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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Toward the Comparative Analysis of Transitions from State Socialism: Structure, Agency and Contingency

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Abstract The comparative study of the transition from state socialism has much to gain from broadening its canvas from the good work that has already been done comparing the USSR/Russia with China and the comparisons among the former Central and Eastern European state socialisms. It can take as its starting point the well developed "transitology" from authoritarianism to democracy. But there are fundamental differences too, especially in that the transitions from state socialism will probably require much more attention to structural *explanans*, which were deëmphasized in favor of agency and contingency in the work on transitions from authoritarianism. That said, *virtú* and *fortuna* will remain crucial as the open-ended transitions from state socialism continue to play themselves out.

Keywords Transitions · State socialism · Post-communism · Comparative politics · Structure, agency and contingency

1 A Broad Comparative Politics of State Socialist Transition?

If the rise of state socialism under Leninist parties that deployed command central planning was perhaps the biggest story of the early and middle twentieth century, their ongoing transitions away from what they had been are one of the biggest of the

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years since the end of that century.[1] These have already involved a wide range of processes and produced sharply differing outcomes. Some Central European states, notably Hungary and Yugoslavia, began experimenting with significant reforms in political economy by the 1960s. China began to follow suit in 1979. In 1989, state socialism across Central Europe collapsed, followed by the USSR two years later. Yet in China, where the 1989 popular mobilization was bigger, broader and more sustained than in Central Europe or the USSR, the political system survived, and beginning in 1992 the leadership finally engineered a radical transition to market Leninism that made the country the biggest economic success story on the planet. Amid no such political drama, communist parties have held onto power in Southeast Asia, North Korea and Cuba, producing widely varying political, economic and social institutions and outcomes. While comparative politics has begun to attend to the differences between Russia and China and to some aspects of the differentiation within Central and Eastern Europe, it has, on the whole, not set its sights on explaining the differences among transitions from state socialism in anything like the temporal and geographic fullness and complexity with which they have occurred.

2 On Transitions

The effort must begin by recognizing that the task before our profession involves most centrally not comparison of countries but rather of transitions, which are far more complex, slippery objects of analysis. Moreover, as "cases" these transitions are independent neither of each other nor, indeed of themselves in that any one transition's early phases are bound to affect its later ones. Barrington Moore, producing a book whose significance "would not be easy to overstate," (Katznelson 1977, 89) conceived of historical transitions as historically moving structural "configurations" of a wide range of economic, social and political factors "favorable or unfavorable the establishment of modern Western democracy", fascism or communism (Moore 1966, 14 and passim.). As Katznelson has also noted, he "did not slice and dice his cases into variables which themselves would be compared as if they were not enclosed and entwined inside cases of dense and distinctive complexity" (Katznelson 1977). If Moore could compare the English enclosure movements, the French Revolution, the American Civil War, the Meiji Restoration, the Chinese Revolution, and Indian democratization, comparative politics today can certainly take on comparison of transitions from state socialism

[1] My thanks to the organizers and participants in the Workshop on The Future of Comparative Politics, in Conjunction with the Fifth Year Anniversary Ceremony of the Center for Comparative Political Development Studies, Fudan University, Shanghai, May 14–15, 2016. In particular, I owe an enormous debt to Philippe Schmitter, who taught me so much about comparative politics when I was his graduate student at the University of Chicago in the first half of the 1970s. Attending the workshop with him, reading his spectacular paper published in these pages, and writing my own paper have continued to reveal to me just how very much he has shaped my own thinking, scholarship and teaching throughout my career.

over the past several decades. Indeed, this is precisely the sort of brave work for which Philippe Schmitter calls in these pages (Schmitter 2016).

It may benefit from the development of a veritable sub-field of comparative politics that has grown up around "transitology" (Schmitter 2014). Of course the question at hand is fundamentally different. Where transitology emphasizes the "to" side of the transition from "authoritarianism" to "democracy", here the analysis is rooted more fundamentally in the "from": broadly speaking, does Leninist state socialism decompose in broadly distinctive ways compared with "authoritarianism"? At first blush the answer might seem to be yes, at least in terms of *process*. Schmitter and Karl identified four modes of the initial break from authoritarianism (reform, revolution, pacted, imposed) (Karl and Schmitter 1991, fn. xi). But where state socialism has collapsed it has always done so through implosion resulting from long-term processes that piled straw upon straw on the camel until a point came at which one more stalk—the collapse of the border between Hungary and Austria, a few spasms of spontaneous demonstrations resulting therefrom across the rest of Central and Eastern Europe, declarations of independence by many Soviet republics, or the election of Yeltsin over Rhyzkov—brought the whole system crashing down in Central Europe and the USSR. But of course in terms of broad-scale *outcomes* the answer to the question of the distinctiveness of transition from state socialism must be no, in a double sense. First, despite that cataclysm, for nearly three decades since communist parties have maintained their political monopolies in China, Cuba, North Korea, and former Indochina. Moreover, among these survivors, political and economic forms have differed widely.

