

Democracies in Transition

Political Change in Democratic Regimes

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*To Pietro,
Rare and precious person*

Introduction

Students of political change focus mainly on the transitions from non-democratic regimes to democratic ones, and vice versa. Much less attention is devoted to the transitions *within* the same type of regime, in particular the political change of democratic regimes. When, why and how do democratic regimes change? Pietro Grilli di Cortona dealt with this topic in an article written in the turmoil of the Italian transition from the First to the so-called Second Republic (Grilli di Cortona 1995) and in a book published ten years later (Grilli di Cortona 2017) when the Italian endless transition was still open.

In these two pieces Pietro Grilli takes into consideration various aspects of this type of transitions. From a theoretical point of view, he distinguishes between the changes of *genus*, when the type (democratic, authoritarian, totalitarian) of regime is involved (inter-regime transitions), and the changes of species when the regime remains the same but some of its important traits are transformed (intra-regime transitions). He also underlines that this second type of changes are much rarer in democratic regimes than in non-democratic ones. And, as we shall see below, this is due to a specific characteristic of democracies. From a historical point of view, Grilli analyses the Italian case and its various institutional reforms from the Legge Acerbo (1923) up to the recent electoral and constitutional ones. Thirdly, in a comparative perspective Grilli contrasts the Italian transition (from 1993 up to nowadays) with the French (1958-1962) and the Belgian (1962-1993) ones. In the light of this comparison he proposes in the last chapter of his book an interpretative model of change within democratic regimes.

The two contributions of Pietro Grilli on democratic transitions are relatively short, less than two hundred pages on the whole. However, they are very dense. Full of hints of reflection, they open a relatively unexplored field of study. In particular, the analysis of Pietro Grilli goes far beyond the Italian context and it has wider implications. In what follows I focus on: i) the way in which political change within democracies can be conceptualized; ii) the possible extension of the concepts usually used in the study of inter-regime transitions to the analysis of intra-regime changes (i.e. transitions within democracies); iii) the need for a general theory of political and institutional change.

Democratic change as a continuum

Grilli distinguishes among three types of political change of democracies.¹ First, there may be a democratic breakdown and an involution toward a non-democratic regime, followed by a new process of democratization (Italy). This is a widely studied type of transition. Secondly, democratic regimes may change gradually in an incremental way, adapting to different domestic and the international challenges (Great Britain, United States, Scandinavian countries). This is the most frequent type of change: democratic regimes are much more flexible than non-democratic ones. In these cases, the relative stability of constitutional and electoral models is often compensated by barely visible and scarcely disruptive administrative reforms.² The third type of transition is characterized (a) by the *continuity* of the basic characteristics of a democracy in terms of civil and political rights but also (b) by *discontinuities* in the formal architecture of the regime, e.g. changes in the electoral system or in executive-legislative relations like in the case of France. The democratic *genus* remains unchanged, while the *species* of democracy may shift, for example, from a consociative to a competitive form of democracy, from a parliamentary to a presidential model of constitution, from a proportional to a majority electoral system or from a unitary to a federal form of state. This is just the type of change Pietro Grilli is more interested in for two reasons. Firstly, because his research question is whether the Italian transition is of the second or of the third type. Secondly, because the logics of these democratic changes are relatively obscure and understudied.

The typology proposed by Pietro Grilli is theoretically rigorous. It sharply distinguishes between the elements of continuity and those of discontinuity at the different levels of the political system. It also is historically well founded, since it is rooted in a comparative analysis of relevant case studies. But it needs a substantial update in the light of the recent evolution of the Italian case that highlights at least three new elements. First of all, transition within democratic regimes is actually an open-ended process and it may become an infinite transition. Secondly, transition can assume an oscillatory character: waves of reformism may alternate to phases of stasis or even to “return to the past” policies, as in the electoral system shifting from proportional to majority systems and then back to proportionality. And finally, recent events suggest that the distinction between the second and the third model of change is not so sharp as it could seem. What prevails in the Italian case is a form of *hybridization* of the original model of consociative democracy with elements of competitive one.³ In this form of change the distinction between evolutionary adaptation and the change of species with the democratic genus tends to blur.


Following these observations, a different form of treatment of the concept of political transitions within democratic regimes can be proposed. In particular, a classification can be replaced by a continuum (see Figure 1). In this continuum, adaptation, hybridization and change of the form of democracy are three types of institutional policies among which policy makers may shift depending on the cohesion of the dominant coalition and its capacity of consensus building upon specific reform projects.

¹ A comparison of the main institutional changes in democratic regimes from 1946 to 2000 may be found in Lanzalaco (2005, 32-44).

² Baldi (2000), for example, shows how democratic regimes may substantially change even if their constitution remains unchanged.

