

# **Introduction: Democratization in the Early Twenty-First Century**

AUREL CROISSANT and WOLFGANG MERKEL

Hardly any other subject in the last quarter of the twentieth century has influenced the research agenda of political science more than the transformation of authoritarian and ‘totalitarian’ political regimes into pluralist democracies. However, to the same extent that the third wave of democratization unfolded, beginning in 1974, which initially encompassed southern Europe and Latin America and then eventually included eastern Europe, Asia and Africa as well, the main focus of democratization studies shifted accordingly. While the ‘transitologists’ of the 1970s and 1980s investigated the conditions and modes of transition from dictatorship to democracy, the ‘consolidologists’ of the 1990s concentrated on inquiring into causes, conditions and models of the consolidation of young democracies. Most recently, the questions of whether democracy is working, how ‘good’ or ‘bad’ a democracy is, and of the conceptual issue of diminished sub-types of democracy (illiberal democracies, defective democracies and so on) have begun to become the new predominant trend in democracy theory and democratization studies.

One must admit that a glance back at three decades of the ‘third wave’ indicates that political alternatives to democracy have since lost much of their appeal – not only from an ideological point of view; their empirical relevance seems much diminished. The data offered by quantitative measurement of democracy leave no room for doubt about this. The political map of the world is, more than ever, marked by the presence of democracy.<sup>1</sup> However, some, if not many, new democracies (and some old ones) have very little to offer outside of elections, which liberal theorists of democracy would associate with the notion of a ‘liberal democracy’, a ‘good democracy’, or a ‘quality democracy’. As Thomas Carothers recently stated:

---

Aurel Croissant is Assistant Professor at the National Security Affairs Department, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA, USA. Wolfgang Merkel is at the Social Science Research Center Berlin (WZB), and Professor of Political Science at the Humboldt University, Berlin, Germany.

Of the nearly 100 countries considered as ‘transitional’ in recent years, only a relatively small number – probably fewer than 20 – are clearly en route to becoming successful, well-functioning democracies or at least have made some democratic progress and still enjoy a positive dynamic of democratization . . . By far the majority of third-wave countries has not achieved a relatively well-functioning democracy or do not seem to be deepening or advancing whatever democratic progress they have made. In a small number of countries, initial political openings have clearly failed and authoritarian regimes have resolidified.<sup>2</sup>

That may be an excessively pessimistic perception. As some contributions to this collection will show, there are indeed several ‘success stories’ of democratic transformation in the third wave. However, the empirical evidence increasingly suggests that to a significant extent the third wave of democratization could become less of a triumph of political liberalism and liberal democracy than a success story for ‘hybrid’ or ‘ambiguous regimes’, ‘delegative’, ‘defective’, ‘semi-’, or ‘illiberal’ democracies, ‘competitive authoritarianism’ and ‘electoral authoritarianism’.<sup>3</sup> These political systems include the ‘Potemkin democracies’,<sup>4</sup> where a democratic façade conceals an authoritarian leadership, and those that are ‘ethnocratic’, plebiscite–populist, often even with sultanistic components, and which therefore may be identified as ‘false democracies’.<sup>5</sup> Even more often, though, they include electoral democracies in which, while free and more or less fair elections take place, many segments of the population merely possess what O’Donnell calls ‘low intensity citizenship’.<sup>6</sup> In this form of political regime, either the effective power to govern of the elected government becomes restricted by an interventionist military, guerrilla fighters, paramilitary forces or simply bands of robbers, or the constitution and the rule of law of the liberal democracy function poorly. Although de jure political rights, civil liberties and the institutions of constitutionalism and the rule of law are found in these political regimes, a whole battery of de facto restrictions, usually informal ones, curb the effective working of the formal rules and significantly distort their value.

