

## *Legacy*

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### **Guillermo O'Donnell's 'Thoughtful Wishing' about Democracy and Regime Change**

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... we must analyze the relationships between two groups typically present in such [authoritarian] regimes: in the vocabulary of O'Donnell's original essay for this project, 'hard-liners' (*duros*) and 'soft-liners' (*blandos*). The first are those who, contrary to the consensus of this period of world history, believe that the perpetuation of authoritarian rule is possible *and* desirable.... As for the soft-liners, they may be indistinguishable from the hard-liners in the first 'reactive' phase of the authoritarian regime. They may be equally disposed to use repression and to tolerate the arbitrary acts of the appropriate ministry or security agency. What turns them into soft-liners is their increasing awareness that the regime they helped to implant, and in which they usually occupy important positions, will have to make use, in the foreseeable future, of some form of electoral legitimation. To this the soft-liners add that, if its eventual legitimation is to be feasible, the regime cannot wait too long before introducing certain freedoms, at least to the extent acceptable to modern segments of the domestic opposition and of international public opinion.

Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter (1986: 15–16)

One idea that differentiated this contribution from much pre-existing literature was that an authoritarian regime could better be viewed as an authoritarian coalition of otherwise non-homogenous actors and interests.

Laurence Whitehead (2014: 339)

#### **FROM LA RECOLETA TO YALE UNIVERSITY**

Guillermo O'Donnell was born in 1936 in Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina. His parents were middle-class Catholic intellectuals and strongly anti-Peronist. Guillermo was the oldest of three sons, all of whom were stimulated to read from an early age.<sup>1</sup> During his childhood, O'Donnell suffered from polio which damaged one of his legs. He recalls: 'Because of my leg, I had more time to read than other kids. When I was a child, my

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1. Guillermo's brother Pacho (who became a writer and politician) reckons that it was as a result of his mother's passion for books that he and his brothers wrote over fifty books between them.

mother practically fed me history books. So my leg gave me a comparative advantage, or disadvantage, depending how you look at it' (Munck and Snyder, 2007: 275). Even though Argentina's economy was declining in those years, it was still ranked among the top twenty economies worldwide — it was the second strongest in South America, after Brazil — with a well-developed industrial capacity for manufacturing consumer goods. The trade unions were very well organized and closely linked to the major political parties, especially to Peronism.

O'Donnell grew up during the legendary period of populist President Juan Perón (1946–1955). O'Donnell wanted to become a lawyer and started his law studies at the University of Buenos Aires in 1954. During his first year at the Law and Social Sciences Faculty, the Peronist government was violently toppled. A classmate remembers how peaceful the Law faculty was amid the turmoil; the faculty was housed in a huge imperial building in the La Recoleta area which had recently been constructed by the Peronists. Students had a lot of freedom, they followed classes and spent most of their time in the library and in the enormous cafeteria. They also made use of the excellent sports facilities of the faculty building, including an indoor swimming pool and a shooting range terrace very few people knew about (Strasser, 2012).

O'Donnell soon became involved in student activism and was a member of the Humanist Party, but he was also part of a reformist movement which included members from the entire spectrum of the Left. Some of his classmates (such as Roberto Quieto, who 'disappeared' in 1975) would later found the Montoneros, the Peronist-led urban guerrilla movement; another, Eduardo Luis Duhalde, became a key Human Rights Ombudsman in the 1990s. O'Donnell soon became a student leader and was elected president of the Buenos Aires University Federation (FUBA) in the mid-1950s. In O'Donnell's words:

In 1954 we got into deep trouble with the Peronist government, and the president, vice-president, and secretary general of FUBA were put in jail. In spite of my visibility I was one of the very few who was not caught in the late night raid. So I became the acting president of the whole thing, in hiding. When Perón was overthrown by a coup in 1955, I was a well-recognized leader, and I thought I was beginning a successful political career. But it did not take me long to discover that being deeply interested in politics didn't mean I was a good politician. (Munck and Snyder, 2007: 275)

At the age of twenty-two, he earned his law degree and started working as a lawyer, but also taught courses at the university. Like many academics in Latin America, he was unable to make a living from his teaching and had to find an income outside academia as well. He taught political theory at the law faculties of the University of Buenos Aires (UBA) and the Catholic University of Argentina. In those days there was no political science faculty (yet) in the country. Little is known about O'Donnell from these early years of his professional career, but one of the striking features was that he briefly served as a Deputy Minister of the Interior in 1963, after highly

contested presidential elections from which Peronists as well as Communists were banned. The Radical Party candidate Arturo Illia won the presidential elections; Illia was a moderate democrat who was toppled by a military coup in 1966 that was organized by his own military chief of staff, Juan Carlos Onganía. This was the start of a period of military rule under the banner of corporatism (*la revolución argentina*), during which political repression rapidly increased. University autonomy was abandoned, police forces carried out raids on the campus of the University of Buenos Aires, and hundreds of professors went into exile as a result.

O'Donnell received an inside glimpse of how the political state machinery functioned. In a short period of time he witnessed the violent end of Peronism in 1955, followed by a period of political instability and military-dominated governments. Only the Illia government (in which he briefly took part) was democratically elected, but it was unable to take root in this unstable period in which the underground Peronist party (banned in 1955) started to prepare for urban guerrilla warfare through the Montoneros. Unfulfilled by his job as a lawyer, O'Donnell returned to academia, this time abroad. He wrote to his classmate Carlos Strasser — who had moved to Berkeley — that he wanted to stop being a lawyer and study political science in the United States. He was turned down by Harvard, but accepted by Michigan, Princeton, MIT and Yale. He eventually chose Yale University as he was interested in working with Harold Laswell, Charles Lindblom and Robert Dahl. Later he also followed courses taught by Alfred Stepan and David Apter. He received a scholarship for three years: 'I remember sitting in the Yale library, thinking this is paradise: here I am, I have the privilege of being paid a reasonable scholarship to do research and study full-time. I had a great time' (Munck and Snyder, 2007: 276).