³ On this point, see Morlino (2014).

Figure 1. Political change within democracies as a continuum

stasis	evolutionary adaptation of the form of democracy	hybridization between models of democracy	change of model of democracy	democratic breakdown
<p>Increasing change</p> 				
	mainly administrative reforms	constitutional and electoral reforms		abolition of civil and political rights

Conceptual analogies

The second point I would like to focus on is the use that Pietro Grilli makes of some concepts excerpt from the theory of regime transitions. On the one side, both in his article and in his book Grilli underlines the difference existing between transitions *between* regimes (change of *genus*) and transitions *within* regimes (change of *species*). On the other side, however, he brought about important analogies between the two types of transitions in so far he utilizes many concepts usually suited for the study of the first type of transitions, for interpreting also the second ones. Is this a form of conceptual stretching, as Sartori called it, or does it open new perspectives of analysis?

The first conceptual analogy concerns the concept of *consolidation*, that as we know is well rooted in Linz, Stepan and Morlino's studies of democratic transitions. In his interpretative model of transitions within democracies Grilli affirms that the timing of the process of consolidation of *a new model of democracy* is crucial for its stabilization. The quicker the process of consolidation, the more robust its stability. But, as we know from the study of democratic transitions, the success of the process of consolidation depends on the legitimacy of the new democratic regime. So, the question is: on what does it depend the legitimacy of a new form of democracy? And why did the old model lose its one? And, last but not least, what is the weight of the original model of democracy in determining the legitimacy of a new and different form of democracy? Whatever the answers given to these questions, my point is that the transplantedation of the concept of regime consolidation from the study of inter-regime transitions to the analysis of intra-regime democratic transitions is very fruitfully, even if not enough explored.

The second conceptual analogy concerns the concept of *gatekeepers*. One of the cornerstones of the theory of democratic transition and consolidation is that political parties are the gatekeepers of democracy. Only when democracy is the only game in town, political parties are the main players. The proposal Pietro Grilli advances, with his usual understatement, is to consider political parties not only as the gatekeepers of democracy *tout court*, but also of a *specific* form of democracy. Following this line of reasoning, Grilli distinguishes the traditional parties who were linked to the Italian transition First Republic from the new parties who tried to dismantle it. So, parties and party system assume a pivotal role in leading the process of transition within regimes, similarly to the role they play in transitions among regimes.

These are only two examples of the way in which Pietro Grilli has extended the use of concepts from one field of inquiry (inter-regime changes) to another one (intra-regime changes). The creation of a new semantic field proposed by Pietro Grilli paves the way for the search of a general theory of political and institutional change.

Incubation, adaptive evolution, punctuated equilibrium

As I already wrote at the beginning of this contribution, Pietro Grilli proposes in his book an interpretative model of transition within democratic regimes. This framework resembles what in organization theory is called incubation theory. The causal factors – whatever they be – remain at the latent level even for a long period of time. The political system seems to be operating with a satisfactory performance, even if elements of the crisis are already present. At a certain moment, there is a trigger, an external factor, often unforeseeable – such as an economic crisis, a challenge on the international arena, the initiative of the judiciary system – and then the crisis explodes and change seems to be necessary. But the external challenge is only the apparent cause of the crisis, it affects an already defective situation.

This is not the only model to interpret institutional change. Streeck and Thelen (2003) have proposed a well-known typology of evolutionary change and pointed that institutions change even if they seemingly do not change. In other words, the functions of political institutions may be subject to deep transformations, even if they may seem extremely stable at the formal level. This model of change recalls what Pietro Grilli termed adaptive change.

Finally, there is a model of change proposed some years ago by Sergio Fabbrini (2000) in a book dealing with the same topic of Grilli's contributions, namely political change within democratic regimes, in particular Italy and France. In his book Fabbrini utilizes the punctuated equilibrium theory, a model originally proposed in contrast to the traditional Darwinian approach of evolutionary change. In this model, gradualism and incrementalism are excluded: change entails a sort of “quantum leap” brought about by a new power balance between the political coalitions supporting or opposing institutional reforms.

Incubation, evolutionary adaptation, punctuated equilibrium. Three different ways of explaining political and institutional change within democratic regimes. Which of them is valid? This question obviously is still open both on the theoretical and on the empirical level. The merits of Pietro Grilli have been two. He has devoted a piece of his intellectual work to this relatively understudied topic. Secondly, he has shed light on what happens before (incubation of the crisis) and after the crisis (consolidation of a new model of democracy) and emphasized that these phases are much more important than the crisis itself. These phases decisively influence the more or less incisive impact the crisis may, or may not have, on the history of democratic regimes.

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