In the years since communism fell across Eastern Europe, political scientists have tracked authoritarianism with zeal and frustration. While looking forward to the fall of regimes, they have watched dictators twist elections and elected leaders warp constitutions. The outlook is now as bleak as ever for the post-Cold War period. Coups in Mauritania, Thailand, and Honduras have demonstrated that military cliques still threaten popular sovereignty. Muted objections to the takeovers underscore a normative challenge. In the milieu of the “War on Terror,” autocratic maneuvers can appear increasingly defensible. Under the aegis of national security, rulers have muffled rights advocacy and used “exceptional” measures to enhance control.

This article does not deliver an overarching explanation of why the quest for global political emancipation seems to have foundered. Instead, it scrutinizes the academic enterprise that charted a rise in democracy and now contends with an “Age of Authoritarianism.” I examine the analytic costs, which have become apparent over the last two decades, of treating democracy and authoritarianism as mutually exclusive “regime types,” which observers can tally as states move from one category to the other. I then venture an alternative interpretation. Rather than undergoing a democratic revolution or an autocratic resurgence, the post-Cold War period has instead been suffused by democratic and authoritarian currents that coalesce within national boundaries and flow across them. Political science has yet to apprehend such transnational processes, which belie the linearity and binary nature of democratic transitions studies.

Defining democracy procedurally as the presence of competitive elections, scholars watched democratic nations increase in number through the early 21st century. When procedural democracy then hit a numerical plateau, the same intellectual community renewed its focus on au-
authoritarian nation-states. Students of authoritarianism rely on the dichotomous treatment their forerunners applied to democratic transitions; in that view, authoritarianism is exclusive of and historically prior to procedural democracy. Such analysis stands to reap diminishing returns, thanks to a mix of conceptual, empirical, and normative obstacles. Students of authoritarianism and democracy over the next two decades can address those challenges by shifting their object of study from domestic, election-based regime types to transnational processes of coercion and accountability.

Democracy Peaks

For decades, political scientists have strived to identify democracy in a replicable, consistent way. The accepted convention has been to apply a procedural standard based on the work of economist Joseph Schumpeter. Over 60 years ago, Schumpeter wrote that democracies are distinguished by a “competitive struggle for the people’s vote.” Through the electoral process, leaders are held accountable by the people they rule. Although political scientists add civil liberties in their minimal definition of democracy, the deciding factor is the existence of competitive elections to select the top decision-makers. Nation-states either meet this standard (such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and India) or do not (such as Egypt, Zimbabwe, and China).

After the Cold War, the number of procedural democracies rose rapidly, and democratization became a primary concern. By the early 1990s, dozens of new governments met the standard, as multiparty systems replaced military juntas and single-party communism. This “wave” touched not only Eastern Europe but also Latin America (Chile, Nicaragua, and Paraguay), sub-Saharan Africa (Benin and South Africa), and South Asia (Bangladesh). Freedom House, a professed “watchdog organization that supports the expansion of freedom around the world,” applies the Schumpeterian criterion to maintain a running tally of democracies. Between 1990 and 1994, the organization recorded a 50 percent increase, from 76 democratic governments to 114. After that point, the global total rose slowly, reaching 120 in 2000.

The ascent of procedural democracies fed triumphant forecasts about the spread of liberalism. The close of the Cold War had not prevented violent conflicts from erupting in Rwanda and Bosnia, but political scientists could point to unprecedented gains, by their metrics, in the ascendance of democracy over dictatorship. Monographs, scholarly articles, and a new *Journal of Democracy* (begun...
in 1990) turned “democratic transitions” and “democratic consolidation” into a full-fledged research agenda, which came to be known as “transitology.”

Just as they were hitting their stride, the scions of this field did an about-face. At the turn of the 21st century, the trend line of democratization began to flatten. In early 2002, contributors to the *Journal of Democracy* questioned some of the assumptions in transitology. They also identified a disturbing trend. Nominally elected rulers, whose governments previously met the procedural standard, were subverting constitutions, undermining legislatures, and behaving as de facto autocrats. The next year, *Freedom House*’s count dropped from 121 procedural democracies to 117, the sharpest dip since the organization had begun reporting data and a sign that global democratization had nearly peaked. Scholars still regarded democracy as the ideal form of government and the ultimate, if distant, outcome of development. They swiveled back, though, to studying authoritarianism, a residual category for all things non-democratic, including absolute monarchies, dictator presidents, and single-party systems. Conference panels and articles soon proffered accounts for the absence of procedural democracy in the Middle East, Central Asia, and much of Africa and Asia.

