

What are the weaknesses of democratic transition theory politics essay



Throughout the 20th century, democracy has gained its status as the predominant and most legitimate form of national governance. Through complex and diverse processes of democratization, not all successful, increasingly more states embedded democratic characteristics and procedures into their governance systems. Consequently, democracy and democratization swiftly became the subject-matter of extensive academic literature, widely referred to as "Democratic Transition Theory" (hereafter: DTT), which aims to scrutinize various aspects of emerging democratic regimes and democratic transitions.

This essay will focus on the question "What are the weaknesses of democratic transition theory". It will assess, while using the case-study of democratization processes in the former-Yugoslavia states, different shortcomings of existing DTT, which arguably undermine its theoretical validity and call into question the extent to which it is useful in explaining contemporary democratic transitions. First, at the theoretical level, DTT's incoherent and diverse use of concepts, variables and methods, which weakens its internal validity. Second, at the empirical level, DTT is inapplicable to contemporary variants of democratic transitions - mainly due to the impact of globalization processes on notions of statehood and citizenship in post-conflict situations, which weakens its external validity. Third, at the practical level, DTT blurs boundaries between academic accounts and policy prescriptions as well as between descriptive and normative perspectives, which calls into question its utility as a guiding principle for democratization policy. Based on these three critiques, I will argue that we should differentiate between notions of DTT as an academic

theory and as a political paradigm. As an academic theory, we should perceive it as an "open project" and thus further develop it in order to suggest plausible explanations of contemporary transitions. As a political paradigm, we should acknowledge the theoretical limitations in using it to underwrite democratization policy and therefore revisit its prescriptive and normative strands.

(A)Democratic-Transition-Theory: A-Historical-Background

DTT is a field of study that focuses on exploring the political phenomenon of regime transitions. In this sense, DTT is a fairly coherent research program, which encompasses various studies which aim to scrutinize the process by which a state attempts to embed democratic features in its formal and informal patterns of governance. DTT's contemporary incarnation evolved in light of the democratic transitions in Latin America and South Europe starting in the mid 1970s. These processes, which Huntington-(1991) dubbed "the third wave of democratization", begat a prominent line of DTT studies (e. g. Huntington, 1991; O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1996), suggesting various explanatory frameworks for these transitions.

Nevertheless, studies on democracy as a form of governance emerged before that. Seminal works of American scholars in the 1960s articulated the first configuration of DTT, which aimed to scrutinize the structural settings that arguably explained democratic patterns, these usually focused either on economic factors, like modernization and economic development or on cultural factors, like political culture. These were nevertheless more of an attempt to empirically identify the structural conditions that shape specific

modes of political institutions and focused less on the studying the process of democratic transition itself. The political processes of " the-Third-Wave", have generated a new approach to DTT, which diverted the focus from strictly structural explanations to agent-oriented ones. This new approach emphasizes the role of political elites as agents that realize and " execute" democratic transitions (for an overview on DTT, see Bunce, 2000: 705-715)

The study of democratization expanded in light of democracy's worldwide expansion. Multiple regional and cross-regional studies were performed in various attempts to deduce theoretical generalizations regarding democratization. Altogether, these studies explored a common type of transition, characterized as the process through which a breakthrough of an authoritarian regime in a certain state results in " transition toward democracy" (Carothers, 2002:). In this sense, DTT studies differed in the various causal explanations of the factors that facilitate the political phenomenon of regimes transitions. By focusing on the processes' features rather than on its diverse origins or potential outcomes, these studies suggested a certain and limited prism on democratic transitions. This prism, based on retrospective empirical evaluations of concrete and deliberated democratization processes in Latin America and South Europe, painted a picture of relatively sequenced and pre-determined patterns of democratic reforms within nondemocratic states.

The criteria for evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of theories are typically based on assessing their internal and external validity. Internal validity refers to the strength of the causal links a theory suggests in terms of conceptualizing, measuring and qualifying its variables-and the relations

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between them. External validity refers to the extent to which theories can be generalized and applied to situations other than those examined. In the next section, I will evaluate-both the internal and external validity of DTT. First, internally in terms of concepts and methodology, and then externally in terms of its applicability to explaining more recent regime transitions- specifically, the fragmentation of Yugoslavia from 1990-1999.

