

Research Note

Democratic Transition: A Critical Overview

SUJIAN GUO

The past two decades have witnessed the most remarkable development toward democracy, which has been referred to as "the Third Wave" of democratization.¹ In the past ten years, the countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have simultaneously undergone political, economic, and social transformations and brought about the undeniable success of democratic transition. The subsequent consolidation of this transition has, however, been complicated and far from completed. Much of the literature on democratic transition has been referred to as "transition theory."

This review essay seeks to offer an assessment of the empirical literature on democratic transition that has accumulated during the past several decades. To this end, the review essay will discuss the major theoretical approaches of transition theory, offer a critical review of the literature, and finally discuss some related methodological controversies and implications.

Sujian Guo received his doctorate in political science at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. He is currently assistant professor of political science at Providence College, Rhode Island. His areas of specialization are comparative politics, international relations, and methodology. His research interests have focused on communist and post-communist studies, democratic transitions, regime change in post-Mao China, Third World politics, and international political economy. He is the author of *Post-Mao China: From Totalitarianism to Authoritarianism?* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2000).

¹Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

Theoretical Approaches to Democratic Transition

Transition theories, as theoretical models, have been influenced by theoretical frameworks drawn from the social science disciplines such as system theory, political culture theory, decision theory, modernization theory, structural-functionalism, and institutionalism. Different theoretical approaches to transition theory have provided various analytical frameworks for a comparative study of regime transition across regions, and identified factors or variables to explain outcomes of particular transformations that have occurred in different countries under different circumstances. However, "theoretical approaches to democratic transition have not presented any coherent or even elaborate body of work."² Transition theory has in fact tended to "diverge" between different schools of thought.

Helga A. Welsh notes that some scholarly attention initially focused on the various causes of regime change, while others placed major emphasis on such prerequisites for democratization as socioeconomic development, political culture, and the role of civil society. More recently, the comparability of regime transitions in the former Soviet bloc to those in other regions of the world has been given greater attention.³ Adam Przeworski points out that studies on democratic transition can be loosely grouped into two categories: studies that focus on the objective conditions of regime transformation and studies that concentrate on political strategies and choices.⁴ However, this review essay attempts to categorize major studies in the rich literature on democratic transition into four theoretical approaches: structure-oriented approaches, process-oriented approaches, institutional context-oriented approaches, and political economy approaches.

1. *Structuralist approaches*, pioneered by Lipset, Almond, Moore, and others, dominated much of the political science scholarship on Latin

²Geoffrey Pridham and Tatu Vanhanen, eds., *Democratization in Eastern Europe: Domestic and International Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 2.

³Helga A. Welsh, "Political Transition Processes in Central and Eastern Europe," *Comparative Politics* 27 (July 1994): 379.

⁴Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 95-99.

America and Southern Europe in the 1960s and 1970s. Structural approaches assume that economic development, political culture, class conflict, social structures, and other social conditions can explain particular outcomes of the transition. These scholars were preoccupied with macro-level social conditions, or socioeconomic and cultural prerequisites of democracy, and sought to explain the causes and effects of democracy and clarify the nature of their relationships. Their quantitative studies of a large number of countries found a positive correlation between democracy and economic development or various facets of social development.

While Lipset focused on the long-run causal influence of the level of wealth, industrialization, urbanization, and education on democratization, other writers emphasized the role of civic culture, class conflicts, interest groups, religions, etc. Their empirical studies generated debates over not only the prerequisites for but also the level and stability of democracy.⁵ O'Donnell and Schmitter's earlier work, another structuralist approach, sought to explain the collapse of democracy by assuming an important connection between socioeconomic and political structures and, accordingly, focusing on economic development and class conflict as principal explanatory variables.⁶ The common feature of these studies by this group of scholars was the assumption that certain social and political structures must be in place before democracy can be inaugurated.⁷

⁵Seymour Martin Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy," *American Political Science Review* 53 (March 1959): 69-105; Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963); Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966). Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Huber Stephens, and John D. Stephens provide a comprehensive review of the modernization literature on democratization. See their *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 12-39.

