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CRISIS AND TRANSITION, BUT NOT DECLINE

Philippe C. Schmitter

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There seems to be an overwhelming consensus among scholars and politicians that democracy *as a practice* is in decline. An 18 August 2014 Google search for *decline of democracy* yielded more than 55.5 million results; Google Scholar, which searches only academic literature, still produced a hefty 434,000 hits. At the same time, however, it is widely accepted that the desire for democracy *as an ideal*—that is, self-rule by citizens possessing equal rights and having equal influence over the choice of leaders and the conduct of public affairs—has never been greater or more broadly distributed. This gap between what is promised and what is delivered has been an omnipresent feature of those long-established regimes that I have called “really existing democracies,” and it has been reproduced in newly established democracies as well. It is the source of most of the historical struggles that have periodically led to the reform of democratic institutions.

A widening of this gap between the real and the ideal characterizes the present crisis—hence the growing pressure not to dismantle or destroy democracy as such, but rather to change the way in which it is being practiced. No one seems to believe that either really existing democracies or newer democracies that have passed some threshold of consolidation will in the foreseeable future regress to their *status quo ante*. Moreover, there is simply no plausible alternative in sight, save for a few models (for example, Chinese meritocracy, Russian neo-Czarism, Arab monarchy, or Islamic theocracy) that are unlikely to appeal far beyond their borders. In other words (to paraphrase a line in Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa’s novel *The Leopard*), democracy will definitely

survive, but only by changing. What these changes will be, however, is by no means clear.

Some Misleading Evidence of Decline

Evidence for the recent crisis and decline of democracy rests on dubious conclusions from quantitative sources and selective inferences from qualitative case studies. Freedom House has served as the “definitive” source for the former, and its annual report has been featuring various versions of the “democracy-in-retreat” narrative since 2008. It has based this assertion on a decline in the average scores of its compound indicator. This is especially misleading since many so-called Free regimes have no room for improvement given the upper limits of the variables used. For example, none of the reform measures to be discussed below would increase the score of a single one of them. Many Not Free regimes have no further room for decline, and many of these are “failed states” that are locked into civil wars and have no regime at all. It is mostly the Partly Free or hybrid democracies that have shown variation—and some of that has been upward. Moreover, small changes in the average for the whole sample (which is what tends to be used as the indicator for decline) can be attributed to a relatively small number of cases, from Russia and its Eurasian former republics to Bangladesh, Fiji, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. One alternative quantitative source, the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Index of Democracy, reports similar aggregate results, while another, the Bertelsmann Transformation Index, shows no significant overall change from 2006 to 2010.

Random public-opinion surveys in both new and established democracies routinely “discover” that a growing share of citizens feel that their votes do not count and are disregarded by their leaders. Most dramatic has been the decline in trust in core democratic institutions—namely, elected politicians, political parties, and legislatures. Yet these same surveys often reveal a similar decline in trust in nonelected authorities, including the military and police, public administrators, and even scientists and physicians. In other words, skepticism has come to characterize public opinion in general, even if it is focused most intensely on the political process. Interestingly, these surveys also tell us that public interest in politics has been rising along with the sense that politics actually has a real impact on people’s lives. So the gap does exist, but so does the awareness of it and, presumably, the desire to narrow it.

On the qualitative side, scholars have found a litany of “morbidity symptoms” that illustrate the extent of decline in many really existing and newly established democracies. At the top of the list, one usually finds increasing distrust of elected politicians and representative institutions (especially political parties), followed by declining levels of elec-

toral participation and party membership or identification, rising electoral volatility, and problems in forming stable governments.

Previously dominant centrist parties find that their ideologies are no longer credible to the public and that they are losing votes to newly emerging populist parties of either the left or the right. Parliaments have become less central to the decision-making process, having been displaced by the concentration of executive power and a wider role for “guardian institutions” dominated by (allegedly) independent technocrats. Governing cabinets include ever more unelected members who are chosen for their “nonpartisan” status. Membership in and conformity to class-based intermediary organizations such as trade unions and employers’ associations have declined, while large firms, especially financial ones, have gained more direct access to the highest circles of decision making.

