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“Did Somebody Say ‘Transition’?”
A Critical Intervention into the Use
of a Notion

From the time of its introduction, the concept of ‘transition’ has effected a tectonic shift in our understanding of post-socialism. In the process which has taken place during the last couple of decades after the collapse of East European socialist regimes, it has become transformed from one of the signifiers of the political and social change which occurred into a cornerstone for thinking, analyzing and predicting the future of post-socialism. Furthermore, in this article it is posited that all the political and social processes occurring in the ex-socialist countries are defined in relation to transition as an all-encompassing form of post-socialist experience. Relying on the discursive theory of Ernesto Laclau, this article attempts to consider together the usually separated questions of epistemology and ontology, and to ask what is the connection between scientific origins of the concept of transition and its political legitimacy. We claim that transition is a “sutured” structure composed of various social experiences and political strategies, which naturalizes and universalizes the contingent power struggles that are taking place and will take place in the future of post-socialist countries. Therefore, severing the existing bonds between transition and the actually existing post-socialism is a necessary precondition for creating a more complex and productive understanding of the societies of East and South East Europe.

Keywords: contingency, discourse analysis, Eastern Europe, Ernesto Laclau, post-socialism, transition, transitology

Insofar as an act of institution has been successful, a “forgetting of the origins” tends to occur; the system of possible alternatives tends to vanish and the traces of the original contingency to fade. In this way, the instituted tends to assume the form of a mere objective presence.

Laclau 1990, 34

Introduction

When the post-history of the dissolution of the East European Bloc is written, as well as the consequent transformation of states and societies of South-East (SEE) and East Europe (EE) and their accession to the European Union (EU), the term ‘transition’ will stand out as the dominant term in the understanding of societies of that time. Although its use has been ostensibly less than frequent in the last half-decade, if not more, in both academia as well as the public, inasmuch as the set of problems which it encompassed were apparently over (especially institutional and political reforms), with only a few serious contenders transition has been one of pivotal terms in the way former socialist societies have narrated their transformation from authoritarian societies with planned economies to democratic and free market societies.¹ As a concept, transition aims to completely exhaust the meaning and scope of a certain society – in this case that of post-socialism – by encapsulating it in time (“before” and “after” transition) and space (“East” and “West”, the Balkans and Europe, etc.). It is one of the concepts which is defined as a result of painstaking and arduous work carried out by the academic community, but the power it yields is based on common sense. In this sense metaphors have a privileged role in the (re)production of everyday beliefs, thus forming a part of what Foucauldian scholar Giovanna Procacci calls *savoir* – an intermediary discourse between the level of science and direct social intervention the aim of which is to “create an object upon which [govenmental] intervention is possible” (Procacci 1991, 157). For example, the metaphors of “a young and fragile democracy” and “learning about democratic political culture” (see Kapstein

1 Of course, the material for this narrative was abundantly provided by Western political science. See Guilhot 2005.

and Converse 2008, Maldini 2006) are commonly used not only in the public domain but among academics as well. In another equally illuminating example, the French economist Marie Lavigne speaks of transition as a condition of long ill men who, after decades of illness and recovery can no longer distinguish between the two states (Lavigne 1999, see also Buden 2010). The concept of transition possesses a “real” existence which remains even after theoretical deconstruction; in most cases of critical intervention this ontological dimension is left out due to epistemological or theoretical reasons. In this essay we focus on the point of convergence between the supposed object – post-socialist experience – and its representation – transition. Our aim in this paper is not to add to the never-ending list of signifiers representing the SEE and EE states by replacing transition with some other concept, but to provide a short comparative analysis of transitional societies, or even to put forward a more or less comprehensive critical overview of transitional literature. We try to put forward a theoretically-driven argument for the overall rejection of the concept by accentuating two ongoing processes which are of crucial importance for understanding the way the concept of ‘transition’ aims to denominate these societies. First, we maintain that all political and social processes occurring in former socialist countries are defined in relation to transition as a peculiar and *contingent* (Laclau) form of post-socialist experience, i.e. as something lived and not canonized through the political optics of political regimes for naming. Second, we argue that by theoretically delineating the existing bonds between transition and post-socialist society, a necessary precondition is met in order to create a more complex and productive understanding of the actuality of the social moment which is defined as “transitional”.