(B)DTT-Weaknesses: Internal-Validity

DTT's main weakness in terms of internal validity is the lack of sufficient coherence in its concepts, variables and the links it suggests between them (Munck, 1994). DTT as a research program encompasses various studies aiming to explain democratic transitions; however, these studies define "democratic" and/or "transitions" in different ways. This in turn creates a situation in which theories that allegedly claim to offer alternative explanations to the same phenomenon, actually explain different phenomena.

For example, the book of O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986), a seminal DTT work, posits in its first paragraph that it "deals with transitions from certain authoritarian regime toward an uncertain 'something else'" (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986: 3). Huntington's book, probably the work that is most identified with the DTT, declares in its preface that it is about "the transition of some thirty countries from nondemocratic to democratic political system (Huntington: 1991, 3). Linz and Stephen (1996), present a third approach, which attempts to revisit the traditional DTT and explore "how the character of different nondemocratic regimes affects, or does not affect, the paths that

can be taken to complete a transition to a democratic regime" (Linz and Stephen, 1996: 3). These three examples reflect three different conceptualizations of democratization: O'Donnell and Schmitter focus on the origins of a political transition, Huntington examines the factors that shape the process of democratization, and Linz and Stephan illuminate the final phase of the process, the consolidation. These different explanatory frameworks, although complementary to a certain extent, are incomparable in terms of evaluating the strength of their arguments and their plausibility.

Furthermore, DTT studies not only conceptualize democratic transition differently, but also conceptualize "democracy" differently. This illuminates two major disagreements that hinder the internal validity of DTT. At the conceptual level, DTT theorists disagree over which democratic features should be used to signify the degree of both existence and success of democratic transitions. At the methodological level, they disagree on how these features can and should be measured. For example, while Huntington prefers to stick to the minimal definition of democracy as a political system in which "decision-makers are selected through fair, honest and periodic elections" (Huntington, 1991: 7), Linz and Stephan choose a wider definition comprising behavioural, attitudinal and constitutional elements (Linz and Stephan, 1996: 6).

The challenge of defining and operationalizing democracy indicators corresponds with the extensive academic literature of democratic theory. The latter, a close relative of democratic transition theory, focuses on highly contested questions of defining, measuring and qualifying democracy both procedurally as a form of government and conceptually as a conduit of

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specific values and norms (e. g. Beetham, 1994). The challenge for DTT in this sense is obvious. If there is no consensus on how to define democracy, how to qualify it and how it can be measured, how could DTT attempt to portray the trajectories of transition to democracy, let alone explain the factors that shape them. For example, the common explanation of elite-driven transition, which emphasizes the essential role of political elites in the transition process, fails to explain the relations between " democracy" and political elites, namely to explicate why, and under what conditions, political elites will be motivated to perpetuate political transition (Bunce, 2000).

These are just several examples of the theory's internal shortcomings. Alongside others, these examples raise questions regarding the ability of DTT's causal explanations to depict a complete picture of the specific transitions they aim to explain (Munck, 1994). This by itself is a sufficient reason to question the transferability of the theory and the ability of applying it on other transitions (Pridham, 2000: 1-3). The next section will focus on democratic transitions in the Balkans as a case-study to illustrate the limitations of using classic premises of DTT as plausible theoretical lenses for explaining political transitions in contemporary post-conflict situations.

(C)DTT-Weaknesses:-External-Validity

Yugoslavia's disintegration and the Balkan wars (1990-1999) that followed led to the creation of seven new independent states (including Kosovo). All were required to face the complex mission of reconstructing (actually constructing) basic political and economic state-infrastructure. This mission is composed, according to Offe (quoted in Kostovicova and Bojicic-Dzelilovic,

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2006: 226) , of triple transition: (1) At the societal level, nation-state building (which can be separated into two different building processes - state-institutions and the nation); (2) at the economic level, economic liberalization and (3) at the political level, democratization (see also Blunden, 2004: 22-23 and Hippler, 2008). These are not separated transitions. In practice, they not only overlap and intertwine, but they also affect each other and are shaped by similar factors. In this respect, democratic transitions in the Balkans cannot be examined separately from the context of concurrent transitions on one hand and of the historical circumstances and legacies that generated those, on the other (Pridham, 2000: 9-15). Herein lays DTT's main deficiency: it is almost blind to the importance of different contexts, at both the domestic and international realms which could potentially affect democratic transitions. .