For several years, most of the literature on ‘transitology’ and ‘consolidology’ shared (rather implicitly than explicitly) the assumption that new democracies could take essentially one of two possible paths of development – back to the authoritarian past or forward to the future of consolidated liberal democracy. Political reality tells another story, however. The problem of institutionalizing liberal democracy is not settled with the adoption of a new constitution and the implementation of free and fair elections – however defined and measured. More and more regimes in the world combine, to differing

extents, democratic forms and institutions with authoritarian tendencies without consistently following either a democratic or an autocratic logic of rule.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, Guillermo O'Donnell strongly criticized the assumption that regimes, whose democratic, constitutional or rule of law components suffer constant restrictions, are simply to be labelled as not yet consolidated democracies. He said:

Cases that have not 'arrived' at full institutionalization, or that do not seem to be moving in this direction, are seen as stunted, frozen, protractedly unconsolidated and the like . . . That some of these polyarchies have been in a state of 'protracted unconsolidation' for some 20 years suggests that there is something extremely odd about this kind of thinking.<sup>8</sup>

It is becoming ever clearer that political development in third-wave countries may take a third direction: the path into the 'grey zone' between open autocracy and liberal democracy.<sup>9</sup> This puts the question, raised in the early days of transition studies of *where* regime transformation ultimately *leads* back into the focus of both empirically and theoretical-conceptually based democracy research.

The questions that this in turn raises are at the focal point of this collection. The questions are which types of democracy are emerging, what are the criteria of democratic quality, how may one measure the processes of democratic institutionalization and consolidation, and what 'causes' underlie either the institutionalization of liberal democracies or the appearance of defective democracies.

This special issue falls into two main parts. Early on the articles address theoretical, conceptual and methodological questions regarding research into the quality of democracy, consolidation of democracy, and defective democracy. In the later part, analyses at regional and national levels investigate empirical questions concerning structures, conditions of origination and developmental courses of some young democracies. The approaches and concepts put forward in the early part are applied in the empirical analyses, and they are critically scrutinized in the light of the empirical findings and brought into closer connection with questions raised by consolidation research in a broader sense. The common analytical perspective involved does not, in this sense, necessitate a complete consensus in the understanding of the 'grey-zone' regime. On the contrary, the contributions that follow cover the full spectrum of the most recent discussion on this topic; the empirical analyses focus upon the regions of eastern Europe and east Asia. Four interrelated thematic complexes form a conceptual bracket defining the individual contributions.

First, what is a 'good democracy' and what is a 'defective democracy'? How may one locate 'grey-zone' regimes according to a more general classification of political regimes? How can one conceptualize such

key concepts of democratization research as political liberalization and democratic consolidation and then utilize them in cross-national comparison? How is one to explain the variation among the developmental paths followed by different democratic regimes?

Second, do these regimes exhibit common structural, functional and inherent characteristics? If yes, are the claims empirically provable, and what meaning do they have for the functioning of a political regime?

Third, what are the causes of the genesis of defective democracies and how can we explain their coming into being, their persistence and their transformation?

Fourth, which developmental paths lead to 'grey-zone' regimes? Can they stabilize? Do they rather tend towards open autocracy, or is it possible for them to shed their 'defects', that is to say their 'deviations' from the reference model of liberal or 'embedded democracy'? If so, under what presuppositions and in which contexts?

The study by Leonardo Morlino functions as a prelude to the other contributions, offering a primarily conceptual focus bolstered by democratic theory. Morlino places two question complexes in the centre of his discussion: What is a 'good democracy', and how can models of 'good democracy' and 'low-quality democracy' be distinguished? In order to answer these questions, the article establishes a clear notion of democratic quality and, in so doing, distinguishes three different meanings of democracy (respectively with reference to procedures, contents and results), as well as five dimensions of good democratic rule: rule of law, accountability, responsiveness, freedom and equality. The 'good' or 'quality' democracies have as their counterparts the idea of 'low-quality' and 'defective' democracies, which is presented in Wolfgang Merkel's contribution.

Merkel also pursues two questions. First, there is the general issue of an adequate conceptual definition of democracy. In order to encompass defective democracies and to distinguish them from full-fledged liberal democracies, he suggests the concept of *embedded democracy*. Embedded democracy functions as the analytical root concept,<sup>10</sup> on the basis of which he then develops the notion of defective democracy as a diminished sub-type of (liberal) democracy. Since they do fulfil a democracy's minimal defining characteristic (open access to rulership and legitimization of rulership through the sovereignty of the people), defective democracies are still classified per se as (electoral) democracies. However, defective democracies exhibit severe shortcomings in respect of the rule of law, horizontal accountability or effective powers to govern, or what may be called partial regimes (the idea is elaborated in the article that follows, on 'Embedded and Defective Democracies'). Thus the electoral regime lacks the necessary complementary support from these other partial regimes that in total

make up liberal 'embedded democracies'. In connection with these conceptual reflections, Merkel also discusses the external embeddedness of democracy in different contexts (socio-economic factors, civil society, and international integration).