At Yale he read Huntington's (1968) *Political Order in Changing Societies* and he enjoyed the way Huntington wrote about institutions, power politics and praetorianism. He also read Barrington Moore's (1966) *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, which he liked very much (maybe also because Dahl thought it was too structuralist and Marxist). Overall, Robert Dahl was a great source of inspiration; in the words of O'Donnell: 'He gave a seminar while he was writing *Polyarchy* (1971). We discussed his chapters, and it was wonderful to see a great mind working through problems and writing an important book' (Munck and Snyder, 2007: 276). Dahl remembered his former graduate student very well: 'Talking about Latin America with students like Guillermo O'Donnell often gave me insights. I've often wondered whether I was wrong about these insights, or if I had misinterpreted them, but students like Guillermo gave me ideas I would not have otherwise gotten' (Munck and Snyder, 2007: 144). O'Donnell also followed a course with Linz on Durkheim, Weber and Pareto, which particularly strengthened his knowledge of Weber. However, his most committed mentor was David Apter — author of *The Politics of Modernization* (1965) — who was opinionated and provocative, but also helped O'Donnell to

improve his English, and encouraged him to write his first major book: *Modernization and Bureaucratic Authoritarianism* (1973/1979a). The book received recognition from established scholars such as David Collier and Fernando Enrique Cardoso and came to be regarded as a primary text on the subject.

## MODERNIZATION AND BUREAUCRATIC AUTHORITARIANISM

O'Donnell returned to Argentina in 1971, having completed his MA in Political Science at Yale. He was offered a research position at Harvard, but to everyone's surprise he declined, preferring to go back to Argentina as the bureaucratic authoritarian regime seemed to be collapsing and everyone was longing for a return to democracy. With a Danforth scholarship, he could work on his PhD, which provided enough income to sustain him and his family. When the manuscript was finished a couple of years later, however, he decided to publish it as a book rather than submitting it as a dissertation to Yale. The implication was that he had no doctorate, which later became a problem when he moved to Brazil and needed a PhD to obtain research grants. He then realized that, if he wanted to continue in academia, he would have to get his doctorate after all: 'So I wrote Apter, Dahl, and Stepan, and asked if they would accept as my dissertation a long manuscript I had written on Argentina's bureaucratic authoritarian regime of 1966–73' (Munck and Snyder, 2007: 278). They finally accepted this work as a PhD thesis and he received his doctorate in 1987, though by then he was already Professor of Political Science at Notre Dame University, and had also published his other major work *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule* (O'Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead, 1986).

The above anecdote illustrates O'Donnell's unusual and non-linear career. After moving back to Buenos Aires, he joined the Argentinean Research Centre for Public Administration, CIAP (Centro de Investigaciones en Administración Pública) where he teamed up with a range of young Ford Foundation scholars: Marcelo Cavarozzi, Oscar Oszlak, Horacio Boneo, as well as French-trained scholars. Meanwhile, he worked on the manuscript of *Modernization and Bureaucratic Authoritarianism*, in which he basically argued that economic and social modernization do not by definition lead to democracy, as was suggested by vested scholars such as Lipset (1959) and Almond and Coleman (1960). In fact, O'Donnell maintained radically the opposite: industrial modernization in a range of Latin American countries seemed to be linked more to authoritarianism. He was particularly interested in the two largest economies, Brazil and Argentina, in which two-thirds of the Latin American population lived and in which 75 per cent of the industrial output was produced. Brazil was taken over by military rule in 1964 and Argentina in 1966. Inspired by critical economists of his era, such as Cardoso and Faletto (who published the first, Spanish, edition of their study on

dependency and development in Latin America in 1969),<sup>2</sup> O'Donnell suggested a direct link between advanced industrialization and the breakdown of democracy. Central to his analysis was the emergence of the military as an institution with a range of political and economic interests, rather than as a collection of individual rulers seeking powerful positions (Collier, 1978). Moreover, these military leaders were taking a more technocratic and bureaucratic approach to policy making, as O'Donnell himself had noticed in Argentina in the late 1960s. Hence his suggestion to call this system 'bureaucratic authoritarianism' (BA), a label that was soon adopted by many other scholars in the region.

The timing of *Modernization and Bureaucratic Authoritarianism* was indeed significant. Published in Spanish in 1972 and English in 1973, its appearance virtually coincided with the breakdown of two other institutionalized democracies in the region, Chile and Uruguay.<sup>3</sup> However, this also required O'Donnell to explain why the Mexican government was *not* overthrown by the military. His argument was that different phases of industrialization could be distinguished that were linked to processes of political change affecting different classes. The transition to the initial phase was based on import-substitution industrialization by producing consumer goods for the domestic market (and increasing worker salaries to buy these goods), coinciding with a shift from oligarchic to populist political systems. These populist regimes relied on political support from the trade unions, as could be seen in the 1950s under President Juan Perón in Argentina and the last term of President Getúlio Vargas in Brazil. However, these popular sectors (*sectores populares*) were also affected by the orthodox economic policies which generated street protests and widespread strikes. In Mexico the authoritarian regime was better able to cope with these reactions as the last phase of industrialization took place when the ruling party PRI was already firmly in control. O'Donnell analysed how the new 'technocratic' ruling coalitions managed to create relative political and economic stability by providing a central role for national entrepreneurs and facilitating large foreign investments.