⁶Guillermo A. O'Donnell, *Modernization and Bureaucratic Authoritarianism: Studies in South American Politics* (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1979); Philippe C. Schmitter, "Still the Century of Corporatism?" *Review of Politics* 36 (January 1974): 85-131.

⁷Robert A. Dahl, *Who Governs: Democracy and Power in an American City* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1961); Arend Lijphart, *The Politics of Accommodation: Pluralism and Democracy in the Netherlands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968); Dankwart A. Rustow, "Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model," *Comparative Politics* 2 (April 1970): 337-63; Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy*.

2. *Strategic choice approaches* constituted a great challenge to the structuralist perspectives. This type of approach concentrated on the interaction of elite strategic choices as possible explanations for the success or failure of democratic transition. Proponents of this approach focused on the micro level, the critical role of elites and their strategic choices, the splits within the authoritarian regime, and the compromise between the "soft-liners" and "hard-liners." Their studies emphasized the autonomy of political processes rather than the economic determinants of political change. Elite calculations, strategic choices, and the interaction between choices were viewed as decisive in determining political outcomes and whether or not democratic transition would occur at all, although they did not deny the importance of economic factors.⁸ This approach was later joined by O'Donnell and Schmitter's oft-cited four volumes of *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*, in which they shifted their positions away from the structuralist perspective. Their studies emphasized the critical role of elites and their strategic choice and the compromise between the "soft-liners" and "hard-liners," and argued that "elite dispositions, calculations, and pacts" "largely determine whether or not an opening [to democracy] will occur at all."⁹

Of central concern to this group of scholars was the process of transition rather than structural conditions. Guiseppe di Palma gave special attention to the process of "democratic crafting," involving "negotiated agreements" between ruling elites and opposition elites that moved common perceptions of "self-interest" toward accepting democracy as the best possible regime form under given conditions. He argued that the game between ruling elites and opposition elites could be converted into a positive sum game, if the right steps in the process of regime transition were under-

⁸Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, eds., *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Guillermo A. O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, eds., *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Guiseppe di Palma, *To Craft Democracies: An Essay on Democratic Transitions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

⁹Guillermo A. O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, "Tentative Conclusions," in O'Donnell and Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*, part 4:19, 48.

taken. Therefore, skillful crafting and tactical devices of transition were important in facilitating the transition process.¹⁰

3. *Institutionalist approaches* emphasized the impact of institutions on the formation of policies and patterns of political actions and stressed the role of institutions in shaping and constraining the objectives and preferences of political actors. How the regime was institutionalized was seen as the explanatory variable for the variations in regime transition.¹¹ Within this camp, some institutionalists concentrated on the changes in state-society relations that played a crucial role in democratic transition. Civil society was the key factor for the collapse of the formerly communist countries in Eastern Europe. Different patterns of interaction between state and society explained the different processes and outcomes of democratic transition. As Ali R. Abotalebi argued: "So long as the state lingers as the ultimate center of power, the prospects for inauguration of democracy will remain minimal."¹²

Other scholars focused on the links between the elite strategic choices and the "confined contexts" that determined the very parameters of political action, and attempted to bridge the links between structures, institutions, and elite contingent choice by pointing out the limits of the two approaches. They argued that the historically created, preexisting structures and institutions were the "confining conditions" that determined the very parameters of political action.¹³ Terry Lynn Karl and Philippe Schmitter

¹⁰Herbert Kitschelt, "Political Regime Change: Structure and Process-Driven Explanations?" *American Political Science Review* 86, no. 4 (December 1992): 1032.

¹¹James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, "The New Institutionalism: Organizational Factors in Political Life," *American Political Science Review* 78, no. 3 (September 1984): 734-48; Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, eds., *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Stephen D. Krasner, "Sovereignty: An Institutional Perspective," *Comparative Political Studies* 21 (April 1988): 66-94; Walter W. Powell and Paul J. DiMaggio, eds., *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Sven Steinmo, Kathleen Thelen, and Frank Longstreth, eds., *Structuring Politics: Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Patrick H. O'Neil, "Revolution From Within: Institutional Analysis, Transitions from Authoritarianism, and the Case of Hungary," *World Politics* 48 (July 1996): 579-603.