The “usual suspects” are typically cited as the generic causes of crisis and decline. At the top of the list, one almost always finds globalization, since it has supposedly deprived the nation-state of its former autonomy, undermining government effectiveness and responsiveness to citizen demands. Multinational enterprises, international financial institutions, and (at least in Europe) multilayered regional-governance arrangements have imposed a complex mixture of constraints and opportunities that greatly limit economic and social-policy agendas as well as the capacity to regulate and tax capitalists and their enterprises. Changes in the structure of production and the sectoral composition of the economy have weakened the collective consciousness of workers and blurred the class cleavage that had long provided the basis for political parties on the left and right.

Politics has become a full-time profession rather than a part-time affair. Most of those who enter the field today expect to spend their entire careers there, and they surround themselves with other political professionals such as speechwriters, media consultants, pollsters, and “spin-doctors.” Citizens have become increasingly aware that their representatives and rulers live in an entirely different and self-referential world. Voting preferences are now based less on class, sector, and professional interests and more on individualistic concerns about personal lifestyles, ethical convictions, and the role of government.

If all that were not enough, citizens—many of whom now have access through the Internet to vast sources of independent and critical information—have become better educated and more skeptical about the motives and behavior of their politicians. Moreover, enormous flows of South-North migration have so altered the demographic composition of most really existing democracies that a substantial share of their populations have no citizen rights or prospects for gaining them. This growing diversity challenges the notion of a common *demos* with a shared fate, and hence a mutually accepted sense of the public good. Notwithstanding the current populist resistance to ethnic pluralism, really existing democracies will have to find a way to accommodate diversity and reform their institutions accordingly.

More conjunctural factors are also supposed to have played an important role. First and foremost, the collapse of Soviet-style “people’s democracy” has deprived Western democracies of one of their primary bases of legitimacy—namely, their superiority over their communist rivals. Since the end of the Cold War, the democracies of the West have had to satisfy the more demanding criteria of equality, access, participation, and freedom promised by democratic ideals. The latest wave (which, *pace* Huntington, is not the “third wave”) of democratization that began in 1974 also contributed to a general rise in expectations and unrealistic assertions about “the end of history.” Neoliberal reforms failed to produce their promise of continuous growth, fair distribution, and automatic equilibration, leading by 2008 to the Great Recession, which many democracies (especially in Europe) proved incapable of mitigating, much less resolving.

At the core of this consensus about crisis and decline lies the heavy emphasis that the practice of democracy places upon representation—especially via competition among political parties in regular and fair elections that are expected to produce, directly or indirectly, legitimate rulers.¹ Admittedly, parties have never been “loved” by citizens—partly because they are an overt expression of the interests and ideological cleavages that divide them, but also because there is ample reason to suspect, as the German sociologist Robert Michels long ago asserted, that they are unusually susceptible to oligarchy and prone to self-serving corruption.²

In the face of such abundant evidence, convincing arguments, and massive consensus, how can anyone doubt that democracy is in decline?

Some Emerging Evidence of Transition

From my perspective as a “card-carrying” transitologist, it should come as no surprise if I conclude that democracy is *not* in decline, but that it *is* in crisis and in the process of transition from one type to another³—although it is not at all clear what the new type (or types) will be or whether any new type will be an improvement over existing practices. Indeed, it is precisely this uncertainty about the rules of the game that is the predominant characteristic of all transitional situations. In generic terms, one might label this emerging configuration “post-liberal” (but definitely not “illiberal” or “anti-liberal”). Of course, this label does not convey much specificity of meaning, other than opening up the prospect for the outcome to be something qualitatively different.⁴

As is often the case with such debates, the answer hinges not on the facts but on the concepts and suppositions that determine which facts are salient and why. Not surprisingly, this begins with the definition of democracy that one uses. In 1991, Terry Karl and I proposed in these pages a very generic definition of democracy that involves neither specific institutions nor presupposed outcomes: “*Modern political democracy is a*

[regime] . . . in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, [usually] acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their elected representatives.”⁵ I would now add for greater clarification: “and in which citizens comply voluntarily with their rulers’ decisions—even when they have not explicitly approved these decisions—because they regard them as having been taken legitimately.”

