

# Brazil: Transition and Reconciliation, a Cold War Strategy

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## Abstract

My research project analyzes the Latin American Program of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, from 1977 (when it was established) to 1983. The Center is important for Brazilian and Latin American history especially because of the iconic discussions within the social sciences about the transition to democracy and the academic and political repercussions of that process. Financed by the Rockefeller and the Ford Foundations, the Latin American Program was established under the direction of Abraham Lowenthal, with the support of a very selective group of intellectuals, including Robert A. Dahl, Juan Linz, Adam Przeworski, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Albert Otto Hirschman, Guillermo O'Donnell, Ricardo Ffrench-Davis, Leslie Manigot, Olga Pelecer de Brody, Thomas Skidmore, Karen Spalding, and Philippe C. Schmitter. The Latin American Program held three big conferences on the subject of transition and published them in four volumes in 1988, under the title *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Prospects for Democracy*, edited by Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead. Albeit the importance of the “Transition Project,” not much is known about the organization of the conferences and the involvement of different scholars, students, and government staff at the debates, reports, and meetings held at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, already one of the most important think tank organizations in the USA. In this project, I propose to explore the complexity of those debates, the agenda, and efforts to move from dictatorships to democratic governments.

## **Brazil: Transition and Reconciliation, a Cold War Strategy**

This project aims to research the creation and the role that the Latin American Program of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (WWC) played in strategies to support efforts to overcome the Brazilian dictatorship during the Cold War. The WWC did so by fostering the discussion and organization of scientific meetings, seminars, and congresses on the issues of transition and reconciliation. We start with the observation that the activities of the Latin America Program (LAP) established parameters for the discussion of seminal political strategies to legitimize political alliances in a new moment of the Cold War. Focused on reconciliation, these strategies explicitly sought not only to safeguard the coalition between liberals and right-wing groups that supported the dictatorship but also tried to stop the advance of left-wing currents into power.

Abraham F. Lowenthal was the intellectual chosen to direct and to organize the Latin America Program. In 1977, Lowenthal was 36 years old and had a Harvard PhD, which he had earned just six years earlier. Both the Woodrow Wilson Center and the Ford Foundation (FF), one of the main funders of the project, together with the Rockefeller Foundation (RF), had agreed that Washington lacked a place where firm attention could be devoted to inter-American relations. Also weighing in was the fact that Lowenthal was dissatisfied as director of studies at the WWC Council on Foreign Relations and wanted to become director of LAP, itself preparing to become the second program in a series of semi-autonomous units that the director of WWC, James Billington, wanted to create. In his favor, Lowenthal argued that he had participated in the preparation of the Linowitz Report (the Linowitz Commission's report on relations between the United States and Latin America, done in 1974) and in the preparations for the “Brazil seminar and the 1980s.”<sup>1</sup>

The project began to be set up in 1976 by Abraham F. Lowenthal and Albert Fishlow, at that time, a professor at Berkeley. There was a singularity about it: Lowenthal felt that there was a need to bridge the gap between purely academic

work and public policy. He ended up instituting the Latin America Program with support from Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Albert Hirschman and the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, which secured the funds for its start. In 1978, a proposal made by Guillermo O'Donnell (CEDES, Buenos Aires) and Philippe C. Schmitter (University of Chicago), with assistance from Abraham Lowenthal and Fernando Henrique Cardoso, was approved by the Academic Council of the Woodrow Wilson Center to be developed in the Latin America Program. The original name of the proposal was "Prospects for Democracy: Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: A Proposal for a Series of Discussions at the Wilson Center."

The emphasis on transition reflected the substantial changes that were taking place in the United States questioning support for dictatorships. American foreign policy, in this regard, had changed substantially, especially since Jimmy Carter's administration. As the United States National Security Council official Robert Pastor, pointed out, when talking of foreign policy for the region: "a commitment to try to improve respect for human rights and extend democracy, and a willingness to consult on the global economic issues of central concern to the area."

The implementation of a "decompression" agenda was the guiding principle for the process of a "democratic transition" for countries under American influence. The concept was to ensure not only the ongoing modernization process, but the safe incorporation of social segments into political life and the possibility of new political alliances, as well as the implementation of a radical change in the image of US foreign policy. In his book, *The Democracy Makers*, Nicolas Guilhot argues that intellectual elites and their networks promoted the conceptual field of decompression, in the way that Samuel Huntington pointed out in his many essays in the 1960s and 1970s. Thus, within this framework, there is one main assumption to understand the studies of *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Prospects for Democracy* that ended up being published by Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter and Laurence Whitehead: that a "democratic wave" would be strongly dependent on the ability of political actors to follow "realistic strategies" - that is to say, of reconciliation.