For years, DTT studies explained democratization from the inside, whether by structural variables like economic and cultural factors, or by agent-oriented approaches, which focus on political elites and their role in redesigning political institutions. By that, DTT largely refers to the transition as an isolated process that is dependent on the confluence of a set of (rather contested) driving forces that arguably promote democracy. It thus ignores the specific contexts and preconditions within which it takes place, as well as the related external forces (Carothers, 2002; Whitehead, 2002). I will elaborate only on the two contextual impediments of DTT, which seem most relevant for explaining political transitions in the global era: (1) the role of statehood and citizenship and (2) the international dimension. Both of these factors gain extra significance if one accepts the common understanding that processes of globalization for the past couple of decades have challenged classical notions of the state's legitimacy and authority.

One of the main indicators of democratization processes in the Balkans is popular elections, which were held in all of the emerging Balkan states ever since the aftermath of the Balkans-wars. Even if we will accept the disputed assertion that elections endow a polity with the label " democratic," the statehood of these polities still remains questionable (Edmunds, 2007; Krastev, 2002). The puzzling phenomenon of democracy preceding statehood, simply does not meet the basic premises of DTT, hence highlights the latter inapplicability to post-conflict political transitions.

One of DTT's core assumptions is that the polity in transition is not only a state, but also a consolidated one. It assumes that the transition is occurring

within the framework of an existing infrastructure of political institutions and is reconstructed through the transition process (Carothers, 2002). The case of the Balkan states imposes a new challenge to this. When former Yugoslav states declared independence, they not only lacked effective and legitimate governments, but were also locked in a state of ethnic conflict. Both conditions have fundamental effects on subsequent democratization processes. Democratization in the Balkans was essentially entwined with processes of state-building and nation-building, and thus was framed more as means to empower forces who wanted to shape the future nation-state and less as an independent aim. This argument could be applied to both nationalist forces operating within quasi-states and to the participating international and transnational actors (Blunden, 2004; Pridham, 2000).

The fragmentation of Yugoslavia and subsequent wars created a great political and social vacuum in its former republics. Opposed to the basic assumptions of DTT, the political transitions in this region were not a consequence of a regime's breakthrough but rather of a state. This did not lead to processes of political reconstruction, but rather a fundamental need to construct social, economic and political institutions. The post-conflict vacuum, characterized by a great sense of social insecurity, facilitated a competition between various forces over power and authority within a given territory (Hippler, 2008). This competition was embodied in the Balkan conflicts and in the reconstruction processes that followed them.

Subsequently, post-war processes of state-building in the Balkans became associated with nation-building processes evolving around ethnic-fragmentation.

Given the legacies of the failure of the prior state-authority to maintain its statehood and conflicts that generated from that, the post-conflict situation in the Balkan illuminated the attractiveness of state authority alternatives in the form of nationalism and identity politics (Kostovicova and Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2006: 229-230; 2009; Smith, 1996: 2-3). Consequently, crucial power shifts within the realm of the state allocated more power to exclusive ethno-nationalist groups than to inclusive ones (Zakaria, 2003: 15). For example, In Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH), since 1996 the parliament has been dominated by the wartime nationalist parties, reflecting popular support for ethnic divides and separatism (Waters, 2004). This demonstrates the inability of the new state systems to create what Smith (1996) calls a balance between the civic and ethnic dimensions of nationalism (Smith, 1996: 97-102). Constant disagreements over the definition of the "people" and the transformation from a Westphalian definition, which is based on bordered territory, to an ethnicity-based definition of people, undermined the ability of any state representative to establish equilibrium and therefore to consolidate effective and legitimate democratic states.