Second, Merkel asks what accounts for defective democracy. He argues that probably not simply one outstanding factor can be singled out as the primary cause. Rather, different combinations of causes lend themselves to special opportunities for certain actors to usurp power, suspend constitutional norms, or circumvent the checks limiting power.

More so than both Morlino and Merkel, the article by Carsten Q. Schneider and Philippe C. Schmitter combines methodological and conceptual questions with empirical findings. Like Merkel, they present an argument for the conceptualization of democracy not as 'a single regime', but as a composite of 'partial regimes' instead. However, they do not aim to provide just another contribution to the discussion on how to conceptualize democracy and types of democracy. Instead their purpose is to conceptualize core concepts of transitology and consolidology, such as liberalization and democratic consolidation, in order to develop indicators for measuring the processes of liberalization of autocracy, mode of transition and consolidation of democracy. Most important, the consolidation of democracy is defined not as an outcome or fixed status of a political system, but as the process or, better, the *processes* that make mutual trust and reassurance among the relevant actors more likely.

In regard to the successes or failures of political liberalization and democratic consolidation of some 30 neo-democracies or liberalizing autocracies from 1974 to 2000, the authors' major empirical finding is probably the remarkable and often unexpected success of central and eastern European countries in both liberalization and consolidation. Most countries in the region have achieved the same or an even higher level of consolidation as the young democracies in southern Europe and Latin America, but they did so in a much shorter time. This challenges the 'dilemma of simultaneity' thesis<sup>11</sup> which dominated literature on these post-communist countries in the 1990s. The pessimists had argued that the mutually obstructing effects of the economic and political transformations and the legacy of several decades of communist rule left the eastern European countries with virtually none of the supposed cultural preconditions for democracy. They predicted that the consolidation of democracy would be much more difficult in eastern Europe. They are now shown to have been wrong. The pessimists were right, however, with respect to the communist republics of the former Soviet Union. They have indeed performed worse in terms of both liberalization and consolidation than most countries in southern Europe, Latin America and the rest of post-communist Europe.

In part, the study of Belarus, Russia and Ukraine by Timm Beichelt supports this view. His article inquires into the usefulness of the concept of defective democracy for analyzing the development of post-Soviet political regimes in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. His analysis shows that the partial regimes of political rights, horizontal accountability and the electoral regime in all three countries, albeit to different extents, are characterized by serious deficits and defects. Democracy in each of these countries is endangered at its very heart: the electoral regime. As the analysis of the partial regimes has shown, similarities between the two countries and Belarus have grown in recent years. Therefore Beichelt asks whether we should even talk about diminished versions of the root concept of electoral democracy so long as the term autocracy might be more appropriate.

In his qualitative comparative analysis, Beichelt stresses the importance of the regimes' past legacies, socio-economic factors, socio-cultural factors, and, albeit to a lesser degree, the international context. Together these seem to account for how defective democracy came about in Russia and Ukraine and why transition in Belarus represents a regression to an open authoritarian regime.

Contrary to these findings, Karen Henderson stresses in her analysis of the political development in the Slovak Republic the highly supportive international factors, in particular the European Union (EU), for the implementation of liberal democracy and democratic consolidation in this country. Using the 'problematic case' of Slovak democracy as a counterpoint of defective democracy or neo-authoritarianism in the most eastern region of post-Soviet central eastern Europe, she first asks whether Slovak democracy in the 1990s really should be categorized as some sort of 'illiberal' or 'defective' democracy (as some commentators have done). She argues that, in spite of a massive onslaught under the Mečiar governments, the constitutional 'dikes held'. Democratic institutions and democratic aspirations withstood the onslaught of defective democracy.

When compared with the post-Soviet cases of regime transformation, some lessons about the conditions in which an apparently defective democracy can transform into a liberal consolidated democracy can be drawn from Henderson's analysis. First, institutional design and elite behaviour matter. The initial elite incompetence that plagued Slovakia in the early years after the fall of communism was balanced by a multi-party parliamentary system of government, whose structural limits on power monopoly created checks and balances that held firm long enough to survive the tendencies of defective democracy during the 1990s. Second, the broader political environment matters. This comprises the level of the socio-economic development of a country, and the geopolitical environment. Slovakia was a developed, modern society, surrounded on almost all sides by consolidated or rapidly consolidating democracies. Last but not least, the powerful incentive to become a member of the European Union contributed to the consecutive elimination of defects that plagued the electoral democracy under Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar.