¹²Ali R. Abotalebi, "Democratization in Developing Countries: 1980-1989," *Journal of Developing Areas* 29 (July 1995): 508.

¹³Terry Lynn Karl, "Dilemmas of Democratization in Latin America," *Comparative Politics* 23 (October 1990): 6-7.

argued that elite strategic choice was contingent upon the confined contexts or conditions, which might or might not break with the past and lead to democracy. If the focus was placed solely upon strategic choice and interaction, the pattern would appear to be simply the result of skillful leadership, leading to excessively deterministic conclusions about democratic transition. Instead, if the links between the strategic choice and the confined contexts were underscored, one would be aware of how different contexts made such "statecraft" of the transition more or less possible, and how the different arrangements "crafted" by key political actors during a regime transition produced different types of democratic regimes. This is because preexisting structures constituted "confining conditions" that restricted or enhanced the choices available or determined the range of options available to political actors and even prepared them to choose a specific option. Therefore, political actors and their strategies, which were constrained by preexisting social, economic, and political structures, defined the basic property space within which transitions could occur and the specific combination of the two defined which type of transition would occur.¹⁴

Still others tried to bridge the gap between the structural and strategic choice approaches and demonstrated how the regime was institutionalized was the explanatory variable for the variations in transition. In his most recent study of Hungary, Patrick H. O'Neil employed institutional analysis to examine the transition from within the communist authoritarian regime and found a strong correlation between institutional forms and the collapse of the regime in Hungary.¹⁵ Helga A. Welsh distinguished among three types of conflict resolution: command and imposition, bargaining and compromise, and competition and cooperation. These three types represented the major methods employed respectively in authoritarian rule, transition periods, and democratic politics. Although these modes might be present in all political systems, their relative significance varied considerably in

¹⁴Terry Lynn Karl and Philippe C. Schmitter, "Modes of Transition in Latin America, Southern and Eastern Europe," *International Social Science Journal* 43, no. 2 (1991): 272-74; O'Neil, "Revolution From Within," 579-603; Welsh, "Political Transition Processes in Central and Eastern Europe," 383.

¹⁵O'Neil, "Revolution From Within," 579-603.

different types of regimes. Moreover, while bargaining in authoritarian regimes was state-initiated, state-controlled, and aimed at the protection and consolidation of monopolistic power, bargaining in pluralist democratic systems was competitive, diverse, yet grounded in a political climate that nurtured mutual trust and cooperation.¹⁶

4. *Political economy approaches* emphasized the sequencing of political and economic reforms and the interplay between politics and economy as the explanatory variables determining variations in transition outcome, with a particular attention to "dual transitions" from authoritarian rule to consolidated democracy. Of central concern to this group of scholars is the effect of short-term economic conditions or the impact of economic crises on the terms of transition and nature of new political alignments.¹⁷ During the transition process, economic conditions affected the capacity of the ruling elites to determine the timing and nature of their withdrawal from authoritarianism, the economic and institutional legacies of the transition affected economic policymaking in the new democratic regimes, and market-oriented reforms and democracy could be reconciled and consolidated. One of the underlying assumptions was the correlation between economic crisis and regime change. Failure to overcome economic crisis and manage the resulting distributive conflicts would increase the probability of the old regime being transformed; similarly, successful adjustment to economic crisis and improvement of economic performance would increase the prospects for democratic consolidation.¹⁸

Moreover, political economy approaches brought attention to the sequencing of economic and political reforms. Of central concern to students of dual transitions were how the sequencing of political and economic reforms influenced the prospects for democracy and economic restructuring, how the arrangements linking state and civil society could facilitate a favorable environment for social interaction, and how socioeconomic struc-

¹⁶Welsh, "Political Transition Processes in Central and Eastern Europe," 383.

¹⁷Stephan Haggard and Robert R. Kaufman, "The Political Economy of Democratic Transitions," *Comparative Politics* 29 (April 1997): 263-84.