In other words, democracy is a two-way process (or better, set of processes) in which citizens with equal political rights and obligations have at their disposal regular and reliable means to access information, demand justification, and apply sanctions on their rulers; in exchange, citizens accord these rulers legitimacy and agree to respect their decisions, even when disagreeing with them. This definition of democracy has two key implications for how we should determine whether democracy is in decline or in transition: This means that it would be a mistake 1) to focus exclusively on a single set of institutions (usually, the conduct of elections and the behavior of political parties) or 2) to make a judgment based on indicators of the substantive performance of a given democracy.

All that should count are the effectiveness of the processes of accountability and the willingness of citizens to accord legitimacy. Both can change for a variety of reasons, including the introduction of new communications technologies, the diffusion of novel ideals across borders, or the creation of new channels of representation. The core assumption is that if rulers know they will be held to account and if citizens believe their rulers to be legitimate, then the substantive outcomes will be satisfactory given the resources available. This definition implies that not all democracies should be held to the same standard of performance—for the simple reason that not all citizens will collectively want the same things and not all polities will be capable of producing the same level of public goods. Tocqueville famously argued that once democracy had established equality in the realms of politics and law, citizens would demand equality in social status and material wealth.⁶ He was right about the tendency, but wrong about the eventual outcomes. Contemporary really existing democracies differ considerably and consistently in their distributive consequences.⁷

Another way of expressing this argument is that one should clearly separate the criteria for assessing the quality of *democracy* from those used to assess the quality of *government*. The former is about processes connecting the rulers to the ruled in ways that ensure mutual accountability, while the latter concerns the outcomes that ensue from the exercise of power, whether democratic or not. This implies the possibility that some autocracies could outperform some democracies—delivering, say, higher economic growth, lower inflation, better distribution of wealth, fuller employment, and in some cases even less corruption, stricter observance of the rule of law, and greater protection of human (but not civil) rights. Much of the anecdotal evidence for decline involves how governments—

more and more of which admittedly belong to democratic regimes—are performing, not how democracy as such is doing.

Some Emerging Evidence of Reform

About a decade ago, Alexander Trechsel and I put together for the Council of Europe a working group of academics and politicians on the theme “The Future of Democracy in Europe.” During the ensuing discussions, the participants quickly became aware that there was a great deal of both political imagination and actual experimentation with regard to institutional reforms.⁸ Much of this thinking and effort had gone largely unobserved because it was taking place at the local level or in a more or less sporadic fashion. In the case of newer democracies, pervasive disparagement of the intrinsic deficits of their regimes—that their democracies were “flawed,” “partial,” “hybrid,” “pseudo,” “façade,” “illiberal,” “stalled,” “low-intensity,” “delegative,” “defective,” or merely “electoral”—obscured the fact that they were often engaging in innovative practices.⁹

To the best of my knowledge there exists no complete inventory of these reform efforts. To list them all and attach them to their specific sites would greatly exceed the space accorded to me (as well as my expertise). Thus, I will simply offer readers a representative sample and invite them to pursue the task in a more systematic fashion:¹⁰

1) Referendums and initiatives are probably the most widely and frequently used innovation, as the kinds of issues that have become subject to such measures at both the national and subnational levels have proliferated. Granted, some of these referendums and initiatives are merely consultative, and many require a high threshold to become valid; nevertheless, they have given citizens in many polities a much more direct channel of participation in decision making than they had in the past.

2) “Participatory budgeting” is one reform that has been extensively studied since it was first implemented in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and then spread across several continents. Participatory budgeting involves convoking an assembly of self-selected or randomly chosen citizens to debate the distribution of some proportion of a governmental unit’s total budget. A wide array of such forums have emerged over time, and their terminology differs—e.g., “consensus conferencing,” “citizens’ panels,” “citizens’ juries,” “planning cells,” “issue forums,” “citizens’ assemblies,” even “deliberation day”—as do the rules that govern them, but the intent is the same: to bring ordinary citizens closer to the policy-making process by personal participation.

