of the public service has been uneven, with greater success in some areas than others. This makes South Africa's transition still incomplete.

Chapter 5 examines the Chilean experience. The slow transition represents even more of a 'systemic transformation' than a genuine revolution. Despite levels of internal repression that exceeded even the worst excesses of the apartheid regime in South Africa, pressures increased against the Pinochet regime when its 'economic miracle' collapsed as a result of rising debt, chronic trade deficits and simple greed and corruption. A fresh wave of repression and a very limited retreat from neo-liberalism brought the status quo a temporary stay of execution. A 1988 plebiscite attempting to extend Pinochet's rule resulted in a victory for the 'no' camp. This led to negotiations between the regime and the opposition concerning the nature and scope of democratisation. The relative weakness of the opposition allowed military commanders to retain their ranks, and granted them an effective veto over changes in a range of areas. In the closing days of military rule, a wave of privatisation took place and a number of pro-military judges received life appointments on the bench of the Supreme Court. Nonetheless, post-democratic governments have managed to bring about some changes, gradually prising Pinochet loyalists out of senior ranks in the armed forces, and implementing some redistributive policies that have reduced the number of Chilean households living in poverty from 54 percent to 20 percent, and cut the numbers of the extremely poor from 17.4 percent to 5.4 percent of the populace. Finally, in the early 2000s, a number of senior Chilean military officers, including Pinochet, were brought to trial, a process that may represent the start of a new stage of genuine transformation.

A brief concluding chapter notes that all three 'revolutions' represented more an attempt to catch up with the mature democracies than to embark on a totally new form of governance. At the same time, the changes in all three countries did represent a partial contesting of the existing international economic order. Again, the experience of numerous countries from the Ukraine to Central Asia underscores the point that democratic reforms can be emasculated by unfettered markets. Social and political institutions need to be nurtured to ensure that party politics do not degenerate to merely a competition between different coalitions of segments of the former state elite and criminal underworld.

This book's structure is rather over-formal, and the use of theory rather plodding at times. This probably reflects its origins as a postgraduate thesis. Moreover, its reading base is somewhat uneven, and some key accounts of transitions, notably those of Adam Przeworski, neglected. Nonetheless, it

provides some interesting insights into political change and marketisation in very different contexts, and represents a valuable contribution to the literature. Indeed, the bold comparative approach represents a refreshing departure from country-focussed accounts. But the book could have gone further to explain political transformation.

3. No revolution: at most evolutionary regime transition

George Lawson describes his book as ‘... an attempt to rescue revolution, both as a concept and practice’ (Lawson 2005: 2). He argues that revolutions seem to have little place within the political discourse in advanced market democracies, having become irrelevant to a world in which the major issues have been settled. A commonly accepted definition of a revolution is ‘a rapid, fundamental, and often violent domestic change in the dominant values and myths of a society, in its political institutions, social structure, leadership, and government activities and policies’ (cf. Huntington in Goldstone 1986: 69). In terms of this definition we can describe revolutions as swift, basic and comprehensive transformations of socioeconomic and political institutions (often accompanied by and effected through class upheavals from below – as Lenin reminded us). Lawson acknowledges that the concept revolution contains the ‘... notion of volcanic ruptures, quasi-astronomical alignments, sharp breaks with the past from which societies could not turn back’ (2005: 4). He then continues by saying: ‘There is no universal quality, characteristic or image that encapsulates a revolution: they may be velvet or violent, reactionary or progressive. Equally, there is no theoretical reason to suggest that revolution can take a contemporary form in keeping with an era marked by globalization and heteronomy. The argument of this study is that this novel form of revolutionary change should be seen as “negotiated revolution”’ (2005: 4). This review article disputes the use of the concept of revolution in Lawson’s book. In addition it attempts to draw attention to the idea of ‘double transitions’ underlying the transformations of the three countries included in the book (Chile, the Czech Republic and South Africa). Lastly it elaborates on the dual processes of internationalisation and globalisation, which played a significant role in the political transitions of the three countries.

In all three countries a regime transition occurred when the dissolution of the old political structure took place and a new political dispensation was established. The new order’s establishment had its decisive moment in the first competitive and fair elections. Most evolutionary regime transitions are preceded by a series of events, unique to that particular transition. In addition, and even more importantly, the decisive moment of the first competitive and fair elections is not the end of the transition. Regime transitions imply changes to the social structure; changes to the ways of doing things.

