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# C OMPARING POST-SOVIET AND LATIN AMERICAN SOCIETIES: FROM “TRANSITION” TO “TRANSFORMATION”

**Mariana Heredia, Olessia Kirtchik**

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This issue of *Laboratorium* offers a comparative look at the experience of post-authoritarian transformations in Latin America and the former Soviet Union that began over twenty years ago. There is no shortage of works on the subject. Since the 1970s, there has been an impressive flow of literature dealing with processes of democratization which took place primarily in Southern Europe and in Latin America, and more recently in Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>1</sup> Yet most research on each of these regions is virtually unknown to specialists from the other area, especially if it is published in the local languages. The main reason for this lack of mutual knowledge is the near-total absence of institutionalized ties between Latin American and post-Soviet researchers. The two regions are as intrigued by as they are ignorant of each other. Not accidentally, the idea for this special issue was born not in Moscow or Buenos Aires, but in Paris—a traditional center of intellectual exchange for each of the two regions. Working together in the French capital over the course of several years, the two editors had a unique opportunity to discuss their experience of doing research in Russia and Argentina.

This thematic issue starts with two basic theses which arose from our prolonged exchanges. Firstly, while the two regions are thousands of miles apart, there are

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1 Among this extensive literature, it is worth mentioning O'Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead 1986; Diamond, Linz, and Lipset 1988; and Przeworski 1991.

striking similarities in the social and political transformations they have been going through. Secondly, comparative reflection on the most diverse aspects of these transformations might enable us to highlight the blind spots of standard democratization and free-market modernization theory, which tends to universalize scenarios of economic development without paying sufficient attention to case studies.

### FROM “TRANSITION” TO “TRANSFORMATION”

Since Dankwart Rustow published his seminal article on the subject in 1970, the dominant framework for conceptualizing the move toward “market democracy” in different regions of the world has been centered on the idea of *transition*. Though it seemed relatively new at that time (Rist 2001), the general idea was in fact far from original. It reflected the age-old motif of “peripheral” countries’ elites “catching up with” the model established by Western European nations. This theory has been shown to be highly normative and prescriptive (Schmitter 1995). It purports to “explain” the ground to be covered while at the same time guiding countries on the right path to transformation. The ambition of *transitology*—a vast field that included scholars and politicians and blurred the boundary between the two groups—was to propose a set of axioms and prescriptions applicable *anywhere* in the “developing” world.

The wave of reforms that was generated by this technocratic optimism engulfed several continents. Nevertheless, from very early on, the notion of “transition” was subjected to a range of critiques, which may be summarized under two headings. On the one hand, change operates in extremely diverse political and cultural contexts, and thus starts from very different points: it is path-dependent. On the other hand, the concept is premised upon an overly linear and positivist conception of change, which assumes that both the start and the end point are known in advance.<sup>2</sup> The real experiences of “transition” demonstrated the limits and biased nature of projects of social engineering. Rather than conforming to a single model, the economic and political systems of the developing and post-communist worlds followed extremely different paths.

Both transitologists and their critics accumulated useful knowledge about processes of transformation and discovered different models, trends, and rhythms underlying them. Yet the only overall conclusion that students of these transformations were able to reach was that the result of every reform has been much more contingent and complex than expected. Numerous case studies of democratic transition in different countries as well as comparative research put an emphasis on actors’ choices, on indeterminate situations and uncertainty, rather than on general social, economic, or cultural determinants. This prompted some to speak of “a certain failure” (Santiso 1996:44) of transitology in its search for “universal lessons” and “general laws” of transition to market democracy.

The terminological shift from “transition” to “transformation” proposed by critics of classical transitology (Stark 1992) reflects an important epistemic turn

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2 For a comprehensive review and critique of the academic literature on “transition,” one may refer to: Bunce 2000; Dobry 2000; Guelman 2001.

marking the end of Grand Theory. It implies at least an intention to abandon teleological explanations and acknowledge a plurality of paths of change and organizational outcomes which always represent a combination of “modern” and “traditional” elements. Our deliberate choice to use the term “transformations” in the title of this issue reflects this methodological concern.

However, should we conclude that there are no common patterns in transformations, and that comparison is useless? Critics of generalizing schemes attach particular importance to singularities and local contexts. Indeed, a certain measure of relativism appears indicated as an antidote to determinism. But, taken to an extreme, such research strategies risk preventing any attempt to reveal and understand similarities and differences in historical change. The heuristic value of comparative research consists precisely in its potential for identifying phenomena that transcend particular contexts. *Laboratorium's* call for papers was therefore an invitation to scholars who are trying to overcome the unproductive dichotomy between the universality suggested by (Western) ethnocentrism and the total idiosyncrasy proclaimed by local populists.

