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The Polish Games of Transition

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Using formal tools from game theory, the first phases of the process of transition to democracy in Poland in 1988-1989 are modeled as a succession of strategic interactions among political actors. Because the Polish process of change was temporarily ahead of others in Eastern Europe, certain false expectations on actors' future power in the middle term were entertained. These miscalculations allowed the communist party and the democratic opposition represented by Solidarity to negotiate and agree on a round-table. However, the results of the first competitive election, in which the democratic opposition won by a landslide, revealed the real bargaining power of each party, breached the political arrangement previously negotiated, and precipitated the fall of the communist regime. Some refined tools of game theory, such as the assumption of an initial state of the game, the conditions of imperfect information, and the order of moves, show their relevance to an explanation of the viability of strictly non-equilibrium outcomes in real political games such as those of the Polish transition from authoritarian rule.

Introduction

The case of Poland was particularly paradoxical in the processes of transition to democracy in Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s: in some very relevant aspects it was the first to begin, but it was almost the last to complete the first phase of the process with the holding of free parliamentary elections.

As has been widely repeated, Poland's transition to democracy lasted about ten years, in contrast to the shorter, accelerated processes of about ten months, ten weeks, ten days, and ten hours, respectively in Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Romania. We can trace the beginnings of the process of change in Poland back to 1980, when a widespread wave of strikes led to the creation of Solidarity, at that time the only organized mass-movement in opposition to communist rule in Eastern Europe. Although Solidarity had achieved a membership of 10 000 000, its action encountered an angry backlash by the communist government at the end of 1981, when it declared martial law and persecuted the movement's leaders and activists. However, in the early months of 1989, Poland embarked upon a new path to change, when the communist rulers and the leaders of Solidarity came to an agreement in round-table talks to allow the opposition a public and legal role, a formula which was later imitated in Hungary.

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In spite of Poland’s lead, while free and general elections were held in most of the other Central and East European countries in the first half of 1990 (in March in Hungary and East Germany, in May in Romania, and in June in Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria), there were no competitive elections in Poland until the presidential and parliamentary contests of November–December, 1990, and October, 1991, respectively. Path dependence in the construction of a new Polish institutional framework, which included an option for presidentialism, generated further political instability and, as a consequence, hindered the introduction of economic reforms. So, the country which had been the first to start political change from authoritarian communist rule in Eastern Europe lagged behind in the later phases of the process towards democracy.

In studying the case of Poland, it is interesting to note that at least two general approaches may be distinguished in the literature on transitions to democracy, depending on whether emphasis is given to the role of socio-economic structures, or to the importance of human choices and strategies (see for example, Lipset, 1959; O’Donnell et al., 1986). The fall of communism in Eastern Europe, where there were few of the “structural” pre-conditions traditionally stated by the former “sociological” approach as being necessary for a successful and stable democracy, seems to have lent some intellectual weight to the “strategic” approach, whereby processes of change are better explained as successions of dares, expectations, miscalculations, decisions, interactions with unforeseen consequences, tipping, and bandwagon games than as results of previous changes in the social context.

Game theory provides a particularly useful tool to formalize, make precise, and stress some of the most relevant aspects of these strategic processes. Choices and interactions between actors with contradictory and at the same time interdependent interests in the short term, as well as the characteristic uncertainty and stability problems of the outcome in a process of political change, find in the framework of game theory an appropriate conceptual instrument.

This paper presents as a succession of games the first phases of the process of transition to democracy in Poland which finally led to the round-table negotiations between the communist party and the democratic opposition. It should be pointed out that, unlike other “strategic” analyses of transitions, the definition of actors is here conceived as a formation and change of preferences which allow a relevant part to be played by external factors, particularly the influence of the Soviet Union before and after Mikhail Gorbachev’s rise to power. In order to introduce a dynamic perspective, a stylized representation of the historical situation at the beginning of the interactions or the outcome of one formalized game at later stages of the process, is always taken as the “initial state” of the next game. Also, the real initiative role of one or another player is formally recognized as the opportunity to move first in the game. These elements allow us to explain some “non-myopic” equilibrium outcomes, such as those in which there is agreement on the same strategy by players, as temporary compromises in order to redefine the institutional framework of their interactions. Thus, a negotiated democratic transition finds an appropriate formal explanation in an advanced theoretical approach.