South Africa’s regime transition for instance, has been described by others as a ‘text-book case of well-crafted transition’ (Jung and Shapiro 1995:

269-308), but it has not led to full democracy. The protection of the interests of some members of the society and the pact between the adversarial elites of the previous and the current regimes, led to limited democracy.

It is inaccurate to talk about ‘revolution’ when analysing the regime transitions of the Czech Republic, South Africa and Chile. In the next section we elaborate on the transitions of these three countries.

4. Double transitions

A central concern is the Janus-faced nature of social change that has characterised political democratisation in the late 1980s and early 1990s. On the one hand, the benefits accruing from freedom of political expression and participation are not to be underestimated. On the other hand, the process of democratisation has done little to promote greater social inclusion, and, in many cases, has been marked rising social inequality. The latter is true for all three countries under review: in South Africa, the persistent racial division of wealth is particularly untenable: more far-reaching change has only been deferred. In Chile, the spectre of renewed military intervention has weakened the left’s ability and willingness to promote social change. At the same time, the popular continent-wide backlash against the Washington Consensus, and the general failure of neo-liberal policies, has gradually brought more progressive alternatives back on the agenda. In the Czech Republic, pressures for greater social equity are somewhat less pronounced owing to a less grossly lop-sided wage distribution than in South Africa and Chile: even here, however, the return of mass poverty is likely to fuel redistributive pressures. In summary, these transitions have had often contradictory effects: political freedom has often coincided with persistent economic volatility and social inequality, even if preceding dictatorships were often ruined by the failings of their own economic policies.

In a seminal essay, Robert Boyer (2000: 416) notes that pressures for political transformation were often impelled by an ‘inability to promote a division of labour that favours a growth in the market and productivity’, rather than simply static inefficiency. This highlights the central contradiction of ‘double transitions’. Investment in skills, and policies geared to promote greater labour market inclusion that will result in renewed consumer demand and more efficient production represent an anathema to the new neo-liberal orthodoxy; yet an inability to bring about these changes led to the collapse of preceding authoritarian governments.

A second factor is the interconnectedness between the polity and the economic domain. The failure of former Eastern bloc Central European governments to create the conditions for a consumer society exacerbated an existing crisis of legitimacy. Political democratisation was followed by far-reaching neo-liberal reforms. Yet, the effects of such neo-liberal reforms included large-scale job losses, and the decline of agriculture and industry, as well as worsening conditions for those on fixed incomes. This in turn, impacted

on the outcome of post-transition elections. Yet in the Czech Republic, the weaknesses of existing political parties precluded the emergence of a genuine social democratic alternative. This, in turn, led to further economic reforms, and renewed pressures on existing parties, which may pave the way either for realignments, or simply have the effect of further weakening political actors. In Chile, the crisis of legitimacy of the brutal Pinochet regime, again driven by the economic failings – in this case, a tendency for the system to serve a shrinking and increasingly wealthy and corrupt elite – impelled a process of political reform. Yet, the pressures for economic transformation were again mediated by political institutions – recurrent fears of a return to military rule weakened demands for far-reaching economic reform, limiting the range of choice available in the political marketplace. Ironically, whilst both Chile and the Czech Republic have undergone experiments with extreme neo-liberalism, the former under the Pinochet dictatorship, and the latter following democratisation, in both cases the operation of markets has been shaped by other coordinating mechanisms, including existing and emerging hierarchies and actors (cf. Boyer and Hollingsworth 1997: 434). In the case of Chile, the operation of markets was previously directed (with aspects of this persisting) towards a self-serving military elite. In the case of the Czech Republic, the fundamental weaknesses, yet enduring influence, of a range of civil society actors has had far reaching impact on debates surrounding macro-economic policy.

South Africa has also experimented with neo-liberalism in the post-apartheid era. At the same time, powerful pressures from the labour movement and community organisations has limited the scale of privatisation and precluded radical labour market deregulation on the scale of that experienced in Chile and the Czech Republic. The relatively favourable bargaining position of the country in the international arena has also enabled a more incremental process of tariff liberalisation, allowing industry valuable time to adjust to global competition. All this has contributed to a return to economic growth, albeit at the expense of job creation and redistribution. Whilst the relatively robust performance of the South African economy is in many respects to be commended, this has served to undermine arguments for more progressive macro-economic policies: the redistribution agenda remains elite driven.