3 The Similarities of State Socialist Transition?

Yet there still may be good theoretical reasons to expect that the transitions from state socialism might still occur in broadly similar ways, albeit at different moments in time (After all, we are comparing transitions, not just countries). First, in all of them, no opposition party could ring down state socialism and engineer the transition to a new system. Leninist Parties have been central to twentieth century revolutions, both in bringing down *anciens régimes* and constructing their replacements (Likewise, Schmitter reminds us how crucial political parties have been to construction of democracy on the ruins of authoritarianism.[2]) But there never has been, and by their very nature as political monopolies, never will be any party to usher them off the stage of history. Second and closely related, state socialist transitions have not and will never benefit from leadership or even guidance from robust organizations and cultures of civil society. Both these *lacunæ*

[2] "We observed that political parties rarely contributed much to the demise of autocratic regimes, but as soon as a transition had become credible and, especially, after elections of uncertain outcome had been convoked, they immediately moved in and displaced the various associations, movements and heroic individuals that had contributed so much more. By not stating it explicitly, we missed the opportunity to give early transitology one of its most stirring slogans: 'Get the Parties Right!'" Schmitter, "Reflections", 74.

would tend to produce transitions more spontaneous, unexpected and disorganized than elsewhere.

Third, the political processes that laid state socialism low in Europe and Russia were, like the transitions to democracy analyzed by transitologists (as Schmitter also notes[3]), largely endogenous. And it seems reasonable to expect that if the survivors eventually do follow suit, in a post Cold War world that is increasingly interdependent and in which the US and its allies are increasingly skittish about foreign adventures, their transitions will similarly result from internal processes rather than external political or military force.

Fourth, state socialism is likely to leave somewhat distinctive legacies. Of particular importance may be its bureaucracy, which is highly centralized, politicized, unregulated, powerful, and resistant to change. Of course during transition the bureaucracy remains a functional necessity: the rubbish must be collected, roads built, taxes collected, budgets administered, and so much more. Decades after the collapse of the USSR, the Russian bureaucracy remains continuous enough with its Soviet past to permit comparison with its current Chinese counterpart (Rochlitz et al. 2016). And while culture is a much more problematic arena for comparative political science, the absence of civil society under decades of Leninist polities that actively rejected the very notion of the autonomy of society from the state seems to have produced lasting effects on the way post-state socialist citizens think about politics, especially in terms of rights and participation.

Fifth, state socialist transitions, while broadly endogenous in their etiology, are, from their first moments, also particularly prone to the lure and power of the West. As mentioned above, a watershed in Central Europe was the collapse of the border between Hungary and Austria. Schmitter has noted the steadily growing role of international actors in the transitions to democracy.[4] The effects on the state socialist transitions have been even greater, for several reasons. To begin with, at least in the first wave of 1989–1991, the Cold War impelled high interest from the US and its allies. In addition is their historicity, coming as they did after the transitions to democracy had gotten well underway, by which time "the Western democracies [had] rapidly equipped themselves with new government agencies and/or re-directed existing 'foreign aid' agencies for the business of 'democracy promotion."[5] Finally, there is the exponentially growing power of the globalized capitalist economy, which has reached so profoundly into the very mode of production (not to mention citizens' consumption habits and desires) across the former and present state socialist countries, albeit in quite different ways: shock therapy after the collapse of the USSR and the Central European state socialist régimes, the establishment of robust capitalist enterprises and relations in China and Vietnam, a capitalist nose under the North Korean tent in Kæsong, and, more dialectically, the siren of economic liberalization alongside the ongoing US blockade in Cuba.

[3] Schmitter, "Reflections", 75.

[4] Schmitter, "Reflections", 77, 80.

[5] Schmitter, "Reflections", 80.

4 The Dissimilarities of State Socialist Transition?

This last point exemplifies a core the problem facing the comparative study of state socialist transitions: while there are good reasons in theory to expect that they will, in practice, evince processes and outcomes with something in common and distinct from transitions from authoritarianism to democracy, the task must also be to explain pretty glaring differences among them. As noted above, in terms of *process*, state socialism in Central Europe and the USSR collapsed more than a quarter of a century ago, while it is still robust in China, Southeast Asia and Cuba even as it is deeply transformed in the former two and beginning an uncertain opening in the latter. Moreover, just as Schmitter reminds us about the transitions to democracy,[6] the processes remain open-ended: Putin will not last forever, and Xi Jinping has made the potential collapse of the People's Republic of China an urgent public question. Less dramatically, China continues to struggle with economic forces for which greater liberalization is, at least according to their many political advocates, a functional necessity, a position that is combatted by entrenched political opponents and path-dependent institutional obstacles.