The Transition Project was developed between 1979 and 1981 at the young and dynamic WWC, crowned by the organization of three major conferences in subsequent years, with the presence of academics of great importance in the social sciences; Robert A. Dahl, Juan Linz, Adam Przeworski, Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Albert Otto Hirschman were the main organizers of the initiative. Besides the Ford and the Rockefeller Foundations, the Transition Project was supported by the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, the Institute of the European University of Florence, the Inter-American Foundation, the Helen Kellogg Institute of Notre Dame University, and from Nuffield College, Oxford. It ended up being the most important project of the Woodrow Wilson Center's Latin American Program and was not restricted to these three major conferences about transition. There is no doubt that it sealed the political and intellectual lines of the debate about the transitions from dictatorships to democracy.

As Lowenthal pointed out in 1985, the orientation of the Project had never been free from the influence of values: it supported a vigorous exchange regarding democratic values. The project also intended to “combine logical and theoretical speculation with empirical research systematization, focusing mainly on comparing countries in contemporary Latin America and southern Europe (“Latin Europe”).” The focus was to answer three main questions:

- a- What were the characteristic pressures faced by authoritarian regimes and the process that directed them towards a kind of transition regime?
- b- How would this pressure and this process affect the attributes and action capacities of political actors within these regimes and in opposition to them?
- c- By what means can the projection of a democratic result be fed in the midst of this transformation?

The title of the last justification in the memorandum, “Prospects for Democracy; Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: A Proposal of The Wilson Center,” presented to the Ford Foundation was elucidative of what should be offered by the project:

The long-term viability of a transition to democracy from authoritarian rule is historically and objectively underdetermined and therefore, contingent in part upon emergent proprieties, unique combinations and personal characteristics.

And the conclusion of the memorandum was very explicit:

Here is where the “thoughtful wishing” aspect of our endeavour becomes more evident. Systematic inquiry into broad logic of social action and bare faces of political interaction cannot be expected to illuminate all the complexities of timing, choice, and commitment which go into a specific transitional situation. Scientific knowledge from such an inquiry should provide indispensable foundation from which to select appropriate strategies of action – a “menu” of feasible courses of action and their probable consequences. This menu must be supplemented, in turn, by consideration of what Machiavelli mysteriously referred to as *virtu* and *fortuna* - the qualities of personal judgment, courage, and audacity, which enable political leaders to see and to create opportunities, and which give them the strength to survive and to persist in the face of unforeseeable adversity. We hope that by reviving discussion of these qualities of *virtu* and *fortuna* (or their contemporary equivalents) we can contribute modestly to firming the resolve of those who would seek a democratic outcome in the situations we think are objectively but uncertainly favourable to it. We hope, by focussing on the possibility for democracy, to encourage like-minded political leaders to act prudently but courageously in such prospective situations.<sup>2</sup>

The defense of human rights was also prominent in the Transition Project. The biography of its board members revealed this commitment: Albert Hirschman, in addition to being an economist focused on Latin American development, had participated in the struggle against Franco in Spain and against Mussolini in Italy. He helped organize the illegal emigration of writers and artists who were refugees from Nazism and was a translator for the first war crimes tribunal in Germany; In 1969, shortly after defending his PhD, Philippe C. Schmitter wrote an important report about the revocation of political rights in Brazil; Guillermo O'Donnell stood out as a political scientist who analyzed dictatorships and democracy; Ricardo Ffrench-Davis was notable for his strong opposition to the Pinochet regime's

neoliberalism in economics; Thomas Skidmore was a signatory to the 285 United States academics document sent to General Costa e Silva against the restrictions imposed on Brazilian intellectuals; and Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who at the time had a political career in Brazil, was impeached as a professor at the University of São Paulo.

The first stage of the Transition Project conference was held in Washington, in September 1979. The discussions were about the transition process in broad terms, seeking to outline the most general theoretical and methodological aspects for the construction of analytical tools and the development of a common conceptual vocabulary. As a result, several issues emerged regarding the origin, characteristics, and the appearance of transition processes.

The second conference took place a year later, in October 1980, and sought to deepen the study of contemporary and historical cases of political change in Latin America and southern Europe. Thirteen cases were examined, and the discussion focused on the importance of individual leadership and political learning in transition regimes, similarities and differences between key actors at the national level, and the international influence on regime change. On this occasion, the question was to work on the categories that had been designed in the previous meeting and adjust them to make the work of the comparative study groups viable. The study of each country served as a starting point for the comparative discussion of actors and instruments of transition (military, capitalists, political pacts, elections).