Relying on a group of authors usually placed under the heading of “post-foundational political theory” (Marchart 2007), most notably the work of Argentine political theorist Ernesto Laclau, we aim to analyze the way in which the knowledge on post-socialism – and by this we mean both science and *savoir*, scientific knowledge and its political operationalization or policy aspects – constructs its object of study. Second, we question the discursive operations through which the named object achieves ontological consistency: in other words, we attempt to intertwine the usually separated questions of epistemology and ontology and ask what is the connection between epistemological and political legitimacy of transition.

The knowledge on post-socialism: objectivity, teleology and transition

Although the scope of the paper allows only for a brief analysis, it seems appropriate to start with a short genealogy of transition, or in Giorgio Agamben's words "the map of the migration of the concept" (Agamben 1993), providing marks upon which the contemporary use of the concept in social sciences is contingent.² The field of transitology studies was first opened up by American political scientist Dankwart Rustow in his work „Transitions to democracy: towards a dynamic model" (1970). Rustow aimed to disentangle the preconditions of democracy and its institutions while underlining the necessity and role of political consensus. His attempt to accentuate political agency over the socio-economic and cultural conditions of development theory was continued and transformed by the work of two American political theorists in the mid-1980s, Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter. Breaking away from the general premises of modernization theory, for O'Donnell and Schmitter transition was a concept defined *post facto*, i.e. in retrospect, with the explicit aim of probing the preconditions and the openness of transition from authoritarian forms of government to capitalism and liberal democracy in South America (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986). Wishing to avoid complex macro-models of social change, their minimalist approach defined transition simply as an "(...) interval between two political regimes" (O'Donnell and Schmitter, cited in Jović 2010, 48). The events of 1989 and their aftermath provided an ample opportunity to apply the concept in somewhat different conditions: the knowledge on post-socialism, which for a short period of time found itself in an ontologically and epistemologically open space – a sort of interregnum of meaning, a place and time devoid of dominant political signifiers – and soon became focused not only on explaining or understanding the changes that occurred, more often than not haphazardly, but in grasping the historicity of the process by clearly delineating its determinants and supposed goals.³ In this new context the theory

2 Having in mind the scope of this article any kind of overview is sketchy at best and, at worst, deficient or even misleading. Nonetheless it is necessary to show how – throughout the history of its use – the concept was plagued by serious theoretical and political issues. For a short but thorough overview, see Guilhot 2002.

3 As shown by Nicholas Guilhot, the concept of transition, which plays a pivotal role in the scholarly expertise which aimed to potentially "remodel global polity" after the fall of the Berlin Wall, was taken from Marxism and its concept of socialism as an intermediate stage towards communism (Guilhot 2005). For the purposes

of transition, which up to this moment has more or less accepted its epistemological limitations by focusing on insecurity as a main characteristic of any systemic change (thus more or less limiting itself to analysis of its micro-aspects), turned into a more general approach anticipating the future and providing guidelines for the management of political conflicts and the development of societies' full potentials. The ideas of progress, universal History, and objective and absolute knowledge of the political became the crucial components of this new dispositive knowledge. This multidisciplinary body of work with an explicit aim – to explain the transformation from socialist to market economy societies – become known as *transitology*. All approaches under this name, regardless of their differences, share a premise that transition is a “rational design” (Stark 1992), an institutional and political project which had only to be implemented on a specific social situation (Carothers 2002, Humphrey and Mandel 2002, Marody 1998, Stark 1992).⁴ This theoretical paradigm soon became criticised on a number of levels. Katherine Verdery, a prominent anthropologist of post-socialist Europe, criticized transitional teleology, claiming that the future condition of the ex-socialist countries cannot be “read off” from the development path of Western democracies (Verdery 2002). Chris Hann argued that what is needed is a corrective to transitology, which failed to explain the processes that occurred after the fall of the Berlin Wall (Hann 2002). Furthermore, Thomas Carothers claims that the Western epistemology is so deeply rooted in certain concepts that as a consequence “analysts are in effect trying to apply the transition paradigm to the very countries whose political evolution is calling that paradigm into question” (Carothers 2002, 10). Steven Sampson argued altogether against what he called “the adherence to concepts in the study of East European societies” (Sampson 2002, 298), be it, *inter alia*, “transition”, “integration” (Petsinis 2010) or, somewhat

of this article we should underline that, together with the takeover of the concept from Marxist philosophy, contemporary transitology and political science also inherited its problematic use, especially its teleological dimension, which itself was a place of continuous debates on the Marxist left. The most prominent debate on the transition to communism and its theoretical-political consequences was that instigated by Althusser's collaborators. For a theoretical overview, see: Etienne Balibar, *On the Dictatorship of the Proletariat*. London: New Left Books, 1977, chapter V.