¹⁸Stephan Haggard and Robert R. Kaufman, *The Political Economy of Democratic Transitions* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), 4, 7-8.

ture shaped policy preferences and social conflicts. Studies on these questions have provided insight into the lessons about democratic transition and consolidation.¹⁹

Some empirical case studies illustrated this very important issue in regime transition and suggested some real lessons about the sequencing of economic and political transition, although the choice of the sequencing model varied across nations. Cases such as Chile and China, in which economic liberalization was pursued first at the expense of political liberalization, suggested that, after the economic reform strategy was put into place, there was no guarantee that authoritarian elites would choose to carry through with political democratization. Instead, successful economic reforms might provide the excuse for the regime to continue dictatorship. Poland and many other formerly communist countries in the Soviet bloc, cases in which economic and political reforms took place simultaneously, suggested this explanation: despite the undeniable success of democratic transition, economic reforms in the fledgling democracies usually ran into serious political difficulties not because of democracy but rather because of the absence of firm institutional structures of political representation that could bring a strong party coalition to support economic reforms. Once the costs of structural adjustment began to be felt by the public, a backlash against economic reforms set in. Most political parties distanced themselves from the reform programs, and the new communist leadership pledged to slow down privatization and restructuring. The Spanish model, in which economic reforms took place after democracy was consolidated, provided a more attractive path of political and economic change. The consolidation of democracy reduced the political risks of structural adjustment because, by the time economic reforms were implemented, the basic infrastructure of democracy was in place and democracy had been institution-

¹⁹Omar G. Encarnación, "The Politics of Dual Transitions," *Comparative Politics* 28 (July 1996): 482-83; Nancy Bermeo, "Sacrifice, Sequence, and Strength in Successful Dual Transitions: Lessons from Spain," *Journal of Politics* 56 (August 1994): 619-23; Stephan Haggard and Steven B. Webb, eds., *Voting for Reform: Democracy, Political Liberalization, and Economic Adjustment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Jeffrey Frieden, *Debt, Development, and Democracy: Modern Political Economy and Latin America, 1960-1985* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991); Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy*.

alized and, with a parliamentary majority, political leadership was able to obtain party coalition support and focused their energies on economic reforms.²⁰

A Critical Review

More recently, especially since the 1980s, much scholarly attention has shifted to the latter three approaches. However, this essay would embrace the first approach as a partial explanation for transition. Each of the four theoretical approaches has its own strengths and weaknesses.

Structuralist approaches help us to understand why the old regime is challenged or threatened, but cannot tell us why and how the elites make the change in one way or another. Social and structural conditions may have a long-term constraining effect on democratization and help to explain the dynamics of social change. They can hardly explain, however, why different political actors make different choices, why their preferences change and policy choices shift from one to another, and why one choice prevails over another within the same social and structural context. Moreover, fundamentally flawed is the argument that democracy can be duplicated from the earlier industrialized and democratized Western countries, or any society today can follow the same path that led to democracy in Western countries. As Haggard and Kaufman noted, modernization theory postulated a positive correlation between capitalist development and democratization and thus failed to anticipate the more recent economic success and political development in the Latin American and East Asian neo-authoritarian countries. Therefore, "by the beginning of the 1980s, most analyses of regime change had turned away from economic explanations of any kind."²¹ Karl and Schmitter concurred that "the quest for a set of unique and identical conditions that can explain the presence or absence of

²⁰For a discussion on these lessons, see Encarnación, "The Politics of Dual Transitions," 480-81, 481-83; Bermeo, "Sacrifice, Sequence, and Strength in Successful Dual Transitions," 619-23.