3) The party primary, a device for selecting from among candidates competing for a political party’s nomination, had long been a peculiarity of U.S. politics. In recent decades, this practice has invaded other

countries and continents. The modalities differ, but in generic terms primaries give party members (or even ordinary citizens) the capacity to penetrate firmly entrenched party oligarchies. Some places have even opted for “open primaries,” in which candidates of all parties compete and the top two vote-getters, regardless of party affiliation, become the nominees for the general election. Another reform that could affect *partitocrazia* is the introduction of NOTA (“None of the Above”) as an alternative choice on the ballot. In some versions, if a sufficient number of citizens check this box, the election has to be held again.

4) Public funding for political parties is yet another relatively recent innovation—one that has spread from Europe’s really existing democracies to newer ones. The presumed objective is to counter the tendency toward disproportionate contributions from wealthy citizens and private corporations by shifting the burden to compulsory contributions from taxpayers as a whole. This usually involves some distribution formula based on the previous electoral results, which would seem to reinforce incumbent advantage and, hence, oligarchy. Because the monitoring of these funds is often deficient and their receipt does not preclude the raising of additional funds from private sources, they have been a persistent source of corruption allegations.

5) In recent decades, quotas for women electoral candidates or even as members of the legislature have become almost standard in many really existing democracies. In some places, this is a formal legal obligation, even a provision of the national constitution. Elsewhere, political parties have adopted the practice voluntarily—at first mostly left-leaning parties, but increasingly parties in the center and on the right as well. Meanwhile, some countries have simply legislated that one-half or some lower proportion of seats in the legislature be reserved for women. An additional measure, called “zipping,” requires electoral lists to order male and female candidates alternately. Efforts to promote gender parity have spread to the process of government formation as well: The informal practice of appointing women to head half of all ministries is becoming a norm. Less common is the notion that other social minorities that historically have suffered discrimination—ethnic, linguistic, or religious—should benefit from similar policies.

6) The devolution of greater powers to subnational political units is becoming more common. Most newly established democracies and several well-established West European democracies have recently transferred considerable decision-making authority to regions, provinces, or municipalities that had previously been ruled by their respective central governments. While full-scale federalism seems to be on the decline, this more flexible form of decentralization should allow citizens to hold their local governments more accountable.

7) Efforts to plan for the future have blossomed in response to the frequent complaint that really existing democracies are intrinsically “short-sighted”—tied to the electoral cycle or to immediate expressions of public opinion and thus incapable of engaging in “forward thinking” or anticipating future problems and preventing their negative impact. Recent decades have witnessed a virtual explosion of “future commissions”—some within governments, others in think tanks or NGOs. It has become increasingly obligatory for legislative proposals and referendums to be accompanied by an expert evaluation of their eventual costs and consequences. In Hungary, there is even an “Ombudsman for Future Generations” who performs this task on a regular basis.

8) The proliferation of freedom-of-information acts all over the world has helped to keep citizens better informed about the behavior of their rulers. These laws give individual citizens and civic associations access to the material that governments have collected—even to material that is currently being used in the decision-making process. To be sure, members of the general public may not always possess the time or skill to mine these documents, the sheer volume of which has increased exponentially over the years with the increase in government surveillance. Nevertheless, such laws make a modest contribution toward ensuring the transparency upon which accountability rests.

9) New innovations in information and communications technology (ICT) are beginning to have a significant impact on the practice of democracy. Their low cost and broad distribution, as well as the personal anonymity that they offer, have given citizens access to sources of information that are difficult for established authorities to control or censor, and that frequently reveal behavior that rulers would rather keep secret. Parties and politicians have also felt compelled to use this technology to connect with their followers. Some parties and candidates have even used it effectively to raise funds and mobilize followers. Meanwhile, vast segments of civil society have made use of ICT to assemble “virtual” units of collective action that are often critical of established authorities.

10) The next steps in this technological transformation have already appeared in a few selected sites—namely, the use of electronic communications to influence the nomination of candidates and the formation of party programs, to match voters’ personal preferences with the positions of parties and candidates (so-called smart voting), and finally to actually cast one’s vote. Several countries have extended this form of “e-democracy” into “e-government” by setting up kiosks or bureaus where citizens can contact government agencies, download forms, and make complaints.