Like Henderson and Beichelt, Dimitrova and Pridham also stress the importance of the external embeddedness of democratization processes. However, they concentrate their attention on a specific contextual element: the international conditions for democracy. Using the example of the political strategy of the European Union regarding neo-democracy in eastern Europe, the authors analyze three issues. First, the conditions under which democracy promotion succeeds. Second, the mechanisms governing the interaction between international democracy promotion and domestic factors. And third, the reasons why democracy promotion by the European Union in eastern Europe is proving to be more successful than any international organizations' efforts elsewhere in the world. In their view, European integration is itself a specific form of democracy promotion. Incremental democracy promotion through integration, however, was often a reaction to external demands and followed rather than preceded the establishment of the most fundamental institutions of democracy in most post-communist states. Nevertheless, there is a major qualification in respect of successful democracy promotion even in the case of the European Union's model. Although central eastern European candidate states have become locked into a permanent integration process that makes it increasingly difficult to reverse democratization, the European Union's impact and success in democracy promotion is crucially dependent on both the will of national governments and the efficiency of state machinery and institutions. Furthermore, the expectation of accession to the EU has also been crucial. Moreover, the EU does not have an active strategy for dealing with seriously defective democracies, except in the negative sense of its refusal to recognize officially a given state as a legitimate democracy. The European Union's relative lack of effective instruments of democracy promotion with regard to the governments of Belarus, Ukraine and Russia clearly supports this conclusion.

The contribution provided by Aurel Croissant directs the focus of empirical analysis away from eastern Europe and towards east Asia. Croissant's inquiry outlines an empirical map of democratic regimes in Asia, categorizing young democracies in Asia under different sub-types of democratic regime. The analysis shows that defective democracy is dominant among the young democracies in Asia. At the non-democratic pole of the continuum of political regimes there are failed democracies in Pakistan, Cambodia and, most recently, Nepal. Taiwan lies at the liberal democratic end. Between the two poles there are five regimes in which transition was followed by a form of defective democracy. The article inquires into why defective democracy comes about (and why not). With regard to the causes of defective democracy, the analysis focuses on social and economic determinants, cultural and historical variables, stateness and nation-building, and political institutions. Albeit Croissant agrees with Merkel and Beichelt that no single primary cause can be held responsible for defects of democracy, his inquiry seems to support a more structural view of democratic development. While cultural background,

colonial experience and ethnic diversity may have a negative impact on democracy, the level of economic development, the dispersion of economic and cultural power resources, income distribution, as well as politico-institutional structures seem to be the most important primary causes, in Asia at least. The experiences with defective and fragile democracies in Latin America also seem to support this conclusion.

The reflections offered by Hyug Baeg Im on the development of democracy in South Korea focus on the search for possible causes of the problematic consolidation of democracy before and after the presidential election of 2002, the first election held in the post-‘three Kims’ era. At the end of this era, most agreed that Korean democracy was not in imminent danger of breakdown or protracted erosion. Though major political actors do not consider that there is any alternative to democratic processes to gain power, and democratic elections are the only game in town, in more substantial terms of democratic consolidation the record of Korean democracy is dismal. In the 15 years since democratic transition in 1987, Korea has completed ‘negative consolidation’ (institutionalization of elections, peaceful transfer of government, enhancing vertical accountability, reinstating civilian control over the military).<sup>12</sup> But it has not completed positive consolidation. This is mainly due to persistent bad legacies of the politics of the ‘three Kims’, such as divisive regionalism, an underdeveloped party system, an imperial but weak presidency, and a constitutional structure that fosters ‘delegative presidency’, high levels of political corruption and generates decline in trust in democracy. With regard to the ‘positive’ consolidation of Korean democracy, the presidential election of 2002 has several implications. On the one hand, political parties advanced reforms and a broader participation of citizens and party members on central issues raised by the election agenda. The 2002 presidential election was, in and of itself, an advance for democratic consolidation in Korea, since it ended the era of the ‘three Kims’. On the other hand, regionalism was still rampant in this election, and that weakened the party politics. Above all, the election led to a widening of political cleavages between the minority camp of the president and the majority led by the opposition. As the political development since the election and particularly since early 2004 has shown, Korea’s democracy has been burdened with grave problems that have harmed the prospects for positive consolidation in the near future.