²¹Haggard and Kaufman, *The Political Economy of Democratic Transitions*, 2.

democratic regimes should be abandoned and replaced by a more modest effort to develop a contingently sensitive understanding of the variety of circumstances under which they may emerge."²²

Strategic choice approaches are an elitist model. Elite strategic choices and their interactions might be an important variable affecting the transition patterns and outcomes, but elites make their strategic choices in a particular context that confines their preferences and calculations of the costs and benefits of different transition strategies. According to Karl and Schmitter, one may object to this approach on the grounds that, first, the process of transition is temporary, with much uncertainty, and therefore largely unpredictable, and second, the decisionmaking process under the old regimes usually takes place behind closed doors or half-closed doors, and therefore the elite model or strategic choice is impossible to fully comprehend. Therefore, this model is less effective in analyzing the transition process than the democratic consolidation phase in which the decision-making is largely open, and therefore it does not serve as an adequate instrument for the comparative study of democratic transitions. As Haggard and Kaufman argue, "Such approaches fail to address the factors that shape actors' political preferences, the conditions under which these preferences change, and even the identity of the pivotal actors."²³ Haggard and Kaufman argue that "socioeconomic structure," "economic policy and performance," and "economic crises" affect not only the preferences of different actors but also their capacity to maintain or change institutional arrangements. Furthermore, "the inability to avoid or adjust successfully to economic crisis increases the probability that authoritarian regimes will be transformed and reduces the capacity of authoritarian leaders to control the process of political change, including the terms on which they exit." Similarly, "the prospects for the consolidation of democracy will be better when the government is able to successfully administer its economic inheritance."²⁴

²²Karl and Schmitter, "Modes of Transition in Latin America, Southern and Eastern Europe," 270.

²³Haggard and Kaufman, *The Political Economy of Democratic Transitions*, 5-6.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 6-7, 7-8.

Institutionalist approaches attempt to link structural constraints to the shaping of contingent choice by synthesizing the strengths of both and dismissing the limits of both. This model enables us to have an empirical analysis of the strategies and choices adopted by party leaders who are confined by the preexisting structures. The analysis of the "confined context," which determines the parameters of political action, will enhance the predictability and be conducive to the analysis of the why and the how of the elite choices. However, the processes of change in China and the former Soviet Union have suggested that, although the preexisting socioeconomic structures and political institutions are similar, the transition processes and their outcomes are quite different. The question will be why such similar structures produce such different outcomes. There must be some other unexplained variables, such as the generational differences of the communist leadership and the military role in transitional politics, that affect the regime change or confine the parameters of elite strategic choice.

Political economy approaches emphasize the economic determinants of political change and democratization. Economic crisis as an explanatory variable seems too deterministic in a sense that it may lead to regime transformation in some countries but not in others. Even in the same country, crisis may lead to transformation in one period of time but may erode development in another period.²⁵ This suggests that there are some other unexplained variables that may influence regime transformation.

Overall, the different approaches of transition theory have suggested a large number of explanatory variables for explaining the transition in different countries under different circumstances and provided different analytical frameworks for the comparative study of democratic transition. The problem is whether we can determine which variable is most important in explaining the variations in regime transition. Most scholars focus their research on one of these dimensions, such as structural conditions, individual elites, institutional contexts, or political economy. The choice of focus often reflects the individual scholars' judgment of which level of analysis is likely to be most fruitful and can contribute to a solid understanding of

²⁵Nancy Bermeo, "Rethinking Regime Change," *Comparative Politics* 22 (April 1990): 367.

the patterns and outcomes of regime transition.

However, each of these theoretical approaches fits the observed facts to some extent but none of them provides an adequate explanation if applied to particular cases. As suggested above, it seems unlikely that any single-level variable affords an adequate understanding of the complexity of transition process and outcome. Therefore, sole focus on any single-level variable in the course of transition will not provide us with a satisfactory explanation for the divergent transition outcomes across regions and countries, because a joint effect of multiple causal forces determines the transition variations. Different approaches should be considered complementary in integrating and explaining the observed phenomena. A more comprehensive scheme is thus needed to provide a multidimensional approach to the divergent outcomes of regime transition across countries.²⁶ A synthesis of transition theories by integrating the key elements of each of the theoretical approaches can develop a more comprehensive scheme against which the key causal variables can be located. This synthesis can also provide a more comprehensive and accurate explanation for regime changes and outcomes, because, in a more comprehensive scheme, more is examined and less is assumed.