11) A few countries have introduced a novel system for funding civil society. Citizens can choose to allocate a fixed percentage of their tax

obligations to an organization (or organizations) of their choice from among an approved list of associations, institutions, or agencies. Such organizations thus become compelled to compete publicly and vigorously for these funds by disclosing what they have been doing and propose to do in the future. Not only is the distribution of these funds an important financial resource for them, but it also serves as a proximate indicator of their legitimacy and reveals otherwise hidden citizen preferences.

12) The nature of citizenship—that most basic of democratic institutions—is beginning to change. There is a trend toward lowering the age of political maturity to sixteen. Nationals living abroad are able to vote at their respective embassies or consulates. Legally resident foreigners are gaining some voting and consultative rights in the countries where they live (especially at the local level), and in some places it has become easier for them to acquire citizenship in their new home countries. The true breakthrough will come when nationality, whether *jus sanguinis* or *jus soli*, is separated from the status of citizenship. There is even a *de jure* status for “supranational” citizenship in the European Union, and the diffusion of human and civic rights across national borders and their (admittedly erratic) enforcement by international or regional courts have created a more extensive *de facto* system of citizen protection.

13) Representation by lot is one device that is hardly new. It was present at the founding of *demokratia* in ancient Athens. As mentioned above, some of the direct consultation of citizens on policy matters has involved the random sampling of participants from those physically present in a given constituency. A more indirect technique has been to assemble a random sample of citizens, register their initial opinions, subject them to a discussion of alternative points of view, test them for potential changes in opinion, and then publicize the results. The assembling of such “deliberative mini-publics” for “interactive polling” has become a common practice in Western democracies—although its practical impact on either policy content or political legitimacy has yet to be conclusively demonstrated (which, incidentally, is the case with many of the innovations presented above).

14) According to the orthodox view of democracy, representatives owe their legitimacy to having been elected in some regular, competitive, and honest fashion. Yet there has been an extraordinary increase in the number of nonelected persons claiming this status on the basis of their professional or organizational expertise, their appealing personality, their commitment to shared norms, or even their celebrity—and there is abundant evidence that many of them are accepted as such. Hardly a single leader of a civil society organization or social movement owes his or her position to a competitive electoral process, not to mention the movie stars and rock musicians who speak on behalf of worthy causes and whole continents.

So far, almost every one of these institutional experiments has focused on reviving *vertical accountability* through political parties or elections or *oblique accountability* through interest associations, social movements, or communications networks. Liberal versions of democratic theory, however, place a distinctive emphasis on *horizontal accountability*. Guided by the more general principle that really existing democracies are better off protecting citizens from tyranny than empowering them to act collectively, such checks and balances within the decision-making apparatus are intended to reduce the potential threat posed by mass citizen mobilization.

The three traditional sites of horizontal accountability—the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary—have experienced a rebalancing. Legislatures have tended to decline, executive power has varied according to the policy agenda (with the conduct of war being one of the major incentives for its growth), and judges (especially appellate judges) have greatly increased their powers. This process of constitutional juridification has varied considerably, with the United States providing an extreme case at the national level and the EU creating an entirely new layer of authority at the supranational level.

15) The establishment of a variety of “guardian institutions” is truly novel. Such institutions hardly existed before, and where they did, they played a much more subordinate role, but they now provide a wide variety of potential checks on decisions made by elected officials or legislators.¹¹ First and foremost among such institutions are independent central banks, which are authorized practically to dictate economic and financial policy. No democracy seems to be capable of doing without them. The central banks have been joined by an extraordinary array of national “independent regulatory agencies.” In addition to the older ones that regulated interstate commerce, transportation, public health, worker safety, food products, drugs, professional ethics, consumer protection, and the like, we now find electoral commissions, human-rights tribunals, and anticorruption agencies. These have all been deliberately “chartered” in such a way as to avoid political interference (in other words, democracy) and handed over to experts who will not bend to pressure from citizens or rulers, or be captured by those whom they are supposed to regulate. If this were not enough, these efforts are often seconded by global institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, and innumerable other standard-setting and standard-enforcing institutions. The EU has not only its own central bank, but also more than thirty regulatory agencies. No wonder citizens complain that they have no effective influence over policy; their politicians can hide behind this screen of supranational actors and pretend that they have no choice but to obey Washington, Brussels, or wherever.