*Modernization and Bureaucratic Authoritarianism* was widely cited in Latin America, especially after the violent military coups d'état in Chile (1973), Uruguay (1973) and Argentina (1976) seemed to have confirmed O'Donnell's thesis of the emergence of a 'new authoritarianism'. Berkeley political science professor David Collier, author of the oft-cited *The New Authoritarianism* (1979), soon realized O'Donnell's book on regime change

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2. The first edition, in Spanish, was published in 1969 in México by Siglo Veintiuno Editores; the second and extended version, in Spanish, of 1971 served as the basis for the English translation

3. The Spanish text *Modernización y autoritarismo* was published by Paidós, Buenos Aires.

was a major and novel contribution.<sup>4</sup> Among these novelties, according to Collier, were:

his emphasis on the absolute, rather than the per capita size of the modern sector explaining the rise of authoritarianism; his effort to move beyond conventional class categories to look specifically at 'social roles' as being critical to regime dynamics. Specifically he emphasized the role of technocrats as a social category, and of the popular sector, which encompassed both the working class and important segments of the lower-middle class. (Munck and Snyder, 2007: 570)

O'Donnell was the first to argue clearly that modernization in a context of 'delayed development' tended to generate authoritarian rule, rather than democracy: that was the strength of his book. Remmer and Merckx (1982: 5) valued O'Donnell's reconceptualization of modernization and its political consequences as 'an original contribution to our understanding of political change', which has 'continued to serve as an important focal point for scholarly research and debate'. But they were also critical: 'he has increased the conceptual ambiguities in his work without accounting for important differences among bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes' (ibid.: 33). They further criticized O'Donnell for suggesting causal relationships which were not supported by comparative data, and for his characterization of the various phases of bureaucratic-authoritarian rule that seemed to be too much of a generalization solely on the Brazilian experience.

On the other hand, authors like the Brazilian economist José Serra (who in 2004 became mayor of São Paulo) questioned the applicability of the BA framework to Brazil. In his view, O'Donnell's analysis was largely based on the causes and characteristics of the 1966 coup in Argentina, which was rather different from the 1976 coup and from the Brazilian process (Serra, 1979). The fact that Argentina and Brazil had quite different trajectories after the military takeovers illustrated, also according to other critics, that O'Donnell was wrong in presenting a general analytical framework for these new military regimes. The country in which the BA model was received with greatest enthusiasm was in fact located outside Latin America, namely South Korea (Whitehead, 2014: 338). O'Donnell himself acknowledged several of the shortcomings of his analysis in an afterword of the second edition that appeared a few years later: 'With the benefit of hindsight in 1979, re-reading this book produced in me a feeling of distance and ambivalence. . . . Certainly there are parts that I would not write in the same way today, but it leaves me with a bitter taste to realize that, though incomplete and imprecise in several respects, this analysis identified tendencies that contributed to the tragic

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4. The writings of O'Donnell were also picked up by his former Yale professors Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, who were preparing *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes* (1978). They wanted to expand the volume with analyses from Latin America and also asked O'Donnell to write a chapter on Argentina, which was titled 'Permanent Crisis and Failure to Create a Democratic Regime, 1955–66' (O'Donnell, 1978).

events that several South American countries have suffered' (O'Donnell, 1979a: 204).

Despite increasing political instability in 1975–76, O'Donnell decided to stay in Argentina and remained at CIAP, which was part of the Di Tella Institute. Some of the members of this institute were rather close to the military, and they considered CIAP and the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies (CEUR) to be too left-leaning, and wanted to get rid of them. This was a year before the 1976 military coup; O'Donnell and his team needed to find a new intellectual home. With funding from the Ford Foundation and Swedish international development funds, they set up the Centre for State and Society Studies (CEDES – Centro de Estudios de Estado y Sociedad). The political situation was becoming tricky in Argentina, but O'Donnell was committed to maintaining a space for academic and political reflection in his country, despite repeated offers to come to work at the Kennedy School at Harvard University. He occasionally went to the United States for short periods, as visiting researcher at the University of California (Berkeley), University of Michigan (Ann Arbor) and the Institute of Advanced Studies (Princeton). About these trips O'Donnell remarks: 'I did this partly out of intellectual interest and vanity, but it was also strategic. My colleagues in Argentina and I felt that having these institutional connections outside the country decreased the likelihood we would be smashed by the violence that surrounded us' (Munck and Snyder, 2007: 279).

In March 1976 the military forces overthrew the civilian government led by Isabel Perón, the widow of Juan Domingo Perón (who had died soon after making his heroic return to power in 1973 after eighteen years in exile). The months preceding and following the March coup d'état were violent, with open guerrilla warfare in the Tucuman province and in the capital Buenos Aires. O'Donnell, as the new director of CEDES, was not safe and received threats from the military forces and their right-wing death squads, as well as from the revolutionary forces of the Montoneros. The latter requested payment of a revolutionary tax to finance their guerrilla warfare, as CEDES was considered to be an 'agent of imperialism' given that it was funded by foreign foundations. O'Donnell refused, also since the amount they asked was five times the amount he had received from the Ford Foundation and the Swedish SAREC. It was a creative and engaging period for CEDES, in which the progressive Latin American intellectuals held intense debates: 'We spent our full time and energy trying to understand what had happened and what could happen in Argentina. . . . All of us travelled a lot in order to feed ourselves intellectually and to increase our protection. It was a period of intense discussion' (Munck and Synder, 2007: 280). O'Donnell stayed in close contact with his academic friends from Brazil (Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Francis Weffort), Chile (Manuel Antonio Garretón, Ricardo Lagos and Norbert Lechner) and Peru (Julio Cotler), and they organized many exchanges. There was a commonality in political goals but also in terms of theoretical language. As O'Donnell said: 'The Brazilians were

coming down from their Marxism to a more Weberian position. The Chileans were already there — none of them had been hard Marxists. And as you can see from my first book, I had an essentially “Weberian bent”, with some neo-Marxism, of course’ (Munck and Synder, 2007: 280).