From June 4 to June 7, 1981, the Transition Project held its third major conference in Washington. The discussions were particularly focused on specific countries in Latin America and southern Europe and centered on the challenge of overcoming potential problems arising from the transition processes. This meeting also functioned as a kind of synthesis of the theoretical discussions with the selective use of cases studied in Latin America and in Europe (having seen the events of the failed military coup in Spain, which occurred in February, the military coup in Bolivia, the previous year, and the Brazilian liberalization process that was underway). Special emphasis was placed on the political transition from liberalization to democratization and the opening of participation policy to the

creation of regular mechanisms of competition that could lead to the transfer of power. The discussions also emphasized the way in which key actors could relate to each other during the transition process and, with this, seek to legitimize and delegitimize the regime at the same time. In a comparative way, Brazil and Spain exemplified the need to address the issue of “disenchantment” in the liberalization process.

Most importantly, at the end of this 1981 meeting, prescriptive conclusions were adopted. And from them, came the most striking outlines of reconciliation. According to the report presented by Richard Sholk, two aspects should be followed:

1. Develop more general hypotheses of the transition process from authoritarian regimes;
2. Focus more on the relationships of social forces and specific actors for the regime change process.

The issue of the relationship of social forces and specific actors was raised because it was thought that there would be danger in the tendency to focus on regime liberalization and to pay little attention to the social forces that opposed authoritarian regimes, as Fernando Henrique Cardoso had emphasized. According to the participants, these social forces could lead to surprises, such as in 1968 in Paris, in the Nicaraguan Revolution, and in the Solidarity movement in Poland. There would also be a need to place greater emphasis on actors outside the regime, especially the role of the United States and the increased importance of European actors in Latin America. If the analyses started with the configuration of social forces, it would be possible to perceive the power levels behind the transition process. Political pacts, the conclusions underscored, would be a way of setting limits on the arrangement of post-authoritarian power. There would be room for more in-depth studies of the institutions through which the power holders would distribute and protect these institutions.

The paper delivered by Fernando Henrique Cardoso at this seminar about the role



of the Brazilian business community was elucidating on the parameters of the Transition Project. His presentation, 33 pages long, analyzed the role of the business community in the alliance system. In the first part, a short theoretical introduction on the possibilities (or not) of the hegemony of the industrial bourgeoisie in dependent countries; in the second, the pragmatic character of the business community at various times in the 1970s and its criticism, pragmatic interest during the military regime; and, in the third part of the paper, aspects of the kind of involvement taken by various social sectors in the struggle for transition: professors and researchers from the Brazilian Society for the Progress of Science (SBPC), parts of the Catholic Church, some unions, students, journalists and lawyers. About the industrialists, Cardoso found a balance of their possibilities in the alliance. He noted, “one must realize what the industrialists' role in the Brazilian transition really was. It well exemplifies how this category balances out in the new system of alliances, without becoming “hegemonic” in the process.”<sup>3</sup>

The focus on transition demonstrated in practice how this question of alliances proved, at a given moment, to be one of the central strategies: the end of dictatorships through alliances and reconciliation.

The intellectuals who ended up publishing their research and opinions in *Latin America in the Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*, as an important part of the Transition Project, were: Fernando Henrique Cardoso, CEBRAP (“Os empresários e o processo de transição: o caso brasileiro”); Roberto R. Kaufman, Rutgers University (“Liberalização e democratização na América do Sul: perspectivas a partir da década de 1970”); Abraham F. Lowenthal, University of Southern California; Adam Przeworski, University of Chicago (“Alguns problemas nos estudos para a transição à democracia”); Alain Rouquié, CERI, Paris (“A desmilitarização e a institucionalização dos sistemas políticos dominados pelos militares na América Latina”); John Sheahan, Williams College (“As políticas econômicas e as perspectivas de um processo de transição a partir da dominação autoritária na América Latina”); Alfred Stepan, Columbia University (“Caminhos para a democratização: considerações teóricas e análises comparativas”); Laurence Whitehead, Nuffield College, Oxford (“Aspectos internacionais da democratização”). In these studies, there was a pattern of analyzing the

differences between democracy and polyarchy, democratization and liberalization, transition and consolidation, and hard and soft groups of militaries. For these “transitionologists,” businessmen, the military, the Church and intellectuals, in addition to political parties, were key elements of the alliance in the transition and consolidation of democracy. In this way, electoral re-engineering would become fundamental to the consolidation project.

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<sup>1</sup> Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC), Rockefeller Foundation Archives (RFA), RG 1.3, series 155, FA388A, Box 93, Folder 971. A sketch of proposed research of Abraham F. Lowenthal, in collaboration with Albert Fishlow, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> RAC, RFA, RG 1.3, series 155, FA388A, Box 93, Folder 971. A Sketch of proposed research of Abraham F. Lowenthal, in collaboration with Albert Fishlow, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Cardoso, Fernando Henrique. *The Role of the Industrialists in The Process of Transition: the Brazilian Case*. Washington, mimeo, paper presented for a conference on “Transitions from Authoritarianism and Prospects for Democracy in Latin American and Southern Europe” June 4-7, 1981.