A synthesis is not only optimal but also achievable. These theoretical approaches do not compete with each other, given that each of them fits the observed phenomenon to a greater or lesser extent. Many of the insights and conclusions from each theoretical approaches reflect different sides of an empirical world and are thus part of a unified whole picture of the transition. In the reality of transition, some of the causal factors are structural, some institutional, some political economic, and others might be mixed. Therefore, different approaches should be considered complementary in integrating and explaining the observed phenomena. A combination of the key elements of different approaches, considering sufficient key factors and critical sides of a particular course of action that take place in the transition process, will be most optimal in theoretical and empirical studies of

²⁶Sujian Guo, "Democratic Transition: A Comparative Study of China and the Former Soviet Union," *Issues & Studies* 34, no. 8 (August 1998): 71.

democratic transition. Such an approach can explain why and when the preferences of political actors change and their policy choices shift from one to another, why democratic transition that occurs in one country fails to occur in another, and why one country demonstrates one pattern of change while others exhibit a different pattern.

What is needed is to find a way of integrating various explained or unexplained variables into a general analytical framework in which the key elements of different approaches can "fit together in a logic of explanation"²⁷ to reveal the variations in transition outcomes. Therefore, it is important to find a research strategy by which such a synthesis can be made in the logic of explanation.²⁸ The final section will briefly discuss the methodological implications of this problem.

Conclusion: Methodological Implications

The above review suggests that researchers have to integrate the key elements of competing theories of democratic transition into a more comprehensive analytical framework by which both the short- and long-term causal variables can be situated together in a logic of explanation. Such a synthesis—a multidimensional approach to democratic transition—suggests some methodological controversies and implications for comparative studies of democratic transition.

First, the richness of theories has suggested a large number of explan-

²⁷Gabriel A. Almond and Laura Roselle, "Model Fitting in Communism Studies," in *Post-Communist Studies and Political Science: Methodology and Empirical Theory in Sovietology*, ed. Frederic J. Fleron, Jr. and Erik P. Hoffmann (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1993), 62.

²⁸The logic of explanation requires that the relevant, important determinants of the occurrence be singled out. Following Carl G. Hempel's characterization of the logic of explanation, an explanation "answers the question, 'why did the explanandum-phenomenon occur?' by showing that the phenomenon resulted from particular circumstances, specified in C_1, C_2, \dots, C_k , in accordance with laws L_1, L_2, \dots, L_k . By pointing this out, the argument shows that, given the particular circumstances and the laws in question, the occurrence of the phenomenon was to be expected; and it is in this sense that the explanation enables us to understand why the phenomenon occurred." See Carl G. Hempel, *Aspects of Scientific Explanation* (New York: Free Press, 1965), 337.

atory variables for the transition, but also led us to a dilemma called "causal overdetermination" or "explanatory overdetermination," "piling up any number of logically unrelated or logically contradictory reasons for an occurrence."²⁹ Social scientists usually run into the problem of causal overdetermination when two or more alternative explanations are available for the same event or occurrence *and* if we fail to eliminate rival explanations.³⁰ This is one of the typical problems in comparative studies that involve "small-n, large number of variables."

The most similar systems design³¹ is a way by which the problem of causal overdetermination can be minimized through maximizing the number of the rival explanatory variables to be eliminated. The logic of the most similar systems design is fairly clear: "Common systemic characteristics are conceived of as 'controlled for,' whereas intersystemic differences are viewed as explanatory variables. The number of common characteristics sought is maximal and the number of not shared characteristics sought, minimal."³² That is to say, those commonalities are treated as the controlled variables, which are not responsible for the explanation of variation in the dependent variable. Identified as irrelevant variables or "rival explanations," they must be first eliminated from the explanations so that the number of the "experimental variables" can be minimized. Those differences are treated as the experimental variables, which are responsible for the explanation of variation, and they are identified as relevant variables or explanatory variables. For example, China and the former Soviet Union can be considered the most similar communist systems, but they differ with respect to their divergent patterns and outcomes of transition. These two

²⁹Jack Snyder, "Science and Sovietology: Bridging the Methods Gap in Soviet Foreign Policy," in Fleron and Hoffmann, *Post-Communist Studies and Political Science*, 113; Mary Hesse, *Revolutions and Reconstructions in the Philosophy of Science* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1980), viii.