Two distinct problems brought authoritarianism back into political science. First, if the low-hanging fruit for democratization had already been picked, political scientists would need to explain why the remaining authoritarian cases hung beyond reach. They soon homed in on elite cohesion, opposition disunity, economic inequality, and natural resources (mainly oil) as causes for the persistence of non-democracy. Second, some governments that had “transitioned” to procedural democracy appeared to be moving in the other direction, backsliding into dictatorship. In different ways, elites in Nepal (a palace coup), Russia (Vladimir Putin’s gradual takeover), and Thailand (a military coup) stripped voters of their Schumpeterian role in arbitrating national politics. Political scientists soon reclassified these states as non-democracies. Political actors, meanwhile, had begun defying the legal basis of democracy and defending the benefits of a little authoritarianism.

Whereas few in US political science questioned the procedural standard, politicians expressed deep ambivalence about its appropriateness and benefits. Leaders like Putin invoked the specter of social instability to contend that rapid political change, even in pursuit of individual liberties, should not jeopardize domestic security. He put reified claims about security and executive authority, they cast doubt on the dominion of democratic procedures.

These developments vexed scholars who sought and foretold new democratic transitions. Today the number of procedural democracies hovers around 120. In 2007, *Freedom House* counted 121; the next year, the total was 119. Partly reflecting this moribund state, scholars have begun studying problems that occur in both democratic and authoritarian governments, such as terrorism, civil wars, rioting, or crime.

Other political scientists continue adding to the field of authoritarianism studies, where intellectual returns are diminishing rapidly. Political philosophers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri passed a dismal verdict on previous regime scholarship: “The numerous shelves of our libraries that are filled with analyses of totalitarianism should today be regarded only with shame and could be thrown away with no hesitation.” Humanists could someday reach a similar conclusion about the authoritarianism literature. It includes major texts, including the works of Juan Linz and Guillermo O’Donnell, but remains defined by the antinomy between authoritarianism and procedural democracy.

Although specialists in authoritarianism assert that they are not studying the lack of democracy, few have conceptualized authoritarianism without referencing, at least implicitly, the Schumpeterian standard. Upon
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this negative concept, students can layer descriptors—“competitive,” “military,” “electoral,” and “liberal”—but
the core is still a vacuum: the absence of democratic
processes. Even as political scientists try to explain how
authoritarianism works, and not just how it changes, they
cannot escape an ontological dependence on procedural
democracy. Moreover, the two are not coequal subjects.
Authoritarian regimes are not only non-democratic,
they are pre-democratic. Assumed to be impermanent,
they enter analysis in mid-metamorphosis. So long as
authoritarianism and democracy are mutually exclusive
regime types, the first will be understood as a temporary,
preparatory state leading to the second.

To summarize the problem, current trends portend no new wave of procedural democracies. For the foreseeable future, transitologists are stuck with roughly the same set of cases. If the 2010s look like the past decade, a democratic plateau will characterize the early 21st century for those keeping count. Influential politicians who prioritize executive power have challenged the norm of procedural democracy and questioned how much democratic processes really matter. This situation confounds numerous forecasts about the post-Cold War period. Linear treatments of authoritarianism and democracy will not help us make sense of the new era. Instead, they may lead scholars to rehash old debates about developmental advances, pauses, and retreats. History has neither stopped nor restarted since 1989, and the complexities of that year are instructive for the present moment.

Revisiting 1989

The literature on democratic transitions originated in Latin America and Southern Europe, but its preeminence followed changes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. The events from 1989 to 1991 produced over a dozen procedural democracies and a compelling image of what democratization looked like. Transitologists conceived their subject as a binary change from authoritarianism to democracy, driven by the domestic relations of elites and masses, with the latter, in the form of civil society, providing a crucial impetus. Ruling elites, deemed pivotal in Latin American transitions, played a smaller role in accounts of Eastern Europe. This particular narrative about
democratization, drawing heavily on the Polish example, made civil society a fixture of comparative political analysis in the 1990s. Equally significant were the elements that slipped from view. Transitologists seldom treated international phenomena as integral to the processes they explained. Foreign governments and groups could enter on the margins, pressuring incumbents or aiding the opposition. The main agents and their effects, though, lay within nation-states.