Moreover, information problems are found to be relevant in some of the Polish games: whereas in the confrontation of 1980–1981, the relevant actors seemed to have a good perception of their interests and to behave appropriately according to their priorities, which led them to an outcome of persistent conflict, in the negotiations held in the months of February to April, 1989, none
of the actors seemed to have had so much farsightedness concerning their own and the others’ expected payoffs in the middle term. This has led to conjecture that “if the Party had known what would happen, it would not have agreed to elections; if the opposition had anticipated what happened, it would not have made the concessions” (Przeworski, 1991, p. 79). According to this, miscalculations on the future would have facilitated the agreement and a peaceful development of the transition process. We might add that it was probably because the Polish process of change was temporarily ahead of others that false expectations were more easily entertained. When the public was allowed to express their true preferences, albeit in non-competitive elections, the revelation produced a dramatic change in the relationship between players, a redefinition of the relevant actors, and the invalidation of the formerly agreed terms of the game. To put it briefly, miscalculations allowed negotiators to agree, but their mistaken expectations were also an encumbrance at later stages of the transition process.


The first Polish game between the communist party (officially, the Polish United Workers’ Party, PZPR) and the Solidarity movement (or the previous Inter-enterprise Strike Committee, MKS) in 1980–1981 did not lead to a durable agreement outcome.

According to more general statements on the basic alternatives in the face of an authoritarian regime, we can outline three strategies available to actors: continuity of authoritarianism (C), moderate reform of the authoritarian institutions (r), and rupture with the legal and institutional framework of the authoritarian regime and the initiation of a constituent process (R) (for a more general presentation of this scheme of alternatives see Colomer, 1991).

In the present case, C means the continuity of the status quo, in which the dominant role of the communist party is undisputed and no civil liberties are granted to the opposition movements. The opposite alternative, R, should be identified with the establishment of a democratic regime with free and competitive elections, a process to create private property, and a market economy system. The intermediate alternative, r, would mean the official acceptance of the Solidarity movement with restricted aims, and its integration into the structures of the communist regime.

Leaving aside the strict totalitarian structures of the Stalinist period, at the beginning of the 1980s this latter alternative would have implied a further development of the thaw and the limited opening up towards other political groups initiated in Poland after October, 1956. We should remember that the limited pluralism of that experiment allowed some participation in the political institutions of the system by groups other than the communist party, for example the United Peasant Party (ZSL) and the Democratic Party (SD), as well as the acceptance in

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1. On information problems and misexpectations, Bronislaw Geremek, an opposition member of the Round Table in 1989 offers an interesting point of view: “I do not think that all that was unavoidable at that moment and that place. Maybe yes, maybe not. What would have happened if they [the communists] perceived the situation in a different way? And what if they tried to solve it by other means? Perhaps we would not be there, at the Diet official building today, and we would not discuss in this way. The entire European situation could have been very different. The Berlin wall could be still in place, and perhaps for long. I do not believe in historical determinism, based in the principle that everything must happen at that moment and that place” (Geremek and Zakowski, 1990).
the Polish parliament of at least one genuine and independent Catholic organization, Znak. Similar openings were implemented in other Central and East European countries, in which the most significant political tendencies, such as the Christian Democrats, the Liberals, and the Social Democrats, achieved official status and participated in parliament and other institutions. Later, in the 1970s, other attempts to proceed to some "window dressing" liberalization in Poland were made.

The significance of this opening has often been obscured both by the repetition of "totalitarianism" clichés in the scholarly literature on the communist regimes during the 1960s and the 1970s, and by the willingness of the former collaborationists to forget that experience after the end of the 1980s. However, "totalitarianism" theory would not explain any process of change in Eastern Europe, since it assumed that the state control of society blocked any mobilization against the regime. Instead, the experience of sharing responsibility through non-competitive but plural elections and parliamentary mechanisms allows us not only to analyse incremental changes from communism, but also to understand better the degree of legitimacy of authoritarian regimes which allowed them considerable stability for a couple of generations.

We assume that the communist party, generically identified with the government and the state, and the Solidarity movement or, rather, their respective leaderships, are the relevant players whose interaction can explain the basic dynamics of the real process. Doubtless, the Soviet Union played a very significant role in the Polish game of the 1980s, but, since it did not intervene directly in the course of the events, its influence is incorporated into the priorities, preference orders, and real behavior of the Polish communist party. We shall see that later, at the end of the 1980s when the orientation of the rulers of the Soviet Union changed to different priorities, the Polish game also changed in a very significant way through the preference change of the Polish communist rulers.

For the sake of clarity in this formal exposition, and in an attempt not to overlook any significant aspect of the question, we assume that the two main players can only choose between their two most preferred alternatives: continuity (C), and reform (r) for the party, and rupture (R) and reform (r) for Solidarity. The choice of a player's last preferred alternative, rupture for the party and continuity for Solidarity, should be considered a complete surrender to the other player, rather than an opportunity for interaction, and its addition would not therefore add anything to the formal analysis of the viable outcomes of the game. That allows us to present the interaction as a standard $2 \times 2$ game.