³⁰Frederic J. Fleron, Jr., "The Logic of Inquiry in Post-Soviet Studies: Art or Science?" *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 29, no. 3 (1996): 270.

³¹Adam Przeworski and Henry Teune, *The Logic of Comparative Social Inquiry* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1979), chap. 2; David Collier, "The Comparative Method," in *Political Science: The State of the Discipline II*, ed. Ada W. Finifltre (Washington, D.C.: The American Political Science Association, 1993), 105-13.

³²Przeworski and Teune, *The Logic of Comparative Social Inquiry*, 33.

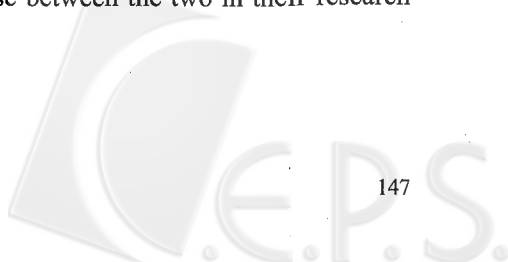
cases can serve as good examples for comparative analysis, because these two countries share broad commonalities, and therefore the number of the "causal variables," although still relatively large, can be minimized.

The second methodological implication is the choice of the two research strategies in empirical studies, with one side emphasizing parsimony and the other comprehensiveness. When is one more appropriate than the other? Is it an equally legitimate and effective research strategy if a researcher prefers a research strategy stressing causality and accuracy over parsimony and generality in his or her study? One-dimensional approaches tend to emphasize the research strategy of parsimony and generality and refuse to accept the other as a legitimate and scientifically sound research strategy.

According to Przeworski and Teune, generality refers to the range of social phenomenon to which the scientific explanation of a theory is applicable. The greater the generality of a theory, the greater the range of phenomenon that can be explained by the theory. Obviously, natural science consists of more general theories. Parsimony involves the effort to gain the greatest amount of explanation from the smallest number of factors. The scientists usually attempt to achieve the greatest explanatory power out of the smallest number of factors, because more factors will reduce the generality of the explanation. Accuracy can be expressed in terms of the amount of variance accounted for by the independent variables—the more variance accounted for by a theory, the smaller the error of prediction. However, when the accuracy of theories is maximized, their generality and parsimony will often be low. Causality implies that factors operating at different levels of analysis—groups, communities, regions, nations, etc.—should be incorporated into theories and that their interactions with factors operating within each of these systems should be examined.³³

Przeworski and Teune's discussion shows that generality and parsimony, as one side, usually conflict with accuracy and causality, as the other. Social scientists can hardly satisfy both demands simultaneously and thus have to choose or make a compromise between the two in their research

³³*Ibid.*, 20-23.



practices. Which research strategy is more appropriate than the other? On this issue, some may argue for a reconciliation between the two research strategies in research practices. Others may argue that only when key variables can be quantified, data sources are systematic, and mathematical manipulation of data is possible, is the research strategy focusing on parsimony and generality more appropriate in research.

It is the opinion of the author that the research strategy stressing parsimony and generality is more appropriate if the study involves a large number of cases *and* if the causal variables are relatively small and can be quantified. Conversely, the strategy emphasizing causality and accuracy is optimal if the study involves a small number of cases and if the causal variables are relatively large and cannot be quantified. There is no single "correct" research strategy in researching political and social phenomena. As Imre Lakatos has noted, a theory is evaluated not only on the basis of parsimony but also on the grounds of the comprehensiveness of the explanation it advances and the extent to which it provides a promising foundation for future research.³⁴ Each strategy has its own particular emphasis in research practices and hence each strategy possesses some strengths that the other does not. Each strategy can lead us in a particular direction to uncover fruitful knowledge and provide explanations for the research questions. Both strategies can be theoretically and methodologically justified and therefore have an equally legitimate place and a particular utility in the practice of research.

³⁴Imre Lakatos, *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes: Philosophical Papers I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 35.