The dominant approach to democratization provided a useful research lens even as it, like any theoretical approach, filtered out some information. The relative parsimony of transitology made it eminently portable; students of many regions could employ it when generating and answering their research questions. The field also facilitated cross-regional work by spotlighting human decisions and agency, negating the cultural determinism that would treat some areas as primordially hostile to popular sovereignty. Other aspects of political change were not emphasized and remained unrecognized in the salient experiences of Eastern Europe. These dimensions help explain the current impasse in democracy and authoritarianism.

Over the past 20 years, historians and journalists writing about Eastern Europe have produced rich accounts of communism’s collapse that their peers will come to envy.
Many contributors participated in or directly observed the upheaval in Eastern Europe. Afterward, declassified documents and newly opened archives provided a trove for sleuthing researchers with the right language skills. The resulting works, and the parameters of disagreement among them, present transitiology with a more capacious treatment of history. When it comes to 1989, a vision of locally-based democratic transitions would not have deciphered—much less anticipated—the events and repercussions of that year. Numerous factors were important, not least the so-called Sinatra Doctrine by which Mikhail Gorbachev withdrew the pledge of Soviet intervention from the Eastern bloc. At the mass level, cross-national networks of support among residents of the East were also crucial. Timothy Garton Ash, a chronicler of Eastern Europe over the last quarter-century, has called the transformations of 1989 “an international event” driven by “not just the diplomatic relations between states but also the interactions of both states and societies across borders.”

Democratization research has downplayed non-domestic components of political change. To the extent that such variables have mattered all along—before, during, and since 1989—the image of Eastern Europe that made democratic transitions a dominant concern may have misconstrued major aspects of its seminal cases. Whereas the lived experience of 1989 was unique, the version of that year absorbed by recent political scientists may have been non-existent. Post-communist revisionist histories provide an opportunity to revisit assumptions and tackle the manifold dilemmas in research on democracy and authoritarianism. From here, I sketch one direction for that activity, based on my experience as a participant in authoritarianism studies and my reflections, as a non-Eastern Europeanist, on the evolving knowledge of 1989.

**Disassembling the Regime**

A binary, domestically-based approach enables country-by-country tallies of procedural democracies but may miss the kinds of transnational dynamics that propelled the revolution of Eastern Europe. Where transitiologists see nationally bounded regimes that morph from one government type to another, the historiography of 1989 reveals constitutive processes of repression and resistance. It suggests ways that “the regime” may yield to a more fluid and open-ended concept of political authority and emancipation.

Addressing the field of political science, professors Timothy Mitchell and Lisa Wedeen have cautioned against subscribing to, and thereby reinforcing, the mystifying representations of those in positions of power. For example, depictions of “the state” obscure material interests by ascribing autonomous influence to a metaphysical construct. Political scientists do something similar when they treat regimes as both a set of rules and a set of rulers. Regimes are constructs that seem external to individual decision-makers. In the summer of 2008, when G8 leaders condemned “the Mugabe regime,” they were denouncing the Zimbabwean president, who had won re-election in a climate of violence and intimidation. This conflation between individuals and an entity that seems to transcend them can be reversed by approaching authoritarianism as agents and practices, rather than categories. Undoing the substitution of regimes for persons reveals a small number of core officeholders: chief executive, interior minister, defense minister, intelligence chief, and perhaps a separate information minister. While the specific constellation of figures will vary across countries, there is an instructive similitude in how governments organize power and preserve hierarchies.

Calling a set of individuals an “authoritarian regime” shrouds the intelligible and often mundane sources of their positions and practices. Disassembling the regime reveals its components: the executive directs; the interior minister polices and disciplines; the defense minister prepares for war; the intelligence chief spies; the information minister censors and educates. Scholars may form categories from any of these areas. The definition of procedural democracy centers on the chief executive’s post and whether it is filled through competitive elections. In other areas, though, electorally and non-electorally accountable governments exhibit parallels. Operational similarities in, say, security and surveillance, may confound and supersede the democracy/authoritarianism division. Compared to the question of whether or not the executive was chosen by voters, repressive practices may evoke more acute concern, due to their immediate effects on human agency and survival.

All governments employ coercion. Some do so while escaping meaningful responsibility to their subjects, and it is those examples that most quickly invite the label “authoritarian.” East Germany’s police state would be an exemplar; the lack of procedural democracy coincided with a surfeit of police intrusion into private life. The production of unaccountable violence, however, is not confined within the borders of the state that detains, tortures, and murders. Instruments and instructions of repression flow across national territories; they involve officeholders in other countries. Just as analysts of 1989 emphasize the relationship of the Soviet premier to the East German Stasi, the study of unaccounted-for coercion must encompass the relationships producing it. This can mean looking at not only unelected governments but also self-identified democracies.