Process aside, the *outcomes* of state socialist transitions have also varied widely. Politically, we already see a wide range, including a somewhat opened market Leninism in China, Cuba and Southeast Asia, hybrids such as electoral authoritarianism where parties are weak and "leaderism"[7] prevails (Russia and much of Central Asia come immediately to mind), competitive electoral systems (known analytically as "democracies" though many, perhaps most, do not deserve the name in any normative sense) in Central and Eastern Europe, and obdurate, dynastic hyper-Stalinism in North Korea. Economically, in Central Europe, some former state socialist countries continue their problematic courtship with capitalism and the EU. Russia remains mired in a polity much more opposed to the West and an economy increasingly limited to primary resource extraction and, ironically, export. The Eastern European republics of the former USSR are literally caught in the middle—the conflict has already ripped Ukraine asunder. In a contrast they must find humiliating, China has of course become a regional hegemon and rising world power. Yet it has paid a hefty price in terms of stunning levels of inequality, environmental damage, corruption, labor exploitation, and even political protest that put it in a class of its own. Meanwhile, Vietnam has broadly emulated the Chinese structural reforms, albeit at a slower pace and with somewhat fewer of the attendant crises. Kampuchea and Laos struggle to catch up while also trying to cope against all odds with the Chinese juggernaut. And then there's stalwart North Korea. Across the planet, Cuba stands at its own distinctive crossroads.

[6] "I suspect that democracy consecrated will become democracy contested—that the triumph of democracy in the last decades of the 20th century will lead to a renewed criticism of democracy well into the 21st century." Schmitter, *"Reflections"*.

[7] See page 269–284.

5 The Uses of a Comparative Politics of State Socialist Transition

So there is much for comparativists to explain about state socialist transitions. Some work has already begun. We already have minor growth industries in comparisons between Russia and China and also among the Central and Eastern European states. For just a few examples of the former, see Anderson (2010); Chen and Sil (2006); Nolan (1995); Pei (1994); Remington (2015). On the latter, see, for just two examples, Crowley and Ost (2001); Bunce et al. 2010). For much fuller bibliographies, see Kubicek (2013) and Tucker (2012) both in *Oxford Bibliographies Online* (http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/). But the potentialities for a wide range of work that transcends comparisons grounded in regions or among countries that appear highly disparate remain large and wide open. They will be of interest not just to political scientists but also to political end economic leaders and ordinary citizens within and outside the former and present state socialist countries. One can only hope, for example, that, at a time when Cuba resembles early 1980s China in some fundamental ways, the Cuban leadership is taking very seriously the downsides of the Chinese transition as well as its glittering achievements. Likewise, we can only wish Xi Jinping well as he tries to steer China away from a Russian fate. As Philippe Schmitter also reminds us in these pages, our work as comparative political scientists necessarily involves urgent practical consequences, and we must rise to the challenge.[8]

6 Structure, Agency, Contingency

To evaluate the scope for any such political agency, it must, of course be placed firmly in the context of structure and contingency—its analytical siblings. Starting with Schmitter and O'Donnell, much of the literature on transitions from authoritarianism to democracy has deëmphasized the explanatory value of structural factors in favor of what, as Schmitter reminds us, Machiavelli called *fortuna* (which is akin to the modern concept of contingency) and *virtú* (the wise agency of political leadership).[9] But the transition from state socialism—a potent concatenation of big structures—may prove different.

7 Structure

Comparativists need to consider the roles of a wide variety of structures in shaping the processes and outcomes of state socialist transition, including political sociology, political economy, globalization, and political institutions.

[8] Schmitter, "The Future of Comparative Politics."

[9] Schmitter, "Reflections", 72. I will argue below that the analysis of state socialist transitions also needs to take agency by the populace into account.

7.1 Political Sociology

Under the broad rubric of political sociology, *class* had pride of place in the original transitions *to* state socialism. But once state socialism flattened class structures and abolished genuine class organizations, class seemed to disappear as an overt force in the politics of building, maintaining, and eventually undermining state socialism. In Central and Eastern Europe, none of the "colored revolutions" were red. In the initial transition in Russia, steel workers were relatively passive while their fellow proletarians in the coal mines were much more active (Crowley 1997). Yet once the transitions to capitalist economic forms began, class formation, structure and conflict have played more complex roles. China's transition to them was significantly eased by the defeat of radical working class politics during the Cultural Revolution (Blecher Forthcoming). Yet today, where labor protest is common, even though Chinese workers rarely mention or organize on a broad class basis, the leadership remains very concerned about their potentially destabilizing effect. In Russia, the régime is still skittish about working class resistance in the rustbelts, and class is reëmerging in popular and scholarly discourse (Crowley 2015a, b).