Thirdly, whilst national level institutional realities remain of critical importance, institutions are nested at a range of levels – supra, national and sub-national. The ability of governments to set policy has been diminished through the growing strength of both transnational institutions such as the European Union and International Financial Institutions (IFIs), and through the operation of the international financial services sector; this has resulted in a complex web of interconnectedness of ideology and practice, moulding national polities (Boyer and Hollingsworth 1997: 464). Hence, the public sphere has been subject to ongoing marketisation, at the expense of democratic accountability (Wise 2002; cf. Anonymous 1997; Wood 2004).

This process has been driven both by the role of IFIs and the pressures posed by the financial services sector, which through the 1990s placed an increasing premium on the realisation of short-term shareholder value. This has led pessimistic commentators to suggest that the non-market elements of national systems and practices are highly vulnerable; the inevitable effect will be a global convergence towards practices encountered in extreme versions of liberal market economies (O'Hagan 2002: 40). Indeed, it has been noted that whilst ostensibly committed to furthering a social model, the EU has pushed for cutbacks in the role of government in a range of areas; the effects of this have been particularly pronounced on the periphery (Masters 1998). More optimistic accounts have suggested that there are a range of pressures for change operating in different directions at a range of levels (Wise 2002; Boyer and Hollingsworth 1997). Enduring institutional ties, and the persistent influence of non-market actors, will result in diverse outcomes, reflecting these competing pressures (*ibid*; Wood 2004).

Alternatively, it can be argued that there are a variety of agents of change; the predominance of one does not obviate the others, whilst no one set of policy prescriptions is likely to remain hegemonic indefinitely (Wise 2002). Transnational bodies such as the EU have a contradictory effect: a range of directives have had the effect of mediating the powers of markets, genuinely contributing towards an emergent social model, at the same time as other policy interventions have impelled market reforms (Wood 2004). The absence of transnational bodies, such as the EU, that incorporate both social and market dimensions, in the developing worlds, has meant that others, that are primarily geared towards the promotion and operation of unrestrained markets, will have a very much greater effect. Yet, even here, the negative consequences of unrestrained markets has the potential to fuel political backlashes, limiting pressures to ever-greater macro-economic liberalisation. Hence, the process of political and economic transformation will remain open-ended and contested. Whilst Lawson points to this partial and contested nature of change, his analysis is weakened by the lack of a nuanced understanding of these institutional effects, a gap that perforce must be plugged through recourse to contemporary regulationist and related thinking (*cf.* Boyer and Hollingsworth 1997; Boyer 2006).

5. In conclusion

There is neither a single set of unique conditions nor a shared model in terms of which the processes of democratisation in Chile, South Africa and the former Czechoslovakia can be compared. This does not imply that no similarities occur. To emphasise the unique combination and variety of circumstances of each country should not take away that the experiences of these three countries had been exposed to and influenced by a wider context. The transitions of the three countries have to be situated within the context of the growing interna-

tionalisation and globalisation of the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. The experience of each of the three countries needs to be situated within and compared to broader developments – ‘... the growing internationalization and the concomitant export and import of social, cultural and economic manifestations across national borders’ (Oyen 1990: 1). ‘Globalisation’ remains an uneven and contested process, but the effects of the liberalisation of markets, the promotion of transnational consumer tastes, and the hegemony of neo-liberal ideologies are not to be underestimated.

On the level of the macro economy, few countries have the ability to direct global change as a result of their sovereign and independent positions. Countries are heavily influenced by what happens not only within, but outside their national borders, reflecting the nestedness of regulating institutions (Boyer and Hollingsworth 1997).

On the broad cultural level, the impact of technological developments in the field of communications and the flow of information brought about a social world that had shrunk to such an extent that one can truly talk of a ‘global village’ (McLuhan) or a ‘single-network era’ (Tilly 1998). Lawson’s book does not cover these important international social movements. The transitions in South Africa, Chile and the Czech Republic cannot be understood without an analysis of these.

The process of social change is one of continuity, incremental development, hybridisation and rupture (Boyer 2006). The Lawson volume highlights the complexities surrounding the transitions to multi-partyism on three continents, transitions that remain open-ended and contested. At the same time, these transitions highlight the limitations of static or linear social theories, and the need to develop more evolutionary alternatives (Boyer 2006), reflecting the realities of a global economic order characterised by persistent volatility, the ongoing recasting of political institutions and the revitalisation of a new progressive politics of the streets.

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