4 This is especially true for the corner-stone of academic knowledge on post-socialism: economic science. For example David Turnock, the English specialist on Eastern Europe, argues that although the final destination of transition cannot be clearly determined since there are multiple Western models (but not because it is unachievable as such), each EE society creates its own adaptation by transforming its civic virtues (Turnock 1997).

similarly (and equally Eurocentric), “re-integration” (Pop-Eleches 2009). Although fully justified in confronting the attempts at “suturing”⁵ all post-socialist experience under a single signifier, Sampson is nonetheless arguing for the use of another concept – “post-postsocialism” – which, not unlike like “post-transition” (Tomić-Koludrović and Petrić 2007) is – in its explicit linearity and positivity – as equally plagued by teleological obscurity as the other notions he dismisses.

A significant number of authors (Verdery 2002, Hann 2002, Marody 1997) that took upon themselves to criticize transitological explanations did so from the standpoint of normative critique – aiming at the implicit political content of the process that was soon to be labelled as “shock-doctrine” or, a bit later, “neoliberalism” – while only a smaller number attempted to provide a critique of its epistemological “horizon” as such. Although transitology as a knowledge apparatus has been strongly criticized from its inception, its central concept of ‘transition’ was usually taken for granted. The peculiarity of transition as a theoretical form is that, on one hand, it plays a pivotal role in the field of post-socialist studies by defining the limits to its application, while at the same time its definitions differ on a case-by-case basis. Putting aside for now the differences between theoretical approaches, the paradigm of transition involves: 1) a universal view on democratization as a “one-way” process; 2) assigning political elites and institutional factors with a crucial role, and 3) neoliberalism and free-market building as its normative content (see for example Jankauskas and Gudžinskas, 2007). The dominant view of transition as a process – being based on an idea of transformation from one social model to another, and therefore defined in dichotomies good/bad, favourable/unfavourable, just/unjust etc. – is set up against the notion of contingency and the fundamental openness of any political regime to change. Therefore, regardless of the criteria in question – economic, cultural or political – which differ from author to author or from one school of thought to another, the rules for creating the definition of the concept are more or less the same. But when writing about it, if not using economic-institutional criteria, authors often eschew the definition of the concept altogether. For example for Michael Heller, paralleling conventional use (such as that of World Development Report, 1996), transition refers to “(...) the 28 post-socialist societies

5 Influenced by the work of Lacanian scholar Jacques Alain Miller (Miller 2006), political theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe used the Lacanian notion of “nodal points” (*point de captation*), a privileged sign around which the meaning of certain discourse is constructed by fixing (or “suturing”) the other signifiers (Laclau and Mouffe 2005).

in which some market-oriented reforms have been adopted but which cannot yet be described as fully-formed market economies” (Heller 1998, 623). We maintain that the deceiving simplicity and lack of precision in defining the term (as evident in the example above) is referenced to numerous epistemological problems approaching the study of transition, one of which is the lack of a clear theoretical framework. Since not openly over-determined, the crisis of the theoretical framework defined by the use of transition does not directly manifest itself as a crisis of a certain theoretical approach.⁶ Even as the political and social promises of transition are melting away, humanities and social sciences (especially, but not reducible to, economics, see Turnock 1997; Lavigne 1999) have a hard time distancing themselves and changing their epistemological perspective. The history of the theory of transition and the way it aims to fully grasp post-socialist experience as an experience of radical inherent instability of all social identities is a history of the transformation of its central concept, away from being an *explanandum* to being the *explanans*. Transition has become an indicator in a series of processes – cultural, political, institutional etc. – growing into an ever widening and conceptually deficient, yet rarely questioned, framework. Following its neutralization and consequent migration to other social sciences, transition lost its concise meaning (as in the work of O’Donnell and Schmitter), which enabled its narrative to attain a circular structure. Thus the meaning of the transition is always-already present in itself, with the task of scientific practice reduced to its simple recovery.