### WHY COMPARE THE “SOUTH” AND THE “EAST”?

The remarkable simultaneity of post-authoritarian transformations lends special heuristic value to a cross-national perspective. Globalization was a necessary condition for change since it resulted in the circulation of capital, ideas, and promoters of “transition,” but it also offer scholars a chance to exchange findings and data. Yet most comparative exercises focus either on intraregional analysis<sup>3</sup> or on contrasts between idealized models of market democracy (Western Europe and the United States) and selected countries from the rest of the world. Intellectual exchange between “South” (Latin America) and “East” (ex-USSR) remains a challenge which poses specific methodological problems.

The first difficulty, as many scholars engaged in comparative research have pointed out, has to do with the significant differences between the economic and political conditions, cultures, and historical legacies of Latin America and the former Soviet Union (Nelson et al. 1994; Bunce 2000). These oft-mentioned disparities seem to support advocates of intra-regional analysis who believe that the so-called “area studies” represent a more fruitful research strategy.<sup>4</sup> Unlike inter-regional comparison, this ensures a “natural” controlling mechanism for some contextual variables—such as geographic situation and cultural and economic characteristics—

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3 Most comparative studies available are based on intra-regional analysis: there is an abundant scholarly literature on Latin America (Dabène 2006; Santiso 2003), and more recent transitological studies on the European countries of the former socialist bloc (e.g. Bléjer and Škreb 2001). Among the few recent publications that compare “non-Western” countries with each other, we would like to note Andreff 2006, Haggard and Kaufman 2008, and May and Milton 2005. The latter two are reviewed in this issue.

4 For a polemical exchange between advocates of “area studies” and “comparativists,” see: Schmitter and Karl 1994; Bunce 1995; Hall and Tarrow 1998.

making it easier to assess variation among other variables. However, while this argument may hold for certain regions, Eastern Europe and Latin America are far from homogeneous units: the diversity among former Soviet republics is as huge as the one existing inside Brazil or between Argentina and El Salvador.

A second major difficulty is due to contrasts in the rhythm, agendas, and depth of post-authoritarian transformations in these two regions. Whereas post-communist countries had to undergo a fundamental reorganization of political and economic structures, most Latin American countries reoriented and revived existing market and democratic institutions. It also has been emphasized often that Latin American nations possessed a longer and better-grounded democratic tradition, and the authoritarian past in that region had a weaker impact on society than in the post-communist countries (e.g. Hermet 2001).

The truth of this argument is beyond dispute, and yet regional boundaries may lose some of their relevance in systematic comparison. The perspective adopted here allows us to avoid one of the usual mistakes committed by "comparatism," which consists in taking for granted the reality of closed cultural areas, bracketing out the interferences and "cultural transfers" that underlie the construction and deconstruction of nations (Espagne 1999:35–37). In this sense, the recent transformations in the South and in the East are better understood as a "modernization offensive", the most recent in a long list, which has strongly involved local and international elites in the modeling of Western-inspired institutions.

The notion of "modernization offensive" was proposed by Wagner (1994) to replace Elias's idea of "civilizing process." "Offensive" seems a more appropriate expression insofar as these transformations were generally initiated by rather narrow and well-identified groups. These groups shared a common vision of transformations or a specific reformist governmentality, which determined the substance as well as the modes of intervention. Though their action took place in different historical contexts, similar aims implied similar outcomes such as inertia and counter-reactions from old groups and practices, increasing social and economic inequalities, revival of nationalisms and ethnic identity politics, etc., widely examined in case studies.

An analysis of these "historical parallelisms" (Skocpol 1994) allows us to identify causalities other than those traditionally discussed (cultural or socio-economic factors, or a common historical legacy), and, for example, identify "logics of situation" or "modes of transition" (Munck and Leff 1997). As illustrated by the joint contributions to the present issue, this analytical strategy makes it possible to rethink older conceptions of "transition," to test existing theories, and to formulate new questions.

Another epistemological and theoretical reason justifying a comparison between different "non-Western" countries is its great potential for overcoming a "self-denigrating" type of analysis, or methodological exceptionalism. Both regions seem unable to define themselves other than through their relationship with the West, and are forever oscillating between more or less successful attempts to "imitate" and "surpass" its example, and claims of fundamental otherness. As Hirschman noted, the general habit of Latin Americans to condemn their reality made them unable to learn

from their past experience (Hirschman 1971:311–312). Indeed, any research on a “peripheral” nation contains an implicit or explicit comparison with an ideal representation of democracy or markets forged by theorists from the “First World” (which does not correspond to the actual reality of the “old” market democracies). The comparison can never be in favor of the former, and always seems to call for adjectives designating delay or deviance. When studying “Southern” or “Eastern” institutions, analysts frequently dismissed them as representing “incomplete democracy,” an “imperfect market,” “weak civil society,” and so on. While it seems impossible to formulate a unique recipe for “evolution” or “success”, comparison between peripheral nations and a contrasting study of their respective “failures” and “deviances” could contribute to a more reflexive stance on their (in)ability to be like the “First World.”