Furthermore, nationalist groups use democratic practices to recreate the nation and national identity rather than create a functioning state (Smith, 1996: 80-82). For example, in 2004-5 Serbian and Montenegrin nationalist group used the political institutions in Serbia and Montenegro (unified state back then) as part of their as part of their struggle for independence and separation (Edmund, 2007). Under the circumstances of weak and fragile states, these ethnic fragmentations just could not be accommodated under any constellation of democratically-elected government (Edmunds, 2007;

Krastev, 2002: 49; Waters, 2004; Zakaria, 2003: 113-155). As a result, the emerging Balkan states emphasized their ethnic components and therefore provoked processes of hyper-nationalism, ethnic-centralization and exclusion (Smith, 1996: 105-106), all of which are essentially counterproductive to state-building processes.

The lack of a civic component, which essentially defines the relationship between the state and its citizens, imposes more challenges for DTT, which presupposes the existence of statehood and in particular, clear definitions of citizens and citizenship. In this respect, citizenship is acknowledged as prerequisite to democracy, not to mention one of its constitutive elements. After all, if democracy is literally " the rule of the people", without agreement on who are " the people" there cannot be a democracy. Thus, if one embraces Grugel's concept of democratization as " the establishment of democratic practices of citizenship" (Grugel, 2003: 250), the absence of a clear civic component in the Balkan states questions the mere existence of democratic transitions within them and emphasize their embedded weakness (Kostovicova and Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2009). In terms of DTT, this emphasizes the need to expand its explanatory frameworks to cases in which there is not only a regime transition but also a transition (or construction) of a state, which entails differentiating between the constitutive elements of democracy - citizenship and statehood - and its procedural practices, like elections.

Another neglected dimension of DTT, which arguably has crucial impact on contemporary post-conflict transitions, is the international dimension

(Schmitz, 2004). International forces, and external forces in general have <https://assignbuster.com/what-are-the-weaknesses-of-democratic-transition-theory-politics-essay/>

always had some impact on domestic democratization transitions as demonstrated by US efforts in the Alliance for Progress (1961) and various foreign aid schemes for democratization states in Latin America.

Nevertheless, although prominent DTT scholars acknowledged the role of the US in third wave democratization processes (Huntington, 1991: 91-100), and recognized , its part in the history of democratization, the role of external forces or superpowers was not incorporated into DTT's explanatory frameworks thus was absent from democratization theory (Schmitz, 2004). More than that, the DTT's reliance on firm division between the external and domestic realms overlooks the involvement of external, international, global and transnational elements in these transitions and thus ignores their role in shaping the course of contemporary post-conflict transition.

Here again the political transitions in the Balkans reveal the inapplicability of the DTT to contemporary conflicts because of its tendency to decontextualize the political phenomenon it aims to explore. The DTT treats democracy and democratization as unitary concepts that have firm meanings regardless of time and space constraints, and thus assumes they can be defined and measured via objective and positivist lenses.

Nevertheless, since democracy as a set of political procedures is the manifestation of set of ideas and concepts, its meaning is dynamic and interpretative, that is constructed and socialized by social institutions and actors under specific social and historical circumstances.

An important shift in the ideas and meanings of democracy and democratization has occurred in the past few decades (Whitehead, 2002: 7-9). The end of the Cold-War marked for many the triumph of democracy as a <https://assignbuster.com/what-are-the-weaknesses-of-democratic-transition-theory-politics-essay/>

desirable idea. This, accompanied by recently emergent ideas of human security, generated a paradigm shift in the academic and political agendas toward the need to embody and realize notions of human, liberal and political rights. President Clinton articulated this trend in its first inaugural speech (1992):

"[O]ur greatest strength is the power of our ideas, which are still new in many lands. Across the world, we see them embraced, and we rejoice. Our hopes, our hearts, our hands, are with those on every continent who are building democracy and freedom. Their cause is America's cause." [1]

In light of these notions, NATO, under U. S. leadership, framed its involvement in the Balkan wars at both diplomatic level (e. g. the Dayton Agreement, 1996) and military one (e. g. NATO's Operation Joint Guardian in Kosovo, 1999). Another example for the ideational framework of the external forces in the Balkans is the involvement of NATO the UN, the EU, and GCS bodies in managing reconstruction and state-building tasks in the region. The official objectives of these tasks illustrate their aim to develop in these states the civic components of statehood and democracy.