A second, and more important, issue is that transition is represented as a neutral discourse, a simple observation of existing conditions which *cancels the distance between representation and the object that is represented*. The social reality of transition is presented as non-discursive, while the dominant discourse on transitional reality represents its own self-understanding. In this sense we are not simply dealing with modern duality of ideology as error and reality as truth: as a signifier *transition produces the reality it aims to represent*. Therefore, if the concept of transition is both a theoretical and a political investment, every theoretical intervention in explaining the post-socialist condition represents a political intervention (and vice versa). It seems to us that rather than being a strong-point for ongoing research on post-socialism and a consequent basis for social

6 Although the absence of a single dominant theoretical framework is a sign of theoretical heterodoxy, it is nonetheless premised on an implicit ontological basis being, in Laclau’s words, a disavowal of the fundamentally contingent character of the event.

policy, this often-referred-to obviousness – supported by the incapacitating immediacy provided by the self-evidence of change – should be thoroughly criticized. Although the number of critics of transition is steadily growing, the implicit teleology which determines the conceptual apparatus itself – and for us represents the crucial aspect of the post-socialist condition – is usually outside the scope of most critiques.⁷ For example, whilst noting the deficiencies of the conceptual apparatus of transitology in the context of analyzing SEE post-socialism, Croatian sociologists Lalić, Maldini and Andrijašević maintain that “(...) some transitional countries had not managed to realize even the most basic criteria of liberal democracy, and thus remain ‘stuck’ on different stations along its [transition] way” (Lalić et al. 2010, 31). Thomas Carothers has documented a number of “qualified democracies” that political theorists use to describe various stages of political transition in certain countries: formal and semi-, electoral and façade, virtual and illiberal, weak and partial etc. (Carothers 2002).⁸ This kind of evolutionist view was already present in the work of O’Donnell and Schmitter, whose approach is often defended as “retrospective” and “open” (Jović 2010), even “extreme in embracing indeterminacy” (Haggard and Kaufman 1997, 264) when attempting to define a criteria by which we can “measure the rank of democratization” (Jović 2010). But the criteria for this measurement is itself related to the “minimal” or “ideal” level of “democratization”, defining therefore any departure from it as a deviation or deficit of the unequivocally defined regulative ideal. As sociologist Mira Marody has maintained, in transitology “(...) attention was paid mostly to threats and obstacles which could hamper the transition” (Marody 1998, 43). Since the declarative goal of transition was the creation of democratic political systems with corresponding free market economy institutions, the perspective it provides

7 For example, see the work of David Stark, in which he maintains that to escape from the trap of a single theoretical model forced upon numerous countries it is enough to insist on its multiplicity: “(...) we should instead regard East Central Europe as undergoing a plurality of transitions in a dual sense: across the region, we are seeing a multiplicity of distinctive strategies; within any given country, we find not one transition but many occurring in different domains – political, economic, and social” (Stark 1992, 18).

8 If further proof is necessary for Guilhot’s thesis about the history of the concept of transition, consider the quote from Balibar: “This logic of evolutionist approach is incapable of thinking in terms of tendencies and contradictions, multiplying the indeterminate stages in order to evade the resulting theoretical difficulties” (Balibar 1977, 43). Of course, Balibar was referring to the epistemological problems of the evolutionary current in Marxism and the way it addresses the theoretical issues of the transition to communism – though, the logic of de-politicization is the same.

constrains us to examine the political life of post-socialism only by reducing it to the “infinite task of perfection“ of the existing politico-economic constellation (Pupovac 2010). The epistemology and political praxis of transition cross multiple paths in almost countless names of aberrations and deviations from the proposed transitological model: one of the less conspicuous but nonetheless present epistemological functions of transitology is to precisely define, code and catalogue these departures. As an object that aims at scientific legitimacy, transition is defined by a mode of normality in which:

Excess or deficiency exist in relation to a scale deemed valid and suitable – hence in relation to a norm. To define the abnormal as too much or too little is to recognize the normative character of the so-called normal state. This normal (...) state is no longer simply a disposition which can be revealed and explained as a fact, but a manifestation of an attachment to some value (Canguilhem 1991, 23).