All in all, this collection represents the first expression of what the authors hope will develop into a broader effort towards the investigation of the role of less-than liberal democratic regimes and hybrid regimes in processes of democratization and political transformation. It will be necessary to continue to deepen the analysis on the basis of studies that reflect experiences from various parts of the world. The authors hope the collection both clarifies some conceptual problems of hybrid regimes and defective democracies and

also contributes to the empirical study of regions that lie in the ‘grey zone’ between liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes.

## NOTES

1. Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2003* (New York: Freedom House, 2004).
2. Thomas Carothers, ‘The End of the Transition Paradigm’, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol.13, No.1 (2002), p.9.
3. See Terry L. Karl, ‘The Hybrid Regimes of Central America’, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol.3, No.4 (1995), pp.72–86; Larry Diamond, ‘Thinking About Hybrid Regimes’, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol.13, No.2 (2002), pp.21–35; Guillermo O’Donnell, ‘Delegative Democracy’, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol.5, No.1 (1994), pp.55–69; Wolfgang Merkel, ‘Defekte Demokratien’, in Wolfgang Merkel and Andreas Busch (eds), *Demokratie in Ost und West* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999), pp.361–82; Fareed Zakaria, ‘The Rise of Illiberal Democracy’, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.76 (November-December 1997), pp.22–43; Larry Diamond, ‘Is Pakistan the (Reverse) Wave of the Future?’, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol.11, No.4 (2000), pp.81–107; Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, ‘The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism’, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol.13, No.2 (2002), pp.50–65; Andreas Schedler, ‘The Menu of Manipulation’, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol.13, No.2 (2002), pp.36–50.
4. See Charles King, ‘Potemkin Democracy’, *The National Interest*, Vol.64 (Summer 2001), pp.93–104.
5. Juan J. Linz, *Totalitäre und Autoritäre Regime*, edited by Raimund Krämer (Berlin: Wissenschaftsdebatte Verlag, 2000), p.xxxix.
6. Guillermo O’Donnell, *Counterpoints. Selected Essays on Authoritarianism and Democratization* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999).
7. Larry Diamond, ‘Thinking about Hybrid Regimes’, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol.13, No.2 (2002), p.22.
8. Guillermo O’Donnell, ‘Illusions about Consolidation’, in Larry Diamond *et al.* (eds), *Consolidating the Third Wave Democracies. Themes and Perspectives* (Baltimore, MD and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p.44.
9. Wolfgang Merkel and Aurel Croissant, ‘Formal Institutions and Informal Rules in Defective Democracies’, *Central European Political Science Review*, Vol.1, No.2 (2000), pp.31–48.
10. David Collier and Stephen Levitsky, ‘Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research’, *World Politics*, Vol.49, No.3 (1997), pp.430–51.
11. Jon Elster, ‘The Necessity and Impossibility of Simultaneous Economic and Political Reform’, in Piotr Polzajski (ed.), *Philosophy of Social Science* (Warsaw: IfiS Publishers 1990), pp.309–16; Claus Offe, ‘Das Dilemma der Gleichzeitigkeit. Demokratisierung und Marktwirtschaft in Osteuropa’, *Merkur*, No.45 (1991), pp.279–92; Claus Offe, *Der Tunnel am Ende des Lichts. Erkundungen der politischen Transformation im neuen Osten* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994); Jon Elster, Claus Offe and Ulrich K. Preuss, *Institutional Design in Post-Communist Societies. Rebuilding the Ship at Sea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
12. Cf. Geoffrey Pridham, ‘The International Context of Democratic Consolidation: Southern Europe in Comparative Perspective’ in Richard Gunther, Nikiforos Diamandouros, Hans-Jürgen Puhle (eds), *The Politics of Democratic Consolidation. Southern Europe in Comparative Perspective* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp.166–203.

Manuscript accepted for publication June 2004.

Address for correspondence: Aurel Croissant, Naval Postgraduate School, 1411 Cunningham Road, Monterey, CA 93943-5100, USA, E-mail: ascroiss@nps.edu; Wolfgang Merkel, Social Science Research Center (WZB), Reichpietschufer 50, D-10785, Berlin, Germany, E-mail: wolfgang.merkel@wz-berlin.de