By contrast, *nation*,[10] and particularly its articulation with the core institutions of the state, had a huge effect in bringing down the Soviet Union. Ronald Suny has argued persuasively that the tendency, going back to Lenin, to coöpt members of minority nationalities into the leading posts in the various republics created a centrifugal time-bomb that exploded as the center began to weaken after 1989 (Suny 1993). It certainly also propelled the Central European transitions that preceded but also overdetermined the collapse of the USSR. In different different ways, nationalism has had a major impact in shoring up the broadly un-"reformed" North Korea. In Cuba and Vietnam it continues to sustain both the leadership and its popular legitimacy. Indeed, one oft-cited theory about the survival of state socialism in Asia and Cuba is that their revolutions were, in large measure, wars of national liberation.

Political sociology denotes not just structures but also, of course, the wider *relationship of state and society*. Of the many big questions that political science slots under this rubric—accountability, transparency, communication and intermediation, resistance, legitimation and hegemony (i.e., the mix of coercion and consent)—the first two can probably be set aside, since the state socialist countries past and present have been and continue to be pretty uniformly lacking in them. But transitologists of state socialism will certainly want to attend to the rest. Some scholars of China worry that the absence of clear channels of communication from society to the state are either bottling up dissatisfaction or sending it straight into the streets, both of which risk dangerous instability (for just one recent example, see Friedman 2014). The Chinese research on the collapse of the USSR ordered by Xi Jinping concluded that a major problem was that the state had lost touch with society. As for legitimation, it is arguable whether the USSR and the Central

[10] In many of the countries in question nation is more than a little tinged with *race* and *religion*, which qualitatively transform it and often heighten its effect.

European state socialisms gave significant thought or creative energy to the problem. By contrast, today's People's Republic of China, fully cognizant of their failures, thinks and works hard to justify its right to rule on the basis of the prosperity and social possibilities it has unleashed as well as the way it has combined both traditional and revolutionary values—the current branding is the "Chinese dream"—as well as its nationalist claims. It has also developed an historically well elaborated hegemonic approach that combines those efforts to gain consent on the one hand with heavy doses of coercion on the other.

7.2 Political Economy

The performance, structure and distributional profile of the economy are obvious candidates for explanatory power in state socialist transition. There can be no question that the legs and back of the Soviet camel were severely weakened by declining economic performance over at least the 1970s and 1980s, making it less and less able to support the straws that kept landing. Yet it is hard to press the analytical power of economic growth and distribution too far, since state socialism in the much more prosperous GDR and even Poland, to mention just two, actually collapsed before the USSR. That said, there can also be no question that the People's Republic of China has managed to avoid a similar fate, despite much wider and more serious social protest, in some significant degree because of the strength of its growth even in the 1980s, not to mention after the 1992 takeoff. And of course at least since Tocqueville political science has known that what really matters is not so much the absolute as the relative level of economic performance and popular well-being. So one might argue that the appropriate *explanans* would be Russia's performance vis-à-vis Poland's or the GDR's, or the latter two's vis-à-vis Western Europe's, or China's vis-à-vis its Maoist past, and so on.

Economic structure—in Marxian terms, the relations of production—may matter more. State socialism fused political and economic power in a way that made it vulnerable to popular unhappiness (Bunce 1999). By contrast, capitalist exploitation takes place in a hidden abode, and there is very good evidence from much research on a wide range of countries—including China (Blecher 2002)—that the hegemony of capitalism is robust even among the working classes. Moreover, as Poulantzas emphasized (Poulantzas 1975), the formal separation of economic and political power also goes far to insulate the state from dissatisfaction from a various social classes and groups and even from within the leadership itself. Such forces help shore up the state socialist survivors that have undertaken significant structural economic reform. One laid-off worker echoed many others when she told me: "What can the state possibly do about unemployment?"[11]

On the other hand, economic distribution may matter less. Certainly the broadly flat economic hierarchies—or at least the absence of gross inequalities of neo-liberal capitalism—of classical state socialism did not prevent the collapses in the USSR and Central Europe. Yet there is also no evidence that even China's yawning

[11] Interview, Tianjin, 1997.

economic gaps figure in any way in the panoply of protest that China has been experiencing (Whyte 2010).