The transnational nature of authoritarianism can be observed in the unaccountable coercive practices of ostensibly democracies. Rather than being natural antagonists, officials in democracies and authoritarian regimes often collaborate. Needless of the regime types assigned to them, presidents, interior ministers, and spymasters commune and collude as they pursue shared interests and act upon shared subjects. Symbiosis characterizes the relationship between elected leaders and repressive means.

Links between the United States and Egypt illustrate this codependency. Over the past thirty years, the government of Egypt has received over US$60 billion in military...
and economic assistance, yet the nation has never qualified as a procedural democracy. Bush administration officials dubbed Egypt a role model in fighting terrorism even while the State Department censured Egypt’s security services for continuing to “mistreat and torture prisoners.” Such abuses have been an important part of the US-Egyptian relationship since 1995, when the White House began using Egypt as a depot for “extraordinary renditions,” whereby a government apprehends and transfers an individual over state boundaries without formally arresting and extraditing the person. At the destination, security forces are free to interrogate the prisoner outside of public view or legal constraints. Rather than turning “a blind eye” to such repression, US administrations have looked toward governments known for maltreating dissidents. Investigative journalists have shown the most common rendition drop-spots are countries infamous for prison brutality, such as Egypt, Uzbekistan, Jordan, and Syria. Through the use of extraordinary renditions, the United States is reported to have delivered at least 22 men to Egypt during 1995 to 2008, a period of frenetic activity by American officials promoting democracy in the Middle East. This comingling of kidnapping and rights advocacy belies the image of an authoritarian realm separate from the domain of elected governments.

Whereas President Obama, speaking from Cairo in June 2009, enjoined the Muslim world that authority should come from “consent, not coercion,” he has synthesized the two in his approach to Pakistan, another major US ally. While aiming to “strengthen Pakistan’s democracy,” Obama has escalated the use of Predator drones within Pakistan’s territory. These unmanned aircraft, under remote control by intelligence agents inside the United States, can fire unseen from two miles above their targets. Predator attacks are estimated to have killed approximately 300 civilians during 2006 to 2009, with one-third of those deaths occurring since Obama took office. The program’s lethality and scope help explain why a July 2009 Gallup poll showed that two-thirds of Pakistanis opposed drone strikes and 59 percent called the US the “greatest threat” to their country (versus 18 percent concerned about India and 11 percent identifying the Pakistani Taliban as the greatest threat). The US presence in Pakistani airspace, neighborhoods, and consciousness reflects an official proclivity for coercion in the face of public opposition.

These seeming contradictions between discourse and policy are the rule, not the exception, and they suggest new ways to understand democracy and authoritarianism.

Approaching authoritarianism as dynamic transnational practices and not static domestic regimes can help interpret the meaning of extraordinary renditions or expanded US use of Predators. Corresponding questions would include: To what transnational constituencies do rulers answer? Upon what subjects, at home and abroad, do they act?

**Studying Repression Without Borders**

When political scientists divide and categorize regimes as country-level entities, they hinder their ability to observe, let alone to explain, the actions behind the constructions of democracy and authoritarianism. In place of binary, national, and basically sequential regime types, authoritarianism and democracy can be understood as coexistent, transnational, and open-ended processes. Democracy involves meaningful, regular accountability to those being ruled, while authoritarianism is unaccountable coercion. Public accountability is an international issue—just witness last year’s voting in Iran, Afghanistan, and Honduras. Unaccountable coercion, too, traverses borders and links members of ostensibly separate political communities, producing Iraqi refugees, Bagram detainees, and Blackwater/Xe contractors.

Transnational theories are prevalent in anthropology and history, but their potential remains untapped in political science research on authoritarianism. Political scientists have written much about repressive rulers who employ elections but much less about elected rulers who employ repression. Leaders of procedurally democracies can coerce members of their own electorate. They may also inflict violence upon people who lack voting rights in their polity and who cannot voice dissent from a polling station. Obviously, unelected leaders may do the same. Gorbachev’s stance toward the Eastern Bloc showed the impact of a procedurally non-democratic government reducing its authoritarian practices abroad.

Political scientists glean authoritarianism through its vestiges, the imprint transnational repression leaves on lives and bodies. They behold effects whose roots stretch to decision-makers outside the regime, to actors who may rebuke human rights abusers even while resupplying them. Post-Cold War trends in unaccountable coercion—where elected governments are very involved—may shed light on why the changes of 1989 remain so rare. Seldom does a major power rescind its backing for violence in an entire region.

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