For example, the mission of NATO-led stabilization force in BiH articulates that its legal and political framework was determined in light of Dayton Agreement's goals (1996):

" To provide a safe and secure environment; To-establish a-unified, democratic Bosnia-and Herzegovina.; To rebuild-the-economy.; and To allow the return of displaced persons and refugees to their prewar-homes." [2]

The mandate of the UN-Mission in BiH (1995) emphasizes the role of law enforcement, whose main tasks include:

" Monitoring, observing and inspecting law enforcement activities and facilities; advising law enforcement personnel and forces; assessing threats to public order and advising on the capability of law-enforcement agencies to deal with such threats"[3].

It also makes its assistance to specific parties in BiH conditional and declares that it will:

" Consider-requests from the parties-or law-enforcement agencies in-Bosnia and Herzegovina for-assistance, with priority being given to ensuring the existence of conditions for free and fair elections."

The objectives of the UN peacekeeping force in Kosovo (KFOR, 1999) are also similar:

" Support the-establishment-of civilian institutions, law and order, the judicial and penal system, the electoral-process-and other-aspects of the political, economic and social life of the province."[4]

The main-problem though, is that these forces by attempting to design and supply the civic components of the state in-light-of western models of statehood and democracy, served as substitute for the state and practically empowered the anti-statist forces in the region, namely the ethno-nationalist groups as a by-product of democratization (Waters, 2004: 424-427).

The American diplomat Richard-Holbrook's expressed his concern from this implication in the course of the 1996 Bosnian-elections:

" Suppose the election was declared free and fair... and those elected are racists, fascists, separatists, who are publicly opposed to [peace and reintegration]. That is the dilemma." (Quoted in Zakaria, 2003: 17-18)

As exemplified above, this has realized in practice, and the institutions that the external forces aimed to achieve in the Balkans, were used by ethno-nationalist movements as a platform to fuel trends of populism and claim their authority in the name of an exclusive ethnic majority (Smilov and Krastev, 2008: 8-10).

The above examples illustrate two important notions regarding the weakness of DTT to theorize the role of external forces. First, its indifference to the fact that international and transnational forces play a significant role in processes-of democratization and state reconstruction (Lewis, 1997).

Second, its indifference to the significance-of contextual and ideational-evolutions in concepts of democracy, as shaping and determining-this role. A comprehensive theoretical account on democratic transitions thus has to consider both the ways in which external forces fulfill their role in the transitions and the material and ideational factors that motivate them to do so. By further scrutinizing the role of external forces in democratization processes, DTT, could perhaps suggest refined and crystallized notions regarding the relations between external and internal forces in contemporary democratic transitions as well as provide further insights regarding the appropriate ways to manage and execute these transitions (e. g. Kostovicova

and Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2006; Schmitz, 2004). The first question to be asked, in this respect, is if DTT in its essence is adequate to serve as a guiding policy tool for democratic transitions.

(D) DTT: Between-Academic-Theory-and-Political-Paradigm:

The relative success of the third wave of democratization coincided with the end of the Cold War, conferred extra normative weight upon concepts of democracy and democratization and anchored democratization processes to the conception that democracy is good and desirable. This conception developed in light of historical and social circumstances that generated specific normative perceptions and-interpretations of democracy. DTT's main theoretical and empirical assertions were combined with similar normative notions regarding the merits of democracy. It was thus shifted from a merely descriptive and explanatory framework to a prescriptive one, representing a new paradigm, in the academic and political realms, regarding the prospects of democracy promotions (e. g. Diamond, 2003; Fukuyama, 1992).