7.3 Globalization

Globalization—which, writing in these pages, Philippe Schmitter has called "**the** independent variable—the 'first mover'—of contemporary comparative politics"[12]—surely plays a huge role in any analysis of state socialist transition. The USSR and the Central European state socialist countries had been weakened from the outset by Western economic blockades. The allied powers occupying West Germany went to extraordinary lengths to undermine the GDR economy, which directly provoked its desperate erection of the Berlin Wall. The gap between China and better-off countries played a major role in Deng Xiaoping's promotion of structural reform starting in the late 1970s, when he was known to ask how China could be so far behind Taiwan. Overseas Chinese capital—from Taiwan, Southeast Asia and beyond—played a major role in jump-starting his effort, after which China was often criticized by Western economists as treating the massive influx of Western investment as a normal, expected revenue stream. And of course it produced an actual and pretty gargantuan revenue stream of export earnings. In short, if globalization helped bring down Russian and Central and Eastern European state socialism, it helped sustain it in China (and Vietnam as well). The reasons for this profoundly significant difference have a great deal to do with political agency rather than with structural factors, to be addressed below.

7.4 Institutions

Finally, political institutions surely matter enormously in shaping state socialist transitions. Their analysis must begin with the Party. In China, its tight *discipline* and iron *commitment* to staying in power, which could overcome even a dangerous wobble during the profound crisis of 1989, contrasts sharply with the appearance of division and diffidence evinced by its Soviet and Central European comrades.

This itself may be attributed to another institutional configuration: *the relationship between the Party and the bureaucracy*. In the USSR and Central Europe, the balance seems to have tipped toward the bureaucracy more than in China, where the Party is still powerful enough to prosecute a surprisingly thoroughgoing campaign against corruption, the effectiveness of which would have been unthinkable in the Soviet and Central European parties even if they had decided to try it.

Institutional de/centralization too has a major effect. As mentioned above, the Soviet practice of leaving significant personnel and other powers in the hands of the élites of the minority nationalities in the republics set the disintegration of the USSR in motion. In China, the center's profound difficulty in controlling lower levels of government constitutes a major institutional problem that has produced all manner of dysfunctions, from the draconian implementation of the one-child policy to environmental disasters to

[12] Schmitter, "The Future of Comparative Politics". Emphasis in the original.

widespread corruption and much more, all of which are piling straw onto the camel. So far the régime has been shored up by the ongoing belief of many Chinese that the center can still make good on the depredations visited on them by their localities. But that is not a sustainable approach to governance.

The position, power and inclinations of the coercive apparatus—vis-à-vis not just society but also the political élite itself—also matter a great deal to transitions everywhere, of course. Deng Xiaoping showed that he understood this all too well when he decided, after his last political rehabilitation, to abjure from the top offices except Chief of the General Staff of the People's Liberation Army. In the late stages of China's 1989 crisis, perhaps the most alarming moments came when splits within the armed forces began to be mooted. Yet in the end Mao's dictum that "the Party commands the gun, and the gun must never be allowed to command the Party" (Mao 1977) held, even though the Party's command to bring the curtain down on months of demonstrations brought the Army into deep disrepute. By contrast, a key moment in the collapse of the USSR came when Boris Yeltsin signaled his successful defeat of the August 1991 coup by speaking from atop a tank. In North Korea, Kim Jong-un continues his father's practice of never being seen in public without military top brass in tow, transcribing his every word onto little note pads.

Finally, scholars of state socialist transition will want to consider "leaderism"—an institutional arrangement in which a single top leader can make their will felt over the Party, the coercive apparatuses, and other institutions (Haggard and Kaufman 1995). After Stalin, the USSR was never again a leaderist system. But in China such an arrangement lived on after Mao's death. Deng Xiaoping was no Stalin or Mao; he played a much more complex and shrewd game of trying to steer the ship of state from behind the scenes while nudging it along in his preferred direction. For example, in the 1980s he allowed significant debates over the incipient structural economic reforms to play out, producing a stop–go pattern of policy change (Blecher 2010). Amidst the mælstrom of 1989 crisis, he also remained behind the scenes, working toward a resolution of the growing battle between soft-liners backing Party Secretary Zhao Ziyang and hard-liners led by Premier Li Peng in a way that would that would reassert the régime's authority while avoiding bloodshed. When that proved impossible, though, he proved willing to make the final decision, sacrificing the latter for the former. That market Stalinist moment[13] fundamentally cemented China's transition