No clear pattern emerges from the reform efforts sketched above, except that it appears not to be true that the practice of liberalism—political or economic—will inexorably produce a satisfying and stable equilibrium. So far, there is none in sight. In some cases, there are traces of “pre-liberal” democracy, with its enhanced role for direct citizen participation and occasional use of selection by lot. In others, especially in the devolution of territorial authority and the emphasis on freedom of information, one might be led to conclude that “more-liberal” democracy is emerging, especially when these practices are combined with such substantive measures as the widespread deregulation of commercial and financial transactions, stronger protections for property rights, and the dismantling or downgrading of various policies of social protection.

Yet most of the reforms hint at a novel configuration that might be called “post-liberal.”¹² Such a configuration would be rooted in the extension of public consultation on policy and budgeting issues, broader definitions of citizenship, public financing of political parties and citizen-chosen civil society organizations, quotas for women, “guardian institutions” designed to protect citizens from fraud and exploitation, the creation of “future commissions” to examine the potential impact of government decisions, and (why not?) the proliferation of self-selected persons claiming to represent a wider diversity of causes and places.¹³

Another, less obvious characteristic of this emerging type of democracy is its ambiguous attachment to the national state. Much of what this form of democracy is seeking to accomplish would require passive consent or active cooperation across its borders, up to and including the formation of supranational norms and institutions. The maxim that really existing democracy can only be practiced within really existing national states seems destined to be challenged.

Any alternative to “really existing” liberal democracy—except perhaps for more liberal and less democratic rule—is bound to be plagued by serious problems of “agency.” However intellectually appealing this alternative may seem, it is usually impossible *ex ante* to specify which actors (or what combination thereof) would support such changes, how much of the transition costs they would be willing to bear, and how the reforms might be successfully and democratically implemented. Once a revolutionary rupture with the previous institutions and practices of liberal democracy has been ruled out—as seems to be the case for the foreseeable future—it is hard to see the potential basis for the sort of sustained social or political support that any combined and persistent reformist campaign would need. So far, all one can observe is a series of isolated and tentative efforts—many of which have yet to make much of a difference. It is almost impossible to overestimate the enormous entropy built into the institutions and practices of today’s really existing democracies and the attendant difficulty in convincing people to accept new ideas about rather fundamental political and economic relations.

The earlier reforms presently embedded in liberal democracy were the

product of efforts to close an enlarged gap between the ideal expectations and the real performance experienced by citizens, but they almost always required at least the specter, if not the imminent threat, of revolution to make the effort seem worthwhile. Today, however, revolutionaries are rare, and their terrorist replacements strengthen rather than weaken the will to retain the *status quo*. The actors who are presently challenging the performance and the legitimacy of really existing democracy are not its declared enemies; they are its avowed supporters. In other words, they are citizens and groups who believe that they are improving democracy, although they have no coherent plan for doing so. Indeed, the task of reform would be facilitated greatly if extremists on either the right or left were self-avowedly seeking to replace liberal rules and practices with some other form of government, but their efforts are presently inconsequential and unconvincing, and in my opinion they are likely to remain so.

As long as the greatest threats to democracy are coming from its “normal practitioners”—voters, citizens, deputies, special interests, movement activists, and “prominent personalities” engaging in their normatively sanctioned behaviors, it will be far more difficult to convince such actors of the necessity for a comprehensive package of institutional reforms. Contrary to past history, when such political transformations occurred only if a dedicated group advocating a plausible alternative existed and succeeded in imposing its model, all that most citizens experience in their daily lives today are “symptoms of morbidity” à la Gramsci—a lot of grumbling, dissatisfaction, powerlessness, and suboptimality, but hardly enough to motivate them to invest in a novel, ill-defined, and as yet untested model of post-liberal democracy.

NOTES

This is an essay in “practical political theory,” not an article of political science. It is my tentative effort to capture a complex set of interrelated phenomena in excessively general terms and without the requisite empirical references. I am grateful to the *Journal of Democracy* for its indulgence.