### CHALLENGES AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO THIS ISSUE

The lack of connections between the two academic worlds, due to the weakness of Latin American Studies in the post-Soviet countries and vice-versa, as well as the lack of intellectual networks between the two regions, made it challenging to find authors, reviewers, and even books to review for this special issue. Additional challenges were presented by the editors’, and *Laboratorium’s*, methodological preferences.

Latin American Studies are weakly developed in the post-Soviet countries (in Russia, they are concentrated at the Latin America Institute of the Academy of Sciences as well as a number of smaller centers), and Russian Studies in Latin America are even weaker. Moreover, most existing specialists do not carry out comparative research. For reasons that are more institutional than intellectual, they confine themselves to a regional studies ghetto that has few contacts with general disciplines such as sociology, history, or anthropology.

The easiest solution would have been to contact researchers from the United States or Western Europe who are already involved in international networks and have sufficient funding and other resources—most of those who specialize in the study of both regions are based in the U.S. But this issue was conceived precisely as an attempt to stimulate dialogue between scholars from Latin America and post-Soviet countries, and primarily those working and residing in their countries of origin. In practice, this condition could not always be met, and the editors have had to work with authors and reviewers from four continents, speaking four different languages (Spanish, Russian, English, and French), and specializing in a diverse array of fields, including sociology, anthropology, and political science.

Statistics and abstract modeling might seem preferable as a universal language for the kind of cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary communication intended here. Nevertheless, we conceived this thematic issue primarily as a collection of papers based on *field research*. This methodological orientation implies that we abandon pre-established causal schemes. Instead of going from concepts to data collection, as in the case of extensive surveys, the exchanges we facilitated encouraged

researchers to correct and to specify the categories they use. As other projects in comparative cultural analysis have shown, similar terms may refer to different phenomena (Lamont 1992), and meanings become clearer in contrast. Yet the overwhelming majority of works engaging in comparative analysis and theorization based on the study of Latin American and East European countries<sup>5</sup> have focused on macro-political and economic transformations, bracketing out social change. In-depth empirical case studies taking a comparative perspective, especially those based on fieldwork, are few and far between.

Some of the difficulties outlined above are due to the fact that none of the participants of this issue are comparativists: they all have specific areas of expertise and have performed in-depth case studies in individual countries. For all of them, this is the first attempt at cross-continental comparison. Although we succeeded in finding some scholars whose fieldwork spans both regions, in most cases we had to bring together previously unconnected authors who work on similar topics in their respective countries. In these cases, the original research was not designed as forming part of a single comparative project, and thus the fields, data, and problems were not always directly comparable. In order to partly compensate for these limitations, we asked authors to write two parallel articles and then produce a joint conclusion. These co-authored discussions compare and contrast the main findings from the main articles and outline a dialogue between the national cases analyzed. However, this strategy was not always successful. Some topics (popular music, religion, the military, and trade unions) had to be abandoned, either because we were unable to find an author in one of the regions or because the authors were unable to engage in productive dialogue.

This issue does not aspire to perform a systematic comparison between Latin American and post-Soviet countries, which would have been impossible given all these difficulties, as well as the limitations of a journal issue. However, it does represent an attempt to test the coherence and theoretical relevance of this analytical strategy using the example of topics as diverse as social movements, the politics of memory, or agricultural land rights, all of which became crucial in the context of post-authoritarian transformations (undoubtedly, the list of comparable objects could be extended or modified). Explicitly or implicitly, one of the core themes of all the articles is the effect of neo-liberal policies in different spheres of society. Most of the contributions to this issue deal with different aspects of change in Argentina and Russia. This choice has much to do with the nationality and institutional affiliation of the editors. Some papers, however, present an effort at comparative reflection on data collected in other Latin American and CIS countries such as Mexico, Brazil, Moldova, or Latvia.

The first part of the issue explores institutional shifts that occurred in the framework of reforms aimed at political and economic modernization. The issue opens with an article by Heredia and Kirtchik contrasting the experiences of economic

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5 Przeworski 1991; Nelson et al. 1994; Lijphart and Waisman 1996; Linz and Stepan 1996; Munck and Leff 1997; Haggard and Kaufman 2008.