[13] After almost a decade during which industrial reform had proven too controversial and complex to produce significant results, in 1988 the leadership finally realized that it had to bite the bullet of thoroughgoing price reform. Throughout the spring and summer it began to ready the bureaucracy and citizenry for the difficult transition, which it expected to involve inflation, runs on banks and shops, and bankruptcies. In the run-up to the implementation, Zhao Ziyang is reported to have demanded the authority to declare martial law if necessary. Hearing that, his colleagues backed down, and the policy was suddenly canceled in August. The country saw that the center had lost its nerve, an atmosphere which helped embolden the spring 1989 protestors. But martial law finally was declared, albeit for a very different purpose, in April 1989, though only enforced in the severe crackdown after June 4. That created the conditions under which price reform could begin once Deng had overcome the political opposition of the triumphant political hardliners who were also opponents of economic reform. In short, in a supremely Polanyian dynamic, the thoroughgoing structural reform of Chinese industry that only began in 1992 with Deng's "Southern Tour" required severe draconian political measures to intimidate popular and élite oppositions. Though the metaphor is imperfect, I have termed it "market Stalinism". For a fuller discussion, see Marc Blecher, *China Against the Tides*, 80–81.

from Maoist state socialism to market Leninism, and in so doing changed the world. Had Chinese political institutions not maintained a sufficient element of leaderism behind what the Party termed its "core", the country may well have gone the way of the USSR, and its earth-shaking structural reforms—which got underway seriously only in 1992—may never have happened.

8 Agency

All this brings us squarely into the realm of political agency—the conscious decisions and actions that leaders but also citizens take under various structural constraints and in the face of accidental, unpredictable contingencies. Philippe Schmitter has reflected that the seminal work he and Guillermo O'Donnell did on work on transitions from authoritarianism deëmphasized structural explanation in favor of what Machiavelli termed *virtú* (agency) and *fortuna* (contingency).[14] We take them in turn.

In China, at the level of political élites, the *virtú* around the state socialist transition began when, as the Cultural Revolution and his own life wound down, Mao proved too feeble, discredited, or lacking in sagacity or good alternatives to put in place a robust succession. The wily, experienced, battle-hardened Deng Xiaoping, thanks to the *fortuna* of winding up as the highest-ranking Communist to survive the Cultural Revolution, managed to shunt aside Hua Guofeng, Mao's hapless appointee, in fairly short order, taking the reins in late 1978, just two years after Mao's death. The Cultural Revolution may have been an example of *virtú* on steroids for Mao and his left-leaning supporters, but by 1978 it functioned more as an historical contingency that had created a strong sense, among many in the leadership and perhaps the populace as well, that state socialism was unsustainable and that the régime faced a serious legitimacy crisis. This provided the opportunity for a complex concatenation of political agency to unfold. Deng could finally act upon his long-standing openness to market forces and opposition to overweening state economic control, which was grounded in his and, indeed, the wider Party's (including Mao's) tradition of political and ideological flexibility, and backed by his and his supporters' political willfulness and toughness as battle-hardened revolutionaries. Moreover, all this played out in the wider context of a political vision that had no place at all for political liberalism. That produced the final daisy in the chain of political *virtú* with which Deng is widely credited: the sagacity to sequence the transition by beginning with structural reform of the economy rather than the polity. Thus, the new leadership summarily abolished rural communes, which Deng had never liked (Eisenman 2014), and also began groping for new market socialist forms in industry and commerce.

Compare all this with the agency of political elites in the USSR and Central Europe. In the 1980s *fortuna* had not bequeathed them a sense of urgency or crisis, as it had in China. To be sure, *Solidarno ść* had rung loud alarm bells, but the threat seemed to have been managed, and in any event it could be chalked up to Polish

[14] Schmitter, "Reflections", 72.

particularities (such as its Catholicism). Indeed, history ultimately provided some evidence for such a view: the final stimulants for the transition from state socialism in the region ultimately began in Germany and Hungary, not Poland. Once those got underway, the siren of political liberalization—which had some purchase throughout the region due to their *fortunas* of brief historical experiences with civil society and their geographic proximity to Western Europe—proved irresistible. Moreover, Gorbachev had already been promoting it by pursuing political *glasnost* along with economic *perestroika*, a strategic direction (*virtú*) that is widely thought to have undermined the régime's capacity to survive either. Compare this with the iron commitment of Deng Xiaoping and the Chinese Communist Party to pursue only the former, for which they saw tight political control as essential.

No discussion of the importance of élite *virtú* could be complete without considering North Korea, a case that all figures too rarely in the comparative analysis of state socialist transition.[15] To be sure, the DPRK shares with fellow state socialist survivors China, Vietnam, Kampuchea, Laos and Cuba (in various forms and degrees) nationalist revolutionary foundations and negative experiences with liberal political thought and institutions—in China due to the failed proto-fascism of the Republic, in the others thanks to imperialism, and in all but Cuba splendid isolation from the Western tradition. But none of that can explain North Korea's staunch hyper-Stalinism in the face of economic openings in all the others. Here the absolute commitment of a dynastic leadership that has grounded itself almost exclusively in the military has to do most of the analytical heavy lifting.