Since deviations can only be defined in relation to the proposed situation of normality, their only significance is to secure ontological consistency where there is none – in the process of *construction of the object of scientific analysis*. From the perspective of post-foundational political theory, transition provides a defence against the radical contingency reactivated through the collapse of real existing socialism. In Oliver Marchart’s words “(...) the strong [radical] notion of contingency implies that being neither impossible nor necessary is itself necessary for all identity” (Marchart 2007, 29). Although from the post-foundationalist perspective no stable identity or social formation can ever be achieved, both are necessary in their precarious forms. Transition thus functions as a *defence formation* against the experience of the fact that, as Laclau and Mouffe (in)famously stated, “society does not exist“, while at the same time it attempts to provide an answer to the question of why it does not exist: only it defers the reasons and therefore the possibility of its foundations (in)definitely into the future. This (in)finitivity of transitional societies’ foundations is at the very core of transitional promise and the crucial aspect of the concept itself.

Reactivating contingency: Towards a post-foundationalist approach to transition

One of the most influential contributions to post-foundational political theory is the seminal joint work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe,

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published in 1985 under the title *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (Laclau and Mouffe 2005). By deconstructing what they had diagnosed as a reductionist line within Marxist thought, the authors take conflict – renamed as antagonism – as their central notion. But unlike Marxism, antagonism in discourse theory is characterized by *materiality* and *subjectivity*: it represents neither a concept nor a category since it does not precede its own application, nor can it exist outside it. At the same time, it isn't exclusively reducible to it because its main characteristic lies in the fact that it is constituent of the very social objectivity whose part it represents. Antagonism is crucial for the construction of social relations and as such it is impossible to objectively grasp or represent it: "(...) the moment strictu sensu of the clash, far from being objective, indicates the impossibility of society of reaching a full objectivity" (Laclau 2006, 104).

The ontological stake in question becomes clear at this point: by maintaining that society is formed as a system in which every identity and practice possesses its own meaning Laclau established that, not unlike discourse, the social field is comprised of a series of signifiers characterized by mutual difference, and whose relationship can be reduced to minimal definition – A and not-A. In order for society to be encapsulated in a unity which is able to give meaning to its constituent parts, just like every other system it needs to establish a limit of exclusion, i.e. decide which heterogeneous elements do not belong to it. These foreign elements are assigned a new key role in supplying the necessary "material" for the definition of the society as an enclosed and meaningful structure. If one of the main assumptions of structural linguistics – that meaning is in fact the result of a negative operation of difference – is correct, then the existence of the whole is necessary since it limits the potentially infinite number of mutual differences. Another consequence of this ontology is that the breakdown of the dominant narrative is at the same time the sign of the breakdown of the social system itself. Laclau named the moment when radical contingency becomes visible *dislocation*, a term which in his later works written under the strong influence of Jacques Derrida replaced the notion of antagonism as an undeconstructable "foundation" (Thomassen 2005, Laclau and Bowman 1999). It is only under a certain conditions – such as, for example, the dissolution of a political regime, not unlike those seen in the late 1980s and early 90s – that one can encounter the groundlessness of a society:

This revelatory function of dislocation and antagonism is achieved when gaps, breakdowns, and interruptions occur at the ontic level of beings. The dislocatory

event brings with it an effect of unconcealment, which is the second consequence (...) (Marchart 2007, 152).

While the experience of post-socialism is always-already represented (since it is always the experience of the subject, which can only be the subject of a discourse), one way to think of post-socialism is to argue that it is *a space of prolonged dislocation(s)*, caught between radically divisive history and a hopeful yet elusive future continuously undermined. Post-foundational ontology precisely allows for the representation of:

(...) the failure inherent to representability (the moment of clash present in antagonism which, as we have said, escapes direct representation) becomes itself representable, even if only through the traces of non-representability within the representable (as in Kant's noumenon: an object which shows itself through the impossibility of its adequate representation) (Laclau 2006, 105).