In 1979, O'Donnell moved to Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), mainly in pursuit of a safer environment for his family. He also enjoyed working with his Brazilian academic friends, who offered him a job on the programme committee to prepare the International Political Science Association (IPSA) World Congress in Rio. A year later he was awarded a Guggenheim scholarship, which allowed him to work on his next major book project: *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*. O'Donnell really enjoyed living in Brazil, where the intellectual climate was more stimulating and where he was able to work with his expanding international network on new publications. But then another offer was made to him which he could not refuse. The University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana, had received a large donation from the Kellogg family to establish an Institute for International Studies, and O'Donnell and Alejandro Foxley were asked to start up the Latin American programme of the new institute. O'Donnell was very fond of Foxley, a brilliant Chilean economist (who would later become the Minister of Finance in the first new democratic government in Chile). Moreover, he only had to spend four months a year at the University of Notre Dame, which allowed him to travel back to Latin America as often as he wanted. O'Donnell was delighted and saw an ideal opportunity to build up an institute dedicated to Latin America studies and run by the Latin Americans of his choice. It was 1983 when he moved again to the United States, this time taking his family with him, intending to use Notre Dame as his new base.

## TRANSITIONS FROM AUTHORITARIAN RULE

In the meantime, a new and ambitious project was in the making. Some of this was already visible in the chapter O'Donnell wrote for David Collier's volume *The New Authoritarianism* (1979). Collier brought key critical Latin American social scientists together to reflect on the wave of authoritarianism in the region, among them Albert Hirschmann, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Julio Cotler and Guillermo O'Donnell. Collier encouraged them to reflect on each other's chapters, carefully discussed conceptual issues, and in addition provided an annotated overview of relevant Spanish and Portuguese texts. The book would come to be regarded as a landmark study of military rule, and the first English language book to include comparative perspectives from the entire region. O'Donnell's chapter in the volume was more forward-looking and less focused on the internal characteristics of bureaucratic authoritarianism. He already saw cracks emerging in the authoritarian system in the late 1970s, especially in Brazil. He pointed at the fragilities of the BA system, such as the shrinking legitimacy of the nation state as well as its tendency



to undermine citizens' rights, leading to political and economic exclusion of the working classes, and fear of the regime that this gradually might generate discontent and even an anti-authoritarian reaction (O'Donnell, 1979b: 309–11). O'Donnell was intrigued by the fact that the working classes were in fact not rebelling: 'the principal mystery is the silence of those who have been excluded: the implantation of BA is a terrible defeat for the popular sector' (ibid.: 312). At the same time, he was convinced BA regimes would not endure as long as the authoritarian regimes of Southern Europe which had come to an end a few years earlier (Portugal in 1974 and Spain in 1975). Therefore, rather than 'transitions to democracy' as the Southern European processes were labelled, O'Donnell preferred speaking of 'transitions from authoritarian rule', as if he was not sure yet what the end result would be. But he was optimistic and considered democratization to be inevitable: he was convinced it would not take as long as in Southern Europe.

The groundwork for the seminal *Transitions* book started in 1978 when O'Donnell, still living in Argentina, received an invitation from Abraham Lowenthal from the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Studies in Washington DC. Lowenthal was leading the Latin America programme and invited Hirschmann, Cardoso, O'Donnell and a few others to join him at his think-tank to brainstorm a new project. O'Donnell and Cardoso (who travelled together from São Paulo) recalled how they discussed during their trip the need for focusing on 'transitions'. Both were convinced the end of the authoritarian regimes was approaching, as O'Donnell already had argued in his chapter in Collier's book (O'Donnell, 1979b).

However, they were not sure everyone would support them, so after arriving in Washington they first checked with another participant, Philippe Schmitter. He immediately supported the idea, and most of the other participants also believed it to be excellent. Lowenthal then took the lead in organizing and funding the project and coined the expression 'thoughtful wishing' — as opposed to 'wishful thinking' — to capture the shared hope for the downfall of authoritarianism, though other colleagues at the Wilson Center were doubtful about so much optimism amid fierce military rule (Munck and Snyder, 2007: 289). Soon after this meeting Cardoso was appointed to the Federal Senate in Brazil, so he had to withdraw from the project. Instead, Laurence Whitehead (from Oxford) was asked to join O'Donnell and Schmitter on the project as one of the editors.

Phillipe Schmitter admitted that, at the start of the *Transitions* project, they only had a few cases and very little literature to draw upon: 'mostly we ransacked the monographs of colleagues who were taking part in the same Woodrow Wilson project as we were. We also reached back to the classics of political thought; I personally drew much inspiration from the work of Niccolo Machiavelli who, I discovered, had grappled some time ago with regime change in the opposite direction' (Schmitter, 2010: 17). O'Donnell wrote an introductory article on the concepts of 'hard-liners' and 'soft-liners' in the regime, the two kinds of opposition, and about the resurrection of civil

society. The articles were discussed at three conferences between 1979 and 1981 with the participation of a few dozen scholars from Latin America, the United States and (Southern) Europe. O'Donnell especially valued the contributions by Alfred Stepan, on the various paths of democratization, and by Adam Przeworski — although O'Donnell largely disagreed with him for inserting a rational choice language into the carefully phrased ideas on regime transitions.

*Transitions from Authoritarian Rule* consisted of four volumes: the first was a collection of case studies from Southern Europe (mostly edited by Schmitter), the second a collection of Latin American case studies (edited by Whitehead), the third volume was on comparative perspectives (edited by O'Donnell), and the fourth and final book was written by O'Donnell and Schmitter. This so-called 'little green book' titled *Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (reissued in 2013) was compact (only seventy-two pages plus notes), but would become the most cited of the four and was translated into six languages (including Croatian and Kurdish). It not only synthesized the findings of the *Transitions* project, but also offered a systematic analysis of how the various authoritarian regimes behaved, which automatically suggested how these regimes could be brought down. O'Donnell and Schmitter explained during one of the seminars: 'All of us who have participated in this project hope that at least it will contribute to a more intelligent and better informed discussion, by activists and scholars, of the potentialities, dilemmas, and limitations involved in the complex process of the demise of authoritarian rule and its *possible* replacement by political democracy' (cited in Arnson and Lowenthal, 2013: viii).

Schmitter (2010: 17–18) emphasized that the strength of the book was 'to insist on a clear distinction between liberalization and democratization and refusing to accept that democracy requires some fixed set of economic or cultural prerequisites'. There was a recognition of a key role of elite interaction and strategic choice during the transition. Here we see a difference with O'Donnell, who tended to see mass mobilization as a critical element that allowed the democratizers to push for a real transition, as a way to move the liberalization further than where the 'soft-liners' wanted to take it. Schmitter saw only a limited role for mass mobilization from below, and emphasized the demobilizing effect of the electoral process in which civil society had a 'short-lived significance'. Both argued that most transitions began from within the previous authoritarian regime, even though it was not at all guaranteed that these transitions would successfully lead to a democratic outcome. The differences between Schmitter and O'Donnell were striking, and they only emerged openly many years later, after the 'little green book' had become one of the most cited publications in comparative politics on regime transitions (O'Donnell, 2010a). O'Donnell recalled that the writing process had been smooth, and accompanied by much mutual respect, but he saw Schmitter only twice during the whole writing process, 'which helps explain why we did not kill each other'. In fact, the book is

one of the few co-authored pieces O'Donnell ever produced, as he preferred to write alone. But Schmitter did inspire him as a sounding board, and especially pointed him to the important role of political parties and the idea of 'pacted transitions'. However, the main difference was — as we will see later — that O'Donnell, unlike Schmitter, never considered himself a 'transitologist'.

By the time *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule* was published (in 1986), the Argentinians had democratically elected Raúl Alfonsín as their new president (1984–89), after the military rulers had been defeated in the Falklands/Malvinas war a year before. Similarly, in 1985 Tancredo Nieves was elected as the first civilian president in Brazil for over two decades. However, Nieves died before actually taking office and was succeeded by his vice-president, José Sarney, who had been loyal to the military governments. After these two 'transitions to democracy', many others soon followed, in Latin America (Uruguay, Chile), as well as in Africa, Asia and the former Soviet bloc. Schmitter was a bit concerned about the 'intellectual risk' of these transitions and wondered whether the tentative conclusions of the 'little green book' would at all be applicable to what Huntington (1991) labelled the 'Third Wave of democratization'.

O'Donnell was less worried about this:

The key point is that the *Transitions* project was a very political work. We were writing politics, not just an academic treatise. . . . I was also a political actor; we were all very visible intellectuals who were not just writing political science, but were writing in and about the politics of our countries. And we were sending a message too: don't despair! (Munck and Snyder, 2007: 292)

The *Transitions* volume was widely circulated, but was prohibited in South Africa, the Soviet Union, Poland, China and North Korea. O'Donnell enjoyed the fact that the 'little green book' also had a life as a translated *samizdat*, which was perhaps the best recommendation for an academic product: serving as a manual for democratization. He considered it as one of the greatest satisfactions of his life: 'Part of its impact was probably due to the hope it apparently gave many people; it had a tonic value that went beyond the intellectual. That is very, very nice. It's the sort of thing you dream might happen, that you write something of value to people' (Munck and Snyder, 2007: 291).

Of course, there was also criticism of the *Transitions* volumes and of the emerging 'transitions paradigm'. A main objection was that the analysis was rather normative and lacked a solid empirical foundation, something which was indeed done in later years (with mixed success) by new and younger participants of the Wilson Center project (Munck, 2011: 339). A second (more left-wing) critique was that too much attention was paid to pacts between elites to bring military regimes down and that the key role of popular mobilizations was downplayed. O'Donnell disagreed with this assertion and argued that he and Schmitter had explicitly stated the

importance of mass mobilizations in bringing down the regime, though elite-level processes were also essential (Munck and Snyder, 2007: 291–2). A third point of criticism was that the role of the international context was often over-simplified; international factors appeared to have a different influence in the various cases. O'Donnell largely agreed with this point, and subsequent work by others in the 1990s vastly elaborated on this issue. But one of the major points of critique on the emerging 'transitions paradigm' was the assumption that democratization proceeded in predetermined stages, in sequences, towards 'democratic consolidation'. This would imply that a move away from authoritarianism was automatically a step towards democracy, and 'that transitions are built on functioning, coherent states' (Arnsperg and Lowenthal, 2013: xi). This weakness in the analysis would become a central target in O'Donnell's later work.

### THE QUALITY OF DEMOCRACY

By the time *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule* was published, O'Donnell had already been at the University of Notre Dame for three years. As mentioned above, he was appointed Helen Kellogg Professor of Government and International Studies even before he formally received his PhD degree in 1987. Even though he regularly travelled to Latin America, O'Donnell would remain at Notre Dame for the next two decades and became a popular and inspiring teacher. Students and alumni admired him for his enthusiasm and his achievements in the study of democracy; he was soon nicknamed GOD in the corridors, the acronym for his name. One of his Latin American alumni remembers how he repeatedly told his students how, for many years, he had to study something he hated most: authoritarian regimes.<sup>5</sup> The current generation of students, in his view, was so much better off as they were able to focus on an object of analysis which generated a lot of pleasure: democracy.

O'Donnell was not in favour of the way many of his colleagues viewed democracy, generally in the Schumpeterian sense, by 'defining democracy in narrow terms as a mechanism that, through competitive elections, decides who will govern for a given period. I do not agree: if democracy were not also a wager on the dignity and autonomy of individuals, it would lack the extraordinary moral force that it has evinced many times in modern history' (O'Donnell, 1999: 204). He witnessed an enormous gap between these values and how they were practised, not least in his own country Argentina where broad sectors of the population had experienced rapid impoverishment during the presidency of Carlos Menem (1989–99). O'Donnell therefore emphasized the importance of studying the 'quality of democracy',

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5. See the blog *El Jorobado de Notre Dame* by a former student from Peru, Carlos Meléndez, <http://jorobadonotredame.blogspot.nl/2011/12/cuando-la-democracia-muere-un-poco.html>

and of studying this from a citizens' perspective — how the state provides guarantees so that people can actually become citizens. In his view, it was this focus on the role of the state that was lacking in post-authoritarian Argentina, as there can be no democracy without a state constructing citizens. He emphasized the importance of effective citizenship, as a relationship between state and citizens as well as among citizens themselves; it remained an ongoing relationship 'during, before, and after elections, among individuals protected and empowered by their citizenship'. It was not surprising that O'Donnell's writing became increasingly openly critical about the work of one of his mentors, Robert Dahl, who in his view focused too much on elections and political regimes. According to O'Donnell, studying democracy in Latin America required more than just understanding the regime and formal politics. He coined the concept 'delegative democracy', which was a variety of Dahl's 'polyarchy' but a type which was not leading to accountable representation (O'Donnell, 1994). Delegative democracies simply lacked strong democratic institutions that could facilitate representation, and instead were dominated by clientelism, patrimonialism and corruption (Power, 2014: 181).

This new focus on 'delegative democracy' highlighted a remarkable shift in O'Donnell's thinking in the years following the publication of *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*. O'Donnell was often charged with co-creating the (problematic) paradigm of 'transitology', although he never really liked that term. However, soon after democratic transitions had taken place in many countries in the so-called 'third wave', the question of democratic consolidation entered the academic discussion. Initially, O'Donnell recognized this to be a legitimate field of study, and he wrote about the role of the state in post-authoritarian settings, particularly the newly independent post-Soviet countries. However, he did so from a Latin American perspective, making it explicit in the title of one of his best-known essays 'On the State, Democratization and Some Conceptual Problems: A Latin American View with Glances at Some Post-Communist Countries' (O'Donnell, 1993). In this article he warned against simplistic and universalistic theories of democratization, which were blossoming in the post-1989 period, fuelled by the triumphalism of capitalism and Fukuyama's *End of History* (1992). Moreover, he found much in these analyses inappropriate and superficial as they often failed to seriously examine the role of the state in democracy. He started to dislike the term 'democratic consolidation', even though he and Schmitter explored this notion at the end of the *Transitions* project, largely examining how new (and successful) attempts at a coup by the military could be prevented.

Implicitly, O'Donnell gradually started distancing himself from some of the ideas of his friend and co-author Philippe Schmitter, as well as from his former Yale teachers Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan. The latter had published a large comparative study on democratic consolidation in a few dozen countries which drew considerable international attention (Linz and Stepan,

1996). But in O'Donnell's view, these democratic consolidations in many cases were 'illusions', and 'evoked static, teleological, and in some cases ethnocentric notions' (O'Donnell, 2010a: 29). He ironically commented: 'I had to grudgingly accept the ugly label of "transitologist" that was imposed on those who worked on the topic, but I never became a "consolidologist"' (ibid.). A few years before, O'Donnell had already sharply attacked this idea in his essay 'Illusions about Consolidation' (1996: 41):

Polyarchies are regimes, but not all polyarchies are the same kind of regime. Here we see the ambiguity of the assertion made by Juan J. Linz, Adam Przeworski, and others who argue that consolidation occurs when democracy becomes 'the only game in town' . . . Przeworski argues that democratic consolidation occurs 'when no one can imagine acting outside the democratic institutions'. But this does not preclude the possibility that the games played 'inside' the democratic institutions are different from the ones dictated by their formal rules.

The 'Illusions' article was published in the *Journal of Democracy*, the main platform of scholars working on democratic consolidation, and many of his peers were puzzled. O'Donnell wrote (1996: 47): 'The Northwest was seen as the endpoint of a trajectory that would be largely traversed by getting rid of the authoritarian rulers. This illusion was extremely powerful during the hard and uncertain times of the transition'. By criticizing his academic colleagues openly for the way they treated the new democracies, he was to a certain extent also being self-critical. This was clear from his eventual conclusion that it was better to leave the consolidation of democracy to politicians, rather than to political scientists (Power, 2014: 182). O'Donnell's withdrawal from the consolidation debate was partly due to his disappointment in the way his concepts of the *Transitions* project were misinterpreted and abused. In a debate with Thomas Carothers, who criticized the 'transition paradigm', O'Donnell emphasized again that he and Schmitter 'were explicit that these transitions do not necessarily lead to democracy; rather, they may as well lead to authoritarian regressions, to revolutions, or to hybrid regimes' (O'Donnell, 2002b: 7; see also Carothers, 2002). He wanted to clarify that there was 'nothing predestined about these transitions', and that the course of the process and their outcomes were open-ended and uncertain.

On the other hand, O'Donnell's call to pay more attention to the 'informal institutionalization' of the new democracies did not mean he had become cynical of the role of elections. In the 'little green book' written with Schmitter, he had already clarified that liberalization was different from democratization, given that it could result in hybrid regimes. Tongue-in-cheek, O'Donnell and Schmitter proposed *democraduras* ('limited democracies') and *dictablandas* ('liberalized autocracies'), illustrating their doubts about the outcome of electoral processes. Two decades later O'Donnell was even sharper:

I do think that fair elections are extremely important. This is not because such elections will necessary lead to wonderful outcomes. It is because these elections per se and due to the political freedoms that must surround them if they are to be considered fair (and consequently,

if the resulting regime is to be democratic), mark a crucial departure from the arbitrariness of authoritarian rule. (O'Donnell, 2002b: 8–9)

By the late 1990s, O'Donnell travelled more regularly to Europe, first to Spain (Centre for Advanced Behavioural Studies in Madrid), and later to the United Kingdom where he accepted a visiting professorship at the University of Cambridge (2002–03), and later also at the University of Oxford where he visited Nuffield College twice (2003–04 and 2007–08) to work with Laurence Whitehead, Alan Angell and Desmond King. O'Donnell was conscious of the social differences between Europe and his continent (including the US). In a keynote speech at a European conference of Latin America scholars in 2002 in Amsterdam he gave his view on the European social welfare state:

You Europeans have states that have tried — and often managed to achieve — countering the worst inequalities of your societies, often benefitting your entire population as well as the calling of your national states. . . . As a result, you have managed to generate more decent societies than what we have in the Americas (both North and South). I mean, societies where there are minor material inequalities, rather than that humiliation of the vulnerable or of the subordinated are the common currency in social relations. (O'Donnell, 2002a: 13).

O'Donnell was also involved in the 2004 UNDP Report *Democracy in Latin America: Toward a Citizens' Democracy*, and provided political advice to various international organizations. In 2009 he and his wife Gabriela moved back to Argentina, having decided to live and work again in the city where he was born: Buenos Aires. O'Donnell had visited Argentina regularly while working at Notre Dame, but now he was also able to properly reconnect with his local academic network. He taught at the National University of General San Martín where, in 2010, he established the Research Centre for State and Democracy in Latin America (CIEDAL). His Argentinean colleagues were proud to have him back home, also because political science had in the meantime become a new discipline in the country. O'Donnell received an honorary doctorate from the University of Rosario, and participated with enthusiasm in the debates at a special seminar on delegative democracy, not hindered — as one of the participants observed — by the 'enormous distance generated by his extraordinary career and influence'.<sup>6</sup>

In these last years of his academic career, he almost exclusively focused on elaborating a theory of democracy which was meant to have a comparative value beyond the rich countries of the Western hemisphere: 'Practically all definitions of democracy are, naturally enough, a distillation of the historical trajectory and present situation of the Northwestern countries. However, the trajectories of other countries that nowadays may be considered democratic differ considerably from the former ones' (O'Donnell, 2010b: 5–6). Therefore, O'Donnell's intention was to include these varieties of specific

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6. Author's translation of Franco Bartolacci, Dean of the Facultad de Ciencia Política y Relaciones Internacionales, Universidad Nacional de Rosario in his tribute to O'Donnell. <http://kellogg.nd.edu/odonnell/letters/bartolacci.pdf>

characteristics of democracies worldwide into a more adequate and encompassing theory of democracy. This was not an easy task and, being a solitary writer, it took him ten years to produce and publish *Democracy, Agency and the State: Theory with Comparative Intent* (2010b). Had he been critical of Schumpeter's view on democracy, he now also distanced himself further from Dahl, arguing that Dahl's polyarchy largely concerns the democratic regime, rather than two other essential elements of democracy: citizenship and the rule of law. This led him to analyse the role of citizens as change agents and as 'the micro-foundation of democracy' versus the macro-foundation represented by the state (O'Donnell, 2010b: 204). With the use of the concept 'human agency', O'Donnell demonstrated the influence of Sen's ideas on human development, which led him to see the citizen as a social and political agent. His effort to lay the foundation for a new theoretical understanding of democracy in the framework of comparative politics was challenging, though it certainly was not meant to be prescriptive.

The book was received as an important contribution to the conceptual and normative underpinning of research on democracy (Munck, 2011: 339) and as 'a telling legacy of one of the foremost political scholars of our time' (Panizza, 2013: 378). Others, though, were slightly disappointed: O'Donnell seemed to be more concerned with the struggle of citizens for democracy (a theory of democratization) rather than providing a new theory of democracy (Vargas Cullel, 2014: 328). One of his closest friends Laurence Whitehead considered *Democracy, Agency and the State* as 'his ultimate intellectual testament' as it was his 'most fully integrated statement of his closing beliefs and conclusions' (Whitehead, 2014: 333). Another friend from Argentina recalls how they presented and discussed the Spanish version in April 2011 during the *Feria de Libros* in Buenos Aires (Strasser, 2012).

O'Donnell died in November 2011, at the age of 75. His death was sudden and many of his friends were unable to attend the memorial service held at the Recoleta cemetery in Buenos Aires. The Kellogg Centre for International Studies at the University of Notre Dame created a tribute web page and organized a seminar a few months later with colleagues and friends to commemorate the life and work of Guillermo O'Donnell.<sup>7</sup> In the following years, several special journal issues were produced in acknowledgement of O'Donnell's contribution to the study of democracy.<sup>8</sup>

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7. The papers of the seminar were later published in Brinks et al. (2014), see <http://kellogg.nd.edu/odonnell/arschedule.shtml>

8. See the June 2012 issue of *Comparative Democratization*, and the April 2013 issue of the *Journal of Democracy*.



## O'DONNELL'S SIGNIFICANCE FOR DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

During his life O'Donnell was praised for his immense intellectual contribution to the study of regime change and democratization. He received awards from his academic peers at the Latin America Studies Association, from the International Political Science Association (where he served as president, 1988–91), and he also became a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He was a vice-president of the American Political Science Association (1999–2000) and received several other fellowships and awards. There are very few political scientists of recent generations who received such widespread recognition from both the North American as well as the Latin American academic community, and even beyond the Americas. Alan Angell (a Chilean professor based at Oxford) remarked in a memorial: 'It would be difficult to think of anyone who has made a greater contribution to the study of democracy and of Latin America than Guillermo' (Angell, 2011). Miguel Centeno — a Latin American scholar of Cuban origin at Princeton — nominated O'Donnell in 2010 for the Albert Hirschmann social science award:

I would argue that O'Donnell is the most important Latin American social analyst of the last 40 years. His is not the significance of a theoretical hedgehog such as Cardoso, but of an incredibly insightful fox who brilliantly captured the various eras and paradigms through which Latin America moved during this period. You could argue that if you had to select one author with which to introduce students to contemporary Latin America, there is no one on O'Donnell's level; the last few decades of the region's foibles, challenges, and triumphs are all in the pages of his work.<sup>9</sup>

What made O'Donnell such an outstanding scholar on authoritarianism, regime change and democratization? Looking back on his life and work, four elements stand out. The first element is that O'Donnell was always a sharp observer of political realities, that is, of those realities that often obscure underlying issues or problematic and complex processes. O'Donnell instinctively noticed these issues and was often the first to point at, for example, the internal contradictions of authoritarian regimes (between hard-liners and soft-liners), the shortcomings of newly established democracies, as well as the relationships between macro- and micro-processes of democratization. Whitehead (2014) noted this quality of O'Donnell, evidenced by his constant dissection of political practices in Latin America, asking questions, and challenging universalistic approaches. What also helped him was an impressive network of close friends and key intellectuals throughout the region, which included many academics who later became ministers (such as Alejandro Foxley in Chile) or presidents (Ricardo Lagos in Chile, and Fernando

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9. O'Donnell was not awarded the Albert O. Hirschmann Prize, which went in 2011 to Benedict Anderson. Nevertheless, Centeno decided to share the full version of his recommendation with the Kellogg Center, *in memoriam*. See <https://kellogg.nd.edu/odonnell/letters/centeno.pdf>

Enrique Cardoso in Brazil), as well as more radical political leaders of smaller parties and of social movements. O'Donnell also did not (any longer) make generalizations about his home country in relation to democratic breakdown or democratization, correctly observing how often Argentina occupied an exceptional political position in the region.

A second element is the impressive intellectual creativity with which O'Donnell managed to craft these issues into key theoretical contributions to the study of comparative politics. Take the term 'bureaucratic authoritarianism': O'Donnell recalled how he first was inspired by his Yale teacher and mentor David Apter, who had written about 'bureaucratic systems' in Africa. Another teacher, Juan Linz, had just published an article on 'authoritarian Spain', and he discussed this with his third teacher, Alfred Stepan, a young Brazilian who had written his PhD thesis on the post-1964 military regime of Brazil. O'Donnell creatively brought these lines together, asking critical questions and inserting empirical notions from Brazil and Argentina into a theory of bureaucratic authoritarianism (O'Donnell, 2010b: 2). Some could argue that it was pure coincidence that *Modernization and Bureaucratic Authoritarianism* (1973/1979a) was published in exactly the same year (1973) as the military coups in Chile and Uruguay, which boosted attention for the book. However, it was more likely that it was O'Donnell's finesse which allowed him to foresee already in the early 1980s that 'transitions from authoritarian rule' were in the making also beyond Latin America, when Samuel Huntington was still rather pessimistic about the prospects for 'democracy's third wave'.

The third element is O'Donnell's ability to generalize about big moral questions, without trying to come up with the universalistic explanations typical of, for example, modernization theory. He criticized the arrogance of modernization theory in the sense that it pretended to be applicable to his part of the world in the same way as it had proven to apply in the richer parts of the world. O'Donnell was a committed observer and analyst of political processes in Brazil and Argentina, the two leading Latin American countries. He hated the quick and dirty research done by some of his academic colleagues 'who come to Argentina, stay for two weeks in the centre of Buenos Aires, and dispense, as their fellow economists do, ready-made prescriptions about what to do with the judiciary, congress, or how to extend the rule of law, reform the police, or whatever, to poor natives whose language they hardly speak' (Munck and Snyder, 2007: 293–4). Having said that, O'Donnell did not narrowly focus on Argentina and Brazil, and actually tried to develop an all-embracing theory of democratization on the basis of his profound understanding of these processes. Perhaps this was too ambitious after all. What distinguishes him was his awareness of the limitations and dangers of gross generalizations, coupled with the conviction that universal theorizing lies at the heart of all social sciences (Mainwaring et al., 2014: 362).

A fourth reason is that he only worked on issues that really interested him, and in ways that suited his preferences, for he was an unconventional

academic — certainly by North American standards. He generally preferred to write essays to discuss and present his broad general theories and ideas, whereas nowadays methodological rigour would be required by the top political science journals. Mainwaring et al. (2014: 354) mention this feature, adding that not only O'Donnell, but also other scholars who for many decades defined the agenda of democratization studies (such as Schmitter, Stepan and Linz), never actually published in the top US political science journals such as the *American Political Science Review* or the *Journal of Politics*. What sets O'Donnell further apart is that he came to study political science from the motivation of a student union leader: in his heart he was a scholar-activist who also wanted to provide hope with his analyses, which typically were illustrated by his examination in the 'little green book' of the crucial role of the soft-liners in opening up an authoritarian coalition. He was genuinely passionate about real political issues, also at the micro level, demonstrating his commitment to the struggle of citizens to building democratic institutions, but generally sticking to a humble position.

After his return to Argentina in 2009 when he was already a 'grand old man' of political science (Schmitter would later call him 'the Argentinean Max Weber'), he remained approachable even though many had the sense that he indeed had something of a divine touch. The medical doctor in Buenos Aires who treated O'Donnell in the last months of his life wrote in her tribute: 'I will never forget the day we first met, without knowing that the person in front of me was this giant of political science worldwide. After inviting me to a ceremony where they declared him honorary citizen of the autonomous city of Buenos Aires I realized what a renowned person he was, but he had not said a word about it. This illustrates his humility, which only characterizes the greatest personalities'.<sup>10</sup>

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10. Author's translation of excerpt from a public letter by Carolina Scotto Vilas to O'Donnell's widow Gabriela, dated 29 February 2012.

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