There are four possible outcomes of the game, derived from combinations of pairs of alternatives: \(Cr, CR, rr, \) and \(rR.\)

The outcome \(Cr\) (in which the party chooses continuity and Solidarity chooses reform) means the "satellization" of the opposition and can be associated with a situation in which the Solidarity movement unilaterally accepts the legitimacy of communist rule without receiving the side-payment of legal recognition or participation. It seems clear that this situation, which would have reinforced the stability of the regime and assured the domination of the communist party and social peace, is the most preferred by the party and the worst for Solidarity.

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2. In the Polish case, even people with a very oppositionist background, such as the post-communist premiers Tadeusz Mazowiecki and Hanna Suchocka, were members of the Sejm during the communist rule (respectively in the ranks of Znak and the Democratic Party).
The outcome $CR$ (the choice of the party being again the first strategy whilst that of Solidarity is the second) means confrontation between the two players and it is the one which best represents the final situation of 1981. At the beginning, there was an outbreak of strikes and Solidarity appeared as a mass movement challenging the incumbent rulers. However, this was not only a situation of conflict, but also one in which the disparity of forces between the two actors, given the Soviet Union's decisive support of the Polish communist party, with an invasion threat included, led to the imposition of the party's power through repression of the rising opposition movement.

The outcome $rr$ implies an agreement on moderate reform between the two players. It could be rightly associated with the literal terms of the Gdańsk agreement of August, 1980, and the round-table agreement of April, 1989. The action of Solidarity, rather as a trade union with a program limited to economic vindications than as a minority parliamentary group, is accepted by the party, while communist power is recognized as legitimate by the opposition. The above-mentioned opening of the political system finds successful conditions with this agreement.

Finally, the outcome $rR$ symbolizes a situation in which the concessions in civil liberties from the communist party to the opposition are not matched by a reciprocal acceptance of communist power, but by reinforcement and increased political activity on the part of the opposition, that is, an overcoming of the official opening that gives Solidarity a chance to come to power. Obviously, this is the most preferred outcome for the opposition and the worst for the party.

So, the two players have opposite preferences in their first and last places, but it is possible to assume that they coincide in their intermediate orderings. Especially on account of the danger of a Soviet invasion which could bring about violent civil confrontation, and in view of their revealed positions and real behavior, we interpret that both preferred the moderate consensus and civil peace of the outcome $rr$ to the radical conflict of $CR$. According to the definition of Staniszkis (1984), Solidarity led a "self-limiting revolution," trying to cram a radical wave of protest and class war into a trade union.

Thus, the orderings shown in Table 1 can be stated. Remember that the values attributed to any outcome are simply ordinal and cannot be compared for different actors. The only assumption is that each actor will choose between outcomes according to its own preference order. In a formal account of all the six possible orderings of the three alternatives $R, r, C$, we have used the following lexicographical criteria to order preferences on outcomes: firstly, outcomes with a level of pressure for change corresponding to preferences on the three

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Continuist Party</th>
<th>Rupturist Solidarity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ordinal value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party</td>
<td>Solidarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most preferred</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Least preferred</td>
<td>r</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Keys: $C$: continuity of the communist regime; $r$: moderate reform with legal Solidarity and communist leading role; $R$: rupture and constituent process.
The Polish Games of Transition: J.M. Colomer and M. Pascual

Figure 1. Remember that each player can choose between two strategies: C (continuity) and r (reform) for the communist party, and R (rupture) and r (reform) for Solidarity. The first value in each cell represents the payoff to the row player, the party, while the second value represents the payoff to the column player, Solidarity. The single-equilibrium outcome is circled. Arrow indicates the move introduced in the game in 1980–1981.

Figure 1. The interaction between the two players is formalized in Figure 1. This game is the celebrated Prisoner’s Dilemma. Each player has a dominant strategy, that is, a strategy that gives to the player a higher payoff whatever the strategy the other player chooses (check that C is the dominant strategy for the player party: when Solidarity chooses R, the strategy C gives to the party a payoff 2, higher than the payoff 1 that would be reached with strategy r, and when Solidarity chooses r, the strategy C gives to the party a payoff 4, higher than the payoff 3 that would be reached with strategy r; symmetric reasoning applies to strategy R for Solidarity).