Consequently, more and more entrepreneurs of democracy promotion framed and justified their policies via a mixture of normative and descriptive notions of DTT, as the paradigmatic foundation for attempts to support and encourage democratic transitions around the globe. The essential question thus is if indeed DTT is designated to serve as the theoretical basis of democratization policies in general and of contemporary post-conflict transitions in particular. The democratization attempts in the Balkans can shed light on this question. The attempts of the international community and GCS networks to democratize the Balkan states by emphasizing the virtues

of elections as a platform for democracy and of law enforcement mechanisms as a platform for constitutionalism, exemplify the limitations of DTT. The overall success of these attempts is questionable as much as the democratic transitions in the Balkan states are questionable due to, alongside other reasons, the theory's deficiencies presented above. First, in terms of cause and effect, these attempts were based on incoherent means and methods that were incompatible to the aim they wished to achieve. Second, they were inapplicable under the ontological features of the political transitions in the Balkans, which were shaped by the new and unfamiliar context of globalization, manifested in non-statist (i. e., sub-national, transnational and global) trends and patterns of conflict and post-conflict reconstruction (Kostovicova and Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2009; On the EU's Europeanization-approach to the Balkans see Kostovicova and Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2006).

These patterns demonstrate the blurred trajectory DTT has taken in recent years and calls into question its ability to serve as the theoretical basis for policies of democratization. This, I wish to argue, has less to do with DTT itself but rather with its transformation from academic theory to political paradigm. As argued above, the end of the Cold-War served as a normative leverage for democracy and democratization as political concepts. Those consequently gained normative weight, which altered the concept of democratic transitions from being a mere "dependant variable" in terms of DTT to aspired political objective. In this sense, DTT was politicized and shifted from being a framework, which aimed to understand and explain reality into a framework which ascribed its shape and designed desirable

political realities. Furthermore, DTT became a tool to justify and frame policy, migrating it from the academic sphere to the political one.

Nevertheless, DTT was not simply applied to new cases of political transitions as a guiding principle, but rather was translated and rephrased. Different entrepreneurs stripped DTT of its original theoretical constructs and rephrased them as both public conventions and political convictions (see also Ish-Shalom, 2006 on the migration process of the Democratic Peace theory.). I use the word "strip" since once a theory migrates from academic to political discourse, it is detached from the skeptical and cautious discourse to which it was originally anchored.

Academic theories are essentially specific adhered-to standards that qualify it to participate in the academic discourse. Among these requisites are expressed notions of cautiousness and skepticism that frame theorizing processes more as a set of probabilistic assertions than as a natural law. In return, theorists usually refer to-their theories as-project that is open to interpretations, refutations and further developments. More than that, theorists set the conditions under which their theories can-be-applied, and-by that acknowledge the limitations of theoretical generalizations (Ish-Shalom, 2008: 683-685). This, for example, is clearly a part of the theorizing process of the DTT in its original setting as an academic-theory, which was explicitly cautious regarding its ability to serve as a model, rather than an explanation. Huntington for example, clearly states that his account of the third wave of democratization is limited-to the specific cases he selected for the study and thus questions his own theory's external validity (Huntington, 1991: xiii). O'Donnell and Schmitter explicitly suggest in their book's title "

tentative-conclusions" and point that although there is a normative strand to the DTT that recognizes democratization as desirable, one has to acknowledge that transitions are essentially disordered and thus difficult to theorize and deduce to concrete generalizations. Democratic transitions thus should not be regarded as either linear or deterministic in their nature (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986: 3-5). Interestingly, Carothers's critique (2002) "The End of the Transition Paradigm" implicitly acknowledges the theory's migration process by referring explicitly to subject under critique "democratic transition paradigm" rather than to "democratic-transition-theory".

It is important to stress the differences between theory and paradigm. A paradigm is a worldview composed of a set of axiomatic, possibly normative, notions regarding facets of the world. Theory on the other hand is the result of complex process of systematically organizing paradigmatic conceptions into sets of assumptions, testable hypotheses, and feasible arguments usually framed by conditioned "if and then" matrixes. DTT, in this sense, shifted from being a theory, constrained by the common standards of academic theorizing, into a political paradigm that embodies a specific set of values and norms. Consequently, the use - some would even argue abuse - of the idea of DTT as a paradigmatic-framework for democratization policies is inadequate given its initial purposes and limitations as a theory. This use can be seen as a selective, even distorte