This object, at the same time *necessary* – because it makes meaning possible and creates an enclosed totality out of a group of signifiers – and *impossible* – because the relationships of equivalence between the chains of signifiers, which constitute the system and which were created by the “extension” of the system, are unstable by definition – is an *empty signifier* (Laclau 2007). This “signifier without the signified” is situated at the very limits of the system and stands for its impossibility to close itself as a stable unity of meaning; closure can be achieved temporarily and only by a negative operation of exclusion by which the excluded becomes a pure negativity according to which the closed system is defined. By radicalizing these assumptions and applying them to social analysis we can differentiate between “society” and “the social”: ‘the social’ represents a discursive terrain within whose framework the meaning is partially fixed through suture points which are always the result of a political act which aims to create a meaningful whole – society (Laclau and Mouffe 2005). The political thus becomes the ontological of the society, a moment in which its social “form” or “quality” (democratic, socialist, transitional etc.) is decided upon. Because of the fact that Laclau’s discourse theory essentially represents a theory of political signification – i.e. a theory of formulation and creation of social meaning and identity – we believe that it is crucial for the analysis of transition as an empty signifier (Laclau 2006). Since power is defined as an ability to create the so-called “society-effect”, for Laclau a simple relationship of representation in which the representing object exists outside and independent of its own representation does not exist. Representation is not a secondary phenomenon which mirrors an object with an already existing and a “fixed” identity; it always adds

to the identity of that which it represents, becoming thus the primary terrain for its very construction (Laclau 2006).

According to this brief outline of Laclau's theory, transition can't in any meaningful way represent a politically neutral concept, something which, we believe, is the fundamental and unquestionable assumption shared by all parties engaged in the current process of negotiating its effects and consequences. *It is rather a politically articulated unity in which power and representation are mutually contaminated from the very beginning. As a theoretical and political concept its effects are written in the social reality itself.* Most critiques of the concept of transition do not touch upon this level, on which the "the society effect" is created – i.e. the dimension of political ontology which makes possible the unified meaning of the interpretation of various indicators (be they economic, sociometric, cultural etc.).

We maintain that the fact that transition is used to offer all answers to the post-socialist condition is not a sign of its strength as a theoretical concept, but a problem to be researched. As a legitimate object of knowledge and analysis transition possesses the structure of an establishing totality, providing a meaning to a historical process which by definition cannot have one. It functions as what Louis Althusser named "expressive totality" in which "each part 'conspires' in the essence of the totality, so that the whole can be read in each of the parts, which are total parts (*partes totales*) homologous with it" (Althusser and Balibar 1970, 310-11). Its can "describe the effect of the whole on the parts, but only by making the latter an 'expression' of the former, a phenomenon of its essence" (Althusser and Balibar 1970, 310), giving the impression of logical and temporal consistency:

If the efficient cause takes precedence, the final cause, the *telos* of the process of change, has to be active from the beginning: it is only as a result of this teleological orientation of action that 'becoming' acquires a being which it lacks. Becoming is intelligible only as far as it is *dominated* by its *telos* (Laclau and Zac 1994, 28).

Therefore, since its starting and end points have already been determined the possibility for transformation of the concept of transition is minimal – the only space somewhat open for political (or academic) discussion is the way from point A to point B. *Numerous different processes may be named transitional and, correspondingly, transition – as a totality of post-socialist experience – can only be identified from the position of its always-already successful outcome.* Therefore, a seemingly minimal and most common definition of transition as an "intermediary period" – what Carothers (2002)

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calls a “grey zone” – already presupposes an ideological mechanism of belief in the necessity of its final outcome. We maintain that this is the crucial part of the ideological background to the common language of “necessary un-popular and painful measures” (Jeffries 1996), a sacrificial policy proposed and/or forced onto the citizens of SEE and EE countries, (in)famously articulated by former Czech President Vaclav Klaus’s plea for “no half-measures” in social reforms (Klaus 1994). It is here that this ideological mechanism shows a number of very concrete – one is tempted to say material – effects: it allows for the dismissal of political issues – such as reduction of social benefits, education, health care etc. – as a simple management “cost-benefit” issue of investing in a future which is already clearly defined. Political decisions, which reproduce the inequality of power, are depoliticized and consequently coded in the form of social goals which require “collective sacrifices”. In order to continue producing effects, the discourse of structural adjustment must find its support in the consensus, which transitional authors avoid describing as political, since such a definition attributes a crucial role to power, thereby revealing the contingent (i.e. non-necessary) nature of the discourse, whose sole legitimacy stems from its supposed necessity (as expressed in the infamous “There Is No Alternative” or “TINA”)⁹. But the implications of eluding the political dimension of transition and postulating an unattainable collective agent (i.e. society) which serves as a theoretical “get out of jail free” card are far-reaching. As Laclau notes, what necessarily accompanies this kind of ahistorical agent which corresponds to and manages the process is the idea that the transformation of society can be rational – which seems to be one of the main, albeit implicit, assumptions of transitology; best illustrated by the idea of transition as a subjectless process of managing social “costs” (since, by definition, they are required by the certainty of a future outcome and can thus only be the result of rational calculation):