Finally, *virtú* is not the sole prerogative of political élites. In China, ordinary citizens weary of the intense politicization of the Maoist era broadly welcomed the offer tendered by Deng Xiaoping for structural economic reform without political liberalization. In 1979, many quickly grasped the opportunity to strike out on their own in petty trades, but almost none supported "Democracy Wall" protestors. Even in 1990, farmers in Xinji Municipality scoffed at the 1989 movement that had shaken Beijing just a few hours' ride away. "We don't have any use for that sort of thing. We have a living to make out here!"[16] Yet 1989 was, of course, a gargantuan movement of utterly spontaneous political protest that provided a loud clarion call to the leadership. The students and intellectuals spoke loudly but vaguely of "democracy," which some, led by Zhao Ziyang, sought to interpret—broadly correctly, given what the protesters were actually saying—as a cry mainly for new forms of accountability and transparency. But Deng Xiaoping shrewdly detected another motif or at least possibility: the wish of the rising middle classes of students and professionals for or at least openness to redoubled efforts at economic liberalization (compared, for example, with the workers, who, wary of labor market reform, entered the fray at the very end under banners of Chairman Mao). Deng knew what it took scholars of Chinese politics another two decades to work out: that

[15] In his graduate seminar on aggregate data analysis, Professor Schmitter urged us not just to focus on the cases on the scattergram that fit the general pattern marked out by the regression line, but to pay special attention to the outliers. "Write your dissertation about them!".

[16] Author's interview.

the former radicals of the Cultural Revolution had eventually come to provide the most ardent social and intellectual basis of the country's transition to its capitalistic political economy (for the leading example, see Wu 2014).

By contrast, "the masses" of the USSR and Central Europe played a more passive role under state socialism and in the transitions from it. Of course there were political revolts from below in 1956 Hungary, 1968 Czechoslovakia, and 1980 Poland. But the first two were so brutally suppressed that the Hungarian embers did not rekindle in 1968, and neither they nor the Czechoslovak ones did in 1980. Some intellectuals did continue to dissent, but, as Konrad and Szelenyi stressed, most took the road (which Mao Zedong would have recognized) to "class power" within their technocratic régimes (Konrád and Szelenyi 1979). What Hungarians did most significantly in 1989 was express the will to exit rather than voice—the reference here, of course, is to the classic triad theorized in Hirschmann 1970—by overwhelming the guards at the Austrian border, setting in motion a rapid chain of events in which the régimes folded without much of a political push from below.

9 Contingency

If agency, so central to the transitions not just from authoritarianism but also from state socialism, always unfolds within structural contexts with which it cannot but interact, it also does so in relation to contingent events and factors which it also cannot always control and which, moreover, it itself often sets in train in unpredictable ways.

One has to do with historicity. In China and Vietnam, state socialism faced unavoidable needs to change in the late 1970s—the former because of the Cultural Revolution, the latter because the victorious North now had to absorb its raucous, capitalistic south. (Compare here with North Korea or the GDR, which eventually found themselves more likely to get absorbed by their capitalist compatriots than to absorb them—a contingency that only further inclined them to double down on their state socialisms.) For very different contingent reasons, then, both China and Vietnam were stimulated to embark on thoroughgoing transitions to new forms of political economy and class formations. Moreover, global geopolitics were such that the Western powers—especially the US—were not well positioned to drive those processes in significant ways. Finally, in the 1980s, when both transitions got underway, neo-liberal globalization had developed to the point at which capital was hungry for new outlets for investment outside the failing Fordist cores. And China in particular proved just what the doctor ordered, with its ample latent reserve army of literate, eager and docile rural labor, and a régime willing to release them from the land, provide the infrastructure, and not ask too many questions about the new conditions under which they would be employed as wage workers—all structural legacies of the Maoist past that now presented themselves as contingencies.

By contrast, the transitions in the USSR and Central Europe began in the 1990s, under conditions in which the Western powers were much better positioned intellectually and politically (including geo-politically) to promote shock therapy. It generally proved ruinous, of course, especially in Russia and the former Soviet

republics on its western and southern flanks. There, oligarchical cronyism provided only obstacles, not opportunities, for neo-liberal capital. Moreover, what capital was seeking—an alternative fount of cheap, willing labor and developable infrastructure—were also not on offer. Central and Eastern Europe presented a more complex, variegated canvas. German manufacturers in particular could quickly relocate their sophisticated operations to its own East or to Hungary, where highly skilled workers cost a lot less and the logistical requirements were available. More remote, poorer countries such as Rumania, Bulgaria and Albania offered no such advantages, and as a result suffered transitions that were much less economically and socially dynamic.