3. According to the above-mentioned criteria, we obtain the following orderings of alternatives (A) and outcomes (O) for the six basic players:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Players:</th>
<th>Revolutionaries (A)</th>
<th>Rupturists (A)</th>
<th>Reformists (A)</th>
<th>Openists (A)</th>
<th>Continuists (A)</th>
<th>Involutionists (A)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most preferred</td>
<td>R RR</td>
<td>R RR</td>
<td>r r</td>
<td>r r</td>
<td>C CC</td>
<td>C CC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>RC</td>
<td>CR</td>
<td>Cr</td>
<td>Cr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C</td>
<td>rR</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>C r</td>
<td>r C</td>
<td>R RR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>r</td>
<td>RC</td>
<td>rr</td>
<td>Cr</td>
<td>r r</td>
<td>R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Least preferred</td>
<td>CR</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>rC</td>
<td>C r</td>
<td>R r</td>
<td>R r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C</td>
<td>rC</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>R r</td>
<td>R r</td>
<td>RC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The orderings of alternatives are all the six possible orderings. To order outcomes consistently with the orderings of alternatives, we compare their “levels of pressure for change” in the following way: the outcomes RR, Rr, rR correspond to the alternative R; the outcomes rr, CR, RC correspond to the alternative r; the outcomes CC, Cr, rC correspond to the alternative C. For each player, we only consider as viable those outcomes in which the player holds its first or second more preferred alternative; when there are several outcomes with the same level of pressure for change, it is assumed that each player uses the complementary criteria of preferring agreement over conflict and holding its more preferred alternative. For a more detailed exposition see Colomer (1991).
The two dominant strategies, $C$ for the party and $R$ for Solidarity, produce an outcome with payoffs 2–2, located at the upper-left cell of the matrix, which is a strongly stable equilibrium.

But note that this is also an inefficient outcome as compared to the more rewarding outcome, with payoffs 3–3, located at the lower-right cell of the matrix. In our problem, the equilibrium is identified with the choices of strategy continuity by the party and strategy rupture by Solidarity, that is, an outcome of open conflict, revolt, and repression, while the more efficient outcome would mean an agreement on reform.

The standard uses of games in strategic form usually assume that an equilibrium is produced after independent choices by each player, in this particular case following their dominant strategies. However, in order to add more realism to the formal analysis of the Polish game, we can accept that it does not start in a would-be ideal ‘natural’ state, but in some ‘historical’ initial state, such as the uncontested domination of communists when Solidarity did not exist, represented by the situation $Cr$. This reflects the post-totalitarian situation to which we referred above. We may also assume that each player can observe the movements of the other player, which are not simultaneous, one of the players making the first move.

On this basis, the strikes movement which started in the summer of 1980 may be seen as an attempt on the part of the column player, Solidarity, to transfer the initial state of the game, $Cr$, to the left column of the matrix, that is, to substitute its moderately higher payoff 2 for its former payoff 1 (see the arrow on the matrix). With this move, the communist party would lose payoff, since its former value of 4 would become a modest 2, but it is difficult for it to avoid such a result.

Making non-myopic calculations and looking ahead to the further consequences of its choices, the party could attempt to improve its payoff of 2 by choosing the reform strategy. It could rely on obtaining a conditional and unstable payoff of 3, in the hypothetical case that Solidarity desisted in its rupturist strategy and accepted again the dominant role of the communist party, in other words, it also embraced the strategy $R$. Thus, the efficient outcome $rr$, with payoff 3–3, would be reached through these choices. In real terms, that would mean a reformist response of the party to the strikes, followed by a withdrawal of Solidarity to accept that limited reform. In fact, such was the meaning of the agreement reached between the Deputy Prime Minister Jagielski and the striker’s leader, Lech Walesa, at the end of August, 1980, which led to the legalization of Solidarity and other independent groups. To understand the move that Solidarity had to make from its rupturist strategy, one might mention, for example, that, at the beginning of the negotiations, the Inter-enterprise Strike Committee presented a list of 21 economic and civil liberties demands, but they decided to drop the political demands for free elections and the abolition of censorship. Instead, the agreed text included a political preamble underlying the acceptance of the leading role of the communist party. After signing the agreement, Jagielski was able to say that “the ideological orientation or the new union is clear: they stand by the positions of our constitution, the steering role of the communist party, and they accept our alliances” (quoted in Staniszkis, 1984, p. 60).

However, and looking again at the matrix, neither Solidarity nor the party had sufficient incentives to remain in the strategy of reform. Both had incentives to unilaterally shift again towards their most beneficial strategies, $C$ for the party and $R$ for Solidarity, which would pay 4. In fact, the agreement with the government was received with accusations of “betrayal” in the ranks of the workers’ movement and gave way to “radical attitudes of many workers,” while, on the other side,
The Polish Games of Transition: J.M. Colomer and M. Pascual

“nearly all the agreements concluded at the enterprise level were immediately broken by the government side” (Staniszkis, 1984, pp. 60–66). Finally, the reformist option was ruled out by the communists, who preferred to maintain their authoritarian and continuist orientation. A resumption of the confrontation represented by the cell CR took the form of an authoritarian response to increasing political demands. Some meetings of the Solidarity leaders, in Radom and Gdansk, in which a referendum on the Jaruzelski government, on free general elections, and on leaving the military alliance with the Soviet Union were approved, were taken as a provocation and held up as an excuse. On December 12, 1981, a Military Council of National Salvation, chaired by General Jaruzelski, was formed and it proclaimed a “state of war.” Solidarity and other organizations were suspended and thousands of people were arrested. The inefficient, but strongly stable, equilibrium of the game was reached again.

In this game, the efficient outcome 3–3 could only be reached in a relatively more stable way through coordinated moves from the outcome 2–2 in which the two players could use their reciprocal threat powers with similar strength and credibility. They would only be able to consolidate this agreement and to avoid temptations to shift towards their most rewarding payoffs through some institutional, external, or coercive enforcement, that is, through an alteration in their payoffs. In our case, because the game starts at CR and one player, Solidarity, chooses first, thus leading the outcome of the game to its unique equilibrium, it becomes more difficult to proceed later in such a symmetrical and balanced way (which would include Solidarity’s reversal of its first choice). After some failed attempts by the leaders of both sides to coordinate their moves towards mutual agreement, the outcome CR becomes the real outcome of the game. That is, by responding to conflict with repression, the party reasserts its dominant power over the Solidarity movement.

It is interesting to note that, according to this interpretation, the equilibrium outcome at CR does not imply a resigned withdrawal by followers of Solidarity to accept the legitimacy of communist power. In fact, the state of war was answered by a couple of hundred strikes in enterprises and institutions, demonstrations, and other forms of protest, which continued through the first half of 1982. Calls for passive resistance and to refuse cooperation with the regime and its collaborators were frequently made. Even when protests died down, that did not necessarily mean a change of the opposition’s preferences in favor of the authoritarian regime. Many people temporarily hid their feelings and opinions against the government, even feigning some support for communism, but it is not difficult to understand that this misrepresentation of preferences was only due to the fear of tough retaliations at a difficult juncture. The position of the Catholic church is particularly representative of this. After the declaration of martial law, it promoted a campaign of caution under the motto “Not a drop of Polish blood.” The Polish Pope, John Paul II, was the first West European head of state to visit General Jaruzelski. But, at the same time, many Catholic parishes and priests protected Solidarity militants and helped to preserve their links and morale, waiting for more favorable circumstances in which to openly act again.

Undoubtedly, this hiding of true preferences contributed to the intensification of the communist regime’s characteristic “rule of falsehood.” Public life, official discourse, and appearances were far away from sincere beliefs, private opinions, and real facts. Nevertheless, there were plenty of signs of enduring majority popular hostility toward the authoritarian communist rule in Poland during the first half of the 1980s. However, in 1987–1988 some polls showed less popular
support to the opposition than before, which led Solidarity leaders to miscalculate their own strength (see, for example, Mason, 1985; Mason et al., 1991). Our argument is that, paradoxically, the people’s failure to reveal their preferences fuelled a feeling of distrust in their own strength on the part of the Solidarity leaders, with significant consequences at the time of the round-table negotiations. Also, the communist leaders acted in a typical “wishful thinking” way and ended up by believing some of their own lies concerning the people’s support. As a result, when changes in the leadership of the Soviet Union and other factors induced the Polish communists to abandon the merely repressive formula to remain in power, they overestimated their strength and promoted an agreement on political reform which finally cast them from power. These half-truths and cases of misinformation were the main source of the “Polish surprise” in the spring of 1989.

The Round-table Negotiations

In the middle of the 1980s, after a long period of economic deterioration and increasing public inefficiency, the new leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev began to introduce some changes in the Soviet Union. Slogans of glasnost and perestroika, as well as official statements in favor of democratization, led in March, 1989, to elections to the Congress of People’s Deputies in which, for the first time, in one third of the constituencies a choice between several candidates was allowed (which produced bad defeats for some communist leaders). This measure would act as a model of reform to be imitated in other socialist countries. But even more important was the fact that, under Gorbachev’s leadership, the Brezhnev doctrine on the limited sovereignty of the members of the Warsaw Pact, according to which the USSR backed the authoritarian regimes of Eastern Europe, gave way to the so-called Sinatra doctrine, by which each country was allowed to “do it its own way.”

In this context, the Polish communist leaders tried for the first time to face up to the economic difficulties of their country through their own means. Initially, they issued a direct appeal to the people to build a new consensus on economic policy, with the priority aims of curbing inflation and external debt. However, in the referendum on that matter held in November, 1987, the communist proposal achieved only 40 per cent support, less than half the number of registered voters needed to win. This result was also an indicator of the strength of the latent anti-communist opinion among the Polish people. A few months later, in May and again in August, 1988, new outbreaks of labor strikes, by transport workers, shipyards, miners and a number of plants throughout the country, surprised both Government and Solidarity leaders, showing once again that feelings of opposition were very widespread.

Almost immediately, and after Gorbachev visited Warsaw, those same leaders who had played a major role in the repressive turn of 1981, and particularly General Wojciech Jaruzelski and Czeslaw Kiszczak, openly proposed “a broad round-table” discussion with the strikers. Notice that the reformist option in the communist party arose from the top levels of the army and the police, whilst other politicians, such as the prime minister Mieczyslaw Rakowski, were more reluctant to pay the price of legalizing Solidarity.

4. In Geremek and Zakowski (1990) there is also mentioned (p. 27) a poll of the official Center of Social Opinion Studies (CBOS), in which the support for the opposition was only 16 per cent.
Specifically, the 8th Plenum of the Central Committee of the Polish Communist Party, held on 27–28 August, 1988, approved a dialogue between the Government and the public in order to increase the number of groups cooperating with the Government. Trying to follow the same path as the previous opening in the second half of the 1950s outlined above, this proposal stressed the condition of accepting the Constitution and the maintenance of the “Socialist character” of the political system, which must be read as the continuation of communist control over public life. Not without resistance, which they overcame by a threat of resignation, Jaruzelski and Kiszczak secured final approval for conversations at the 10th Plenum of the Central Committee of the Party, on January 17, 1989. These tactics implied new priorities on the part of the communist leaders which can be precisely defined as new preference orders. Therefore, we will assume that, although being in some cases the same people, they formally became a different player in the interaction game with Solidarity.

A meeting between the Minister of the Interior, General Kiszczak, and the top Solidarity leader, Lech Walesa, on January 25, 1989, started the process which led to formal negotiations between delegations of the two parties from February 6 to March 7 of that year. There were several scenarios to the negotiations: officially, a main table and a number of sectorial sub-tables assembled in Government buildings and made regular statements to the media; unofficially, but probably of major importance, more informal and private talks took place at dusk in the Magdalena palace. About two dozen people for each party were actively involved in the bargaining and decisions. For the Government, besides the above mentioned communists, a delegation of the official unions, represented by the hard-liner Alfred Miodnowicz, was added to the negotiations. On the Solidarity side, Lech Walesa led other veteran opposition people, such as the Catholics Tadeusz Mazowiecki and Andrzej Stelmachowski, the “secular leftists” Bronislaw Geremek, Adam Michnik, and Jacek Kuron, the unionists Zbigniew Bujak and Władysław Frasyniuk and people from the Gdańsk area with a more centrist orientation, such as Jacek Merkel and the twin brothers Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński. All the Solidarity negotiators acted in a united way, without the divisions among some of them that would later appear in the political process, which allows us to consider them as a single “player.”

The reform project initially submitted by the communist party delegation can be summarized as follows. On the one hand, Solidarity would be legalized. As a side-payment, its leaders would participate in elections without competition for a minority number of reserved seats to the parliament, called the Sejm, supporting a common platform with the communists and their traditional allies, and would maintain social peace by refraining from calling for strikes and by curbing the claims of their followers. This new distribution of seats would reduce the number of communist seats in the parliament to less than 50 per cent, but they would retain their dominant role in the political system through other reinforced institutional guarantees. Specifically, the Presidency of the State Council, then in the hands of General Jaruzelski, would become the Presidency of the Republic, which would be in charge of defence and foreign policy, would nominate the government, would have power of veto over the Sejm, could dissolve it in some circumstances, and could declare a state of emergency. References to the semi-presidentialist model of the French Fifth Republic were repeated on that occasion, but the powers allocated to the President of the Republic in the Polish framework were rather greater than in other modern experiments of this sort.
In short, the communist leaders wanted to maintain their control of public life and the stability of the system, particularly its socialist character and its membership of the Warsaw Pact, but increasing its limited pluralism with the voice of the moderate wing of the opposition in parliament. In the middle term, they probably expected to turn the whole Solidarity movement into a new 'satellite' as they had done with the Peasants, Liberals, and some Christian groups, while buying time to implement some economic measures that would foreseeably strengthen their popular acceptance and de facto legitimacy.

The Solidarity negotiators basically accepted the outline and its prospects for the short term. On the eve of the start of formal negotiations, the Civic Committee that represented Solidarity at the round table made a formal statement of its position, centered exclusively on civic liberties and legal guarantees. At the first meetings in Magdalenka, they were surprised to realize that the Government was above all interested in a political agreement. In fact, economic issues played a minor role in the negotiations. Solidarity leaders ultimately accepted the communist side's offer to create a new second chamber, called the Senate, with few, unreserved seats and limited powers, and succeeded in avoiding the traditional plebiscitary system and the requirement to sign a common electoral platform in order to gain access to their reserved seats in the Sejm. However, they did not gain any compensation for the austerity policy in the economic field, such as a mobile scale of salaries.

It is important to note that the participation of Solidarity in the "non-confrontational" parliamentary elections, as they were called by Kiszczak, was not seen as a concession from the party to the opposition, but rather as the opposite. The communist party foresaw voting as a way of expanding consensus to its leading role, and to govern "by building a broad coalition of partners." Communists represented themselves not as being in retreat, but on the offensive, and Jaruzelski in person repeatedly reassured communist militants and members of the military about their fears of destabilization, affirming that the party would retain its central place in Polish political life "because of, and not in spite of," the agreements reached at the round table talks. In their calculations, even an ambiguous electoral outcome would be sufficient to claim that participation had demonstrated popular trust and endorsement of existing political institutions. In the worst possible scenario, the communist party would retain control of enough seats in the Sejm to block any change in the Constitution.

In Solidarity circles, "a pervasive sense of uneasiness" was detected. In the eyes of some of its leaders, entry into politics on the party's terms, with the exclusion of only "the disobedient opposition," might undermine the moral integrity of its activists. Solidarity negotiators were ready to pay a price for legalization, but they felt they were taking a considerable risk in participating in the official institutions that had long been regarded as mere facades; they feared that they might be admitted only to more or less phony forums, with real power remaining behind the scenes, and would thus contribute to legitimizing the existing authorities.

In spite of signs of popular disbelief in communist rule, to some of which we referred above, the party rulers relied on the disorganization of the opposition and the internal conflicts between Walesa’s conciliatory approach and those who stood for continuing resistance. They imposed a runoff electoral system in the hope of winning many local majorities in the rural provinces. Official forecasts gave to communist candidates between one-third and a majority of seats in the Senate and, at one optimistic moment, the party considered the possibility of putting forward candidates even for the minority of Sejm seats reserved to be filled through
elections between opposition candidates. As for Solidarity, it fixed its sights on carving out a place for itself and gradually strengthening its influence in society; it would take advantage of legality just as a first step on the road towards the long-term objectives of political and economic reform.5

Transition by Agreement

We assume, therefore, that the Solidarity player maintained in 1988-1989 the same preference order on the four possible outcomes above presented as in 1980-1981: \( rR > rr > CR > Cr \) (the first strategy being the choice of the party and the second that of Solidarity). According to our previous presentation, this ordering of outcomes corresponds to the logical criteria of a formal “rupturists” player who prefers alternatives from greater to lesser degree of change: \( R > r > C \).

On the other hand, the party player, previously presented as “continuists,” that is, a player with an opposite ordering of the basic alternatives to the “rupturists,” \( C > r > R \), adopted a new ordering in which reform was put in the first place: \( r > C > R \). Using the same formal criteria to order outcomes as those presented above to define players in the first game, we obtain the following for the “openists” player: \( rr > CR > Cr > rR \) (that is, preferring, first, the outcomes with an intermediate level of pressure for change, in which priority is given to agreement over conflict, and then the outcomes with lesser and greater levels of pressure for change, in that order; see Table 2). The interaction between the two players is presented in Figure 2.

This structure reflects one of the three games in which a possibility of mutual cooperation, politically interpreted as an opportunity for transition by agreement, formally appears. Beyond the so called “agreed reform within the ruling bloc,” played by reformists and continuists, and the more difficult agreement between rupturists and continuists when a “sudden collapse of the authoritarian regime” occurs, the present interaction between openists and rupturists may be labeled a process of “opening to the opposition.” This model implies an initiative role for openists and adaptation by rupturists, and it is the slowest of these three models of “transition by agreement” in the pace of change, characteristics which both fit very well with the Polish process (Colomer, 1991, Table 4).

As in the first game presented above, in this game a deficient outcome would be achieved in the upper-left cell of the matrix, with payoffs 3–2, if the players chose their strategies simultaneously and without information on the choice of the other player. Again, in this game, as in the former Prisoner’s Dilemma, both players have incentives to transfer the outcome to the lower-right cell, that is, to reform by agreement, where both would obtain higher payoffs, in this case 4–3. But, to go there, and this is a crucial difference from the previous game, the initiative of one of the players is sufficient. It is not necessary for both players to make coordinated moves and use reciprocal threat powers with similar credibility. In

5. The official texts of the agreements are only available in Porosumienia Okraglego Stolu (Round Table Agreements) (mimeo, Warsaw, 1989). For analyses of the process which led to the roundtable, see Mroz (1990) and Holc (1992). For the feelings, expectations, and calculations both of the communist leaders and the opposition circles in the spring of 1989, the chronicles of Radio Free-Europe offer a particularly perceptive account; for the quotes, see de Weydenthal (1989) and Vinton (1988a, b, c). See also the accounts and memoirs of some protagonists and witnesses, such as the above mentioned Geremek (Geremek and Zakowski, 1990), the Solidarity journalist Gebert (1990), and some brief references to negotiations in Walesa (1991); on the communist side, there is the elusive Kiszcak (1991), and the detailed account of Kiszczak’s secretary Dubinski (1990).
Table 2. Preference orders on outcomes by the two players in 1988–1989

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Openist Party</th>
<th>Solidarity</th>
<th>Ordinal value</th>
<th>Rupturist Solidarity</th>
<th>Solidarity</th>
<th>Ordinal value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>r</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>r</td>
<td>r</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>r</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>r</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Keys: C: continuity of the communist regime; r: moderate reform with legal Solidarity and communist leading role; R: rupture and constituent process.

Figure 2. As usual, the first value in each cell represents the payoff to the row player, the party, while the second value represents the payoff to the column player, Solidarity. Circled is the outcome of the game. Beginning in the initial state that corresponds to the outcome of the previous game, arrows indicate the moves introduced in 1988–1989.

fact, in this game the inefficient equilibrium CR—confrontation—is not the result of two dominant strategies of players and it is not strongly stable, but vulnerable to moves by either one of them.

To interpret the Polish real process as a succession of games, observe that the outcome created by CR strategies is the final outcome of the first game, played in 1980–1981, and therefore just the initial state of the game played in 1988–1989. Starting at CR, we see that the party can shift first its non-dominant strategy C to strategy r, in the hope that Solidarity will respond with a corresponding shift to the same strategy r (these are the moves indicated by the arrows). This shift of the party to the low row of the matrix implies a risk for it, because momentarily it is going to receive its worst possible payoff, 1, but it is reasonable enough because, in the hypothesis that Solidarity would not act in the expected corresponding way, the party could shift again to the initial state.

For Solidarity, the shift of the party is an invitation to join its reformist strategy; the opposition leaders know that, if they do not accept the invitation, the party will re-endorse the continuist strategy and they will have missed their opportunity. They are fully aware of this because of their experience of party rule since 1981 and because, at the round-table, communist negotiators do not fail to reiterate that other relevant members of the party would like to go on being loyal to their traditional course of action. So, because CR was the real outcome of the previous game and remained as a situation of veiled but bitter conflict throughout the decade, now, when the party offers an alternative, Solidarity leaders have
an incentive to accept the challenge and to resist their temptation to stay at strategy R.

The most important feature of this game which serves to explain the agreed outcome is the following. Having achieved the more rewarding outcome rr, only Solidarity would be motivated to abandon this outcome, tempted to seek its highest payoff of 4 by shifting again to the rupturist strategy. It seems logical that the mere fact of making the previous move from R to r implies that Solidarity rules out this reversal of its strategic decisions. But, above all, and in contrast to the first game, Solidarity can now embrace r because, in the new outcome rr, the party, attached to its maximum payoff 4, would not have incentives to shift. In other words, after the initial move of the party to r, Solidarity can block the game and induce the outcome by choosing r also. In real terms, an agreement response by Solidarity to the first reformist proposal by the party can produce a real outcome of the game.

We can understand, therefore, that a strictly non-equilibrium but efficient outcome, such as rr, is reached in this game by using the appropriate theoretical and empirical tools of game theory.

On a theoretical level, we have taken into account the distinction between the strong stability of the inefficient equilibrium CR in the previous Prisoner’s Dilemma game, played by continuists and rupturists, and the vulnerability of the same equilibrium outcome CR in the present game, played by openists and rupturists. It is worth pointing out that an outcome is called vulnerable when the move of one player, although immediately self-damaging, would create a new situation in which the other player would find it advantageous to move too. Conversely, absolute stability is found when there is no reasonable expectation of an incentive to any player to depart from the outcome. Trying to model the facts in a more realistic way, we have also abandoned the simple assumption of independent or simultaneous choices by players and introduced an initial state and an ordering of choices (that is, the initiative of any of the players). Then, we have seen that, in the first game, the initial state at Cr and the initial choice by one player to the equilibrium makes it even more difficult to reach the efficient outcome, that is, an agreement on reform, than in the standard Prisoner’s Dilemma, in which simultaneous moves from an unknown state are supposed. On the contrary, in the second game, played after an externally-induced preference change of one of the players, because one player chooses first, it becomes easier for the other player to respond with the appropriate strategy to achieve the efficient and cooperative outcome.

It could be noted that, strictly speaking, the opportunity to reach an outcome in which both players coincide in their strategies, that is, an agreement on reform, exists in the two strategic situations here modeled as games of interaction between

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6. Some of the analytical tools of game theory used here, such as the degrees of stability and vulnerability of the outcomes and the importance of the order of moves, are drawn from the work of Rapoport and Guyer (1966) and Brams (1990, 1994). We have not used games in the form of a tree because, although they would have been effective in intuitively showing the temporal succession of moves, they would have clouded the possibility of counter-moves by one of the players that may induce some specific moves on the part of the other player. In general, the relevance of the theoretical advances and refinements we use is judged by their performance in analysis.

7. In fact, in the real world, the first move which makes agreement unlikely in the first game is a mass-movement "from below," while the first move which facilitates agreement in the second game is a political position-taking "from above." This aspect of the