1. For a more detailed analysis of the shrinking role of political parties in really existing democracies, see Philippe C. Schmitter, “Parties Are Not What They Once Were,” in Larry Diamond and Richard Gunther, eds., *Political Parties and Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 67–89.

2. Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy* (1911; New York: Crowell-Collier, 1962). More recently, his “Iron Law of Oligarchy” has been rebaptized by the Italians as “partitocrazia,” an expression that has rapidly diffused throughout the political universe.

3. Three non-transitologists have arrived at the same conclusion: In their introduction to *The Future of Representative Democracy*, Sonia Alonso, John Keane, and Wolfgang Merkel point out that several authors in the volume suggest that “what we are witnessing is not so much a crisis of representative democracy as its transformation into something new”; Alonso, Keane, and Merkel, eds., *The Future of Representative Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 17. Admittedly, I was a participant in this

research group and, hence, one of the authors. Subsequently, however, a distinguished political theorist has arrived at the same conclusion quite independently, as I discovered after writing this essay: Alessandro Ferrara, “Judging Democracy in the Twenty-First Century: Crisis or Transformation?” *NoFo* 10 (2013), www.helsinki.fi/ifo/NoFo10FERRARA.pdf.

4. This has already happened several times in the past. The root concept of democracy persists, but its translation into rules and practices has been subject to three successive “revolutions,” to use the expression of Robert Dahl; see his *Polyarchy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971). For an extension of this argument to include five subsequent revolutions within really existing democracies, see Philippe C. Schmitter, “The Future of ‘Real Existing’ Democracy,” European University Institute (unpubl. ms., 2007).

5. Philippe C. Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl, “What Democracy Is . . . and Is Not,” *Journal of Democracy* 2 (Summer 1991): 75–88. This essay has been widely reprinted in several languages.

6. In the first volume of his *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville makes this one of his founding observations about democracy: “The gradual development of equality of conditions is therefore a providential fact, and it has the principal characteristics of one: it is universal, it is enduring, each day it escapes human power; all events, like all men, serve its development”; see Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. and ed. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1:6. In the second volume, published some five years later, Tocqueville expresses some doubts about the impact of this “providential fact” and envisages the possibility of the development of an industrial aristocracy in America and even of an eventual despotism (2:530–34, 661–65).

7. Looking over the abundant literature on the “quality of democracy,” one is impressed by the extent to which it presumes that the features of the Scandinavian democracies are universally appreciated and therefore occupy a prominent place among its criteria for excellence. Is it really a relevant question to ask why Brazil has not attained the standards of, say, Sweden—or even if Brazilians wish to become Swedish?

8. Philippe C. Schmitter and Alexander H. Trechsel, eds., *The Future of Democracy in Europe: Trends, Analyses and Reforms* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2004).

9. I am indebted to Leonardo Avritzer for my awareness of this and for his research, which demonstrates that the flow of innovations is not exclusively from really existing democracies to newly existing ones. The latter have much to contribute to the former.

10. For a more extensive list of potential as well as actual reforms, see Schmitter and Trechsel, *Future of Democracy*, which offers 29 of them.

11. See Robert Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) for the initial observation.

12. For this distinction between “pre-liberal,” “more liberal” and “post-liberal,” see Philippe C. Schmitter, “Democracy’s Future: More Liberal, Pre-Liberal, or Post-Liberal?,” *Journal of Democracy* 6 (January 1995): 15–22.

13. For my very tentative effort at imagining what such a post-liberal democracy might eventually look like, see “The Prospect of Post-Liberal Democracy,” in Karl Hinrichs, Herbert Kitschelt, and Helmut Wieselthaler, eds., *Kontingenz und Krise. Institutionenpolitik in kapitalistischen und postsozialistischen Gesellschaften. Claus Offe zu seinem 60. Geburtstag* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2000); “Un esbozo del posible aspecto de una democracia ‘post-liberal,’” in Jose Felix Tezanos, ed., *Clase, estatus y poder en las sociedades emergentes: Quinto foro sobre tendencias sociales* (Madrid: Fundación Sistema, 2002), 587–98.