The differing historicities of transition in China on the one hand and Russia and Central and Eastern Europe on the other also produced very different short-term dynamics of crisis. By 1989, China had already developed a significant commitment to and some experience with a thoroughgoing transition to market Leninism, although it had not yet found the way to deliver fully on its promise. This produced a very specific kind of crisis and way of resolving it among both the leadership and the populace, neither of which was particularly inclined to throw out the existing political order. By contrast, at that very same time, the *denouement* of state socialism in the USSR and Central and Eastern Europe played out on a much blanker or at least uneven slate in which the key societal and élite players were much more inclined or at least susceptible to radical, ruptural transition.

A final contingency has to do with initial sources of investment capital. As mentioned above, China was blessed with a network of overseas nationals ready and willing to return to their ancestral home now that it presented such favorable opportunities. In the early days of its own transition, Cuba may turn out to benefit in similar ways, especially now that enough time has passed for the rise of a successor generation of successful exiles who are ready to set aside the revolutionary past in favor of the joys of returning home and making good money doing it. Russia and Central and Eastern Europe were not so lucky. Indeed, before too long capital began to cross borders in the opposite direction, as oligarchs looked for safe havens abroad, which of course only undermined development except among the real estate, yacht and sports team markets of the UK and New York.

10 Conclusion

Three observations emerge from these initial, rough ruminations on a comparative political science of state socialist transition. First, in theoretical and analytical terms there are reasons to expect that potentially significant gains can be had from broadening the canvas beyond the useful work that has already been done pairing the USSR and China or doing comparisons within Central and Eastern Europe. For example, in a possible vindication of Philippe Schmitter's sage advice to us graduate students, the stolid, decidedly non-transitional North Korean outlier may have a thing or two to teach us about the centrality of *virtú* in explaining why the transitions in Central and Eastern Europe or its own Asian "neighbors" played out as they did. More focus on the transition in Vietnam may help the analysis of China

avoid some of the same pitfalls of "exceptionalism". One can even imagine something useful coming out of a comparison of peripheries in Central and Eastern Europe and in Southeast Asia (i.e., Laos and Kampuchea). And in terms of helping guide real politics—a crucial task which, as Philippe Schmitter also reminds us in these pages,[17] comparative politics has broadly abdicated (or, I would add, shunted off onto narrower policy studies)—a widened field of vision may also have something important to offer to, for example, Cubans, both at the centers of power and in the streets and provinces surrounding them, as they begin to steer their country forward. The same potentiality can eventually develop even in North Korea once the dynasty finally falls.

Second, if the transitology of authoritarianism began, as Schmitter argues, with Machiavelli and his Prince trying to find *virtú* amidst all the *fortuna* and in the context of vanished structures, then the comparative study of state socialist transition may turn out to find its theoretical roots in his latter-day compatriot and student Antonio Gramsci, who wrote *The Modern Prince* and who added a rich panoply of historical structures—classes, parties, states, civil society, and culture—into the mix. While the transitology of authoritarianism to democracy tended to downplay the importance of structural factors in favor of agency and contingency, there are reasons to expect them to hold more potential in the comparative politics of state socialist transition. If this proves out once the thoroughgoing scholarship is done, the reason for the difference may turn out to lie in the more radical—in the sense of root-seeking—nature of the latter. For these transitions amount to nothing less than the structural transformation of the economy, society and polity. This seems more obvious in the transitions in the former USSR and Central and Eastern Europe, where the old political régimes actually fell. But it is equally the case in China and Vietnam, which have undergone social and economic revolutions without political revolutions, a process I have dubbed "structural reform".[18] In either case, the transitions from state socialism have produced even more profound economic and social transformation than those from authoritarianism to democracy. Despite all their many differences, they have all created new bourgeoisies that have driven their economies, societies and cultures in radical new directions. They have also proletarianized their formerly uncommodified working classes. These new capitalist and working classes have played complex and variegated new political roles.

Third, these new economic, social and political structures and relationships are not just richly differentiated, but also highly fluid and unstable. State socialist transitions have either taken down the "dikes and dams" (Machiavelli 2010) that, for Machiavelli, made political life normal and the prince's job manageable and likely to succeed, or they have put them under enormous strain. So we return after all to Schmitter's insight with which we began. Agency and contingency will continue to matter a great deal to the course of what are, after all, still decidedly open-ended transitions. Whether their leaders can "enter upon a new way, as yet untrodden by anyone else" (Machiavelli 2003) to master the structural forces they have unleashed and the inevitable contingencies is their great challenge. It keeps

[17] Schmitter, "The Future of Comparative Politics".

[18] Blecher, *China Against the Tides*, 63.

both Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping awake at night. And a comparative politics of state socialist transition is needed both to understand what is unfolding and perhaps even to help master it.

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