If this transformation is conceived as taking place at the level of a rationally graspable ground of the social, then the transformation is the work of reason and not of ourselves. A rationality transcending us fully determines what is to happen, and our only possible freedom is to be conscious of necessity. (Laclau 2007, 102)

It seems therefore that transitional societies simply reinstate one teleology in a place of another. It is only the teleological perspective of transition

⁹ For an overall argument against the contemporary dominant forms of consensual politics (of which transition is but an aspect) and the political philosophy on which it is founded, see Mouffe 2005.

that enables one to talk about its “costs”. Without such an ideological horizon of expectations the costs, such as increasing unemployment rates, constantly declining living standards, rising poverty, erosion of the leftovers of the welfare state, political clientelism etc., suddenly turn into its end results (Močnik 2003). As Carothers maintains, the often described “feckless pluralism” or “dominant power politics” are a state of “normality” and not any kind of interim state to be overcome (Carothers 2002). The *telos* of transition functions as a Derridean *supplement* which becomes an indivisible part not only of the paradigm, but even of the concept itself – one which defines the identity of each of the elements of the structure it forms: if excluded, the experience of transition would ultimately be reduced to heterogeneity and polysemy.

The transitional framework represents a key step towards political signification, an attempt at defining social unity as a meaningful system by excluding that what is heterogeneous to its structure. But herein lies the “trap” of transitional ontology. Its universality – i.e. the framework within whose boundaries individual identities are formed – does not represent only a particular logic which erases differences among individual identities, but rather a logic which becomes a ground that permanently “absorbs” differences into itself, becoming a resource for transitional teleology itself. It is only by limiting, or by paradoxically including heterogeneity in the shape of discursive negativities of the system, that transition achieves its unstable ontological coherence. For example, in Croatian and post-Yugoslavian social sciences these elements include, only to name a few; “chaotic privatization” (Katunarić 2004), “criminal or political capitalism” (Cifrić 1998), “(...) a weird symbiosis of market absolutism and (...) ethno-national state”, “transitional capitalism”, “belated construction of state in the war context”, “return to traditionalism”, “the expected reactive nostalgia for safety” (Tomić-Koludrović and Petrić 2007), as well as “undemocratic political practice with certain retrograde processes” (Maldini 2006)¹⁰. As an “empty signifier” in the Laclauian sense, transition thus allows for a metaphorical and representational closure which stabilizes the meaning of other social and political phenomena within the post-socialist context. Therefore a seemingly

10 The stance of transitologists towards the pre-post socialist past is representative of this issue. For example David Lane argues that “processes inherited from the past may hinder progress and the success of capitalism and market relations” (Lane 2007, 3). This position is brought to its most radical, but by no means infrequent, conclusion in the work of the French economist Marie Lavigne, who maintains that “most of these legacies, if not all, are negative from the point of a view of transition to a new system” (Lavigne 1999, 16).

endless series of metonymic displacements of the dominant discourse is neither a limit nor an obstacle to its successful functioning. As Jelica Šumič Riha maintains regarding the global dominance of neoliberal discourse,¹¹ *its structural non-closeness not only does not endanger its hegemonic status, but is on the contrary the source of its thriving and success*. It is only by a process of extension of the semantic field that a unique sense of the whole is created, converting previously mutually heterogeneous and foreign elements into moments of the defined whole. Transition ceases to be a concept (one among others) which is used to designate a certain period in history, and is transformed into an *ontological support to those theoretical approaches that aim to explain post-socialism: it creates a singular socio-political process and provides it with a narrative sense*. The end result of this epistemological transformation is the affirmation of the last dominant historical narrative about the end of history, or the inherent position of global capital as a continuous circulating structure whose legitimacy, regardless of its form, can only be “transitional”.¹²

Conclusion: A future (beyond) transition?

Transition has provided a theoretical framework for understanding a whole array of different social and political processes and phenomena at the crucial historical moment of one of the biggest changes of a socio-political regime in contemporary world history. Therefore, it is only natural to wonder why one should question a concept which aims to explain the profound transformation that societies in Eastern and South-East Europe underwent and which apparently does so more-or-less successfully?

In this paper we intended to provide a Laclauian discursive analysis of the political emergence of the concept of transition, analyzing it as a “signifier without signified” (Laclau), a signifier which, by naming, aims at creation of the very thing it supposed to represent. We have tried to offer several arguments which are crucial to understanding the political mechanism of representation which enables one to think or be “in transition”. A locus of absolute self-understanding and self-identity, transition at the same time represents a common denominator

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11 Unpublished keynote address at the conference “Thinking the political: The work of Ernesto Laclau”, University of Brighton, 10-12 April 2013.

12 For a view of transition as not only a historical but a “logical category” of capitalism, see Mezzadra 2007.

of everyday post-socialist experience as well as a central concept of the social and political sciences. Inasmuch as it defined by a political/normative dimension, the concept of transition is *ideal* and at the same time *real*, representing itself as a mere description of contemporary social relations and changes. Such a dual nature is defined by the mutual preconditioning of the positivist tendency for empirical knowledge about the changes which took place in societies of former Yugoslavia and other East European countries, and the normative dimension of the concept which is used to explain such changes (be it, amongst many others, modernization, Europeanization etc.). As a closed system of meaning, transition connects mutually heterogeneous phenomena by excluding elements whose common denominator is negativity toward the established totality. Such a theoretical structure, which tries to explain social changes through oscillations between normative, i.e. cultural, elements and economic trends, proves itself to be incapable of accepting the political dynamic of the process in which Society, as a defined and self-enclosed totality, shows signs of radical ontological openness. We argue that the transitional model is ontologically unsustainable and epistemologically useless. It does not assure the very thing it was constructed for: elements which would help us extrapolate current processes and create predictions for the future, nor is it capable even of explaining these without transforming them into moments of transitional *telos*, which in the end results in the hegemonic fixation of their meaning. Transition is therefore not only characterized by *epistemological blindness*, but is also *ontologically heuristic*.

As it represents an attempt at a neutral or apolitical suture of the whole post-socialist experience, it aims to replace the grand narrative of socialism not so much with another grand narrative – this time of liberal-democracy – but with a seemingly politically neutral and subjectless process. Analyzing transition as a subjectless process only serves to indicate an inherent quality of transitology – for it the subject of transition represents a plethora of voiceless acts. In the limited scope of this paper we have managed to touch upon only a small fraction of epistemic and hegemonic practices which formed the dominant logic of transition. Be it the quasi-mythical project of nation-state building, the new theoretical paradigms dumbfounded by the constantly changing social reality, of the paternalistic Western gaze and its accompanying interpellated East European political subject, all come together in the notion of a transitional society. But as already mentioned, a political establishment of social meaning can never be completely successful; that which remained excluded in the shape of radical negativity/positivity in the process of creating identity for the newly formed structure will always come back to “haunt” the very thing they

it gave its life to. Thus, these various discourses support transition by producing its excluded outside: the very nature of transition as an order which aims to be nameless, whose sole purpose is to vanish or be self-negated – the moment which is, of course, forever postponed – makes it possible to always-already include new causal explanations of ongoing events in what Šumić-Riha calls “generalized metonymy”. *Transition does not explain but makes sense*, thus operating under the guise of neutrality, causality and purpose.

We have tried to put forth a fairly brief account of transitional knowledge. In this limited space it wasn't possible to encompass all points of divergence between different approaches to transition, but we have attempted to point out some of its most basic axioms. Its causality makes all the current socio-political phenomena one encounters in the research superfluous, seemingly incorporating all kind of events as a mere steps in the process of its realization. And while its epistemological dismantling can provide theory with a far greater scope for analyzing post-socialism than its continued use, its ongoing political existence and its persevering teleology, interwoven with political desires and optimism, may turn out to be much more resistant.

Thus, these various discourses support transition by producing its excluded outside: the very nature of transition as an order which aims to be nameless, whose sole purpose is to vanish or be self-negated – the moment which is, of course, forever postponed – makes it possible to always-already include new causal explanations of ongoing events in what Šumić-Riha calls “generalized metonymy”. *Transition does not explain but makes sense*, thus operating under the guise of neutrality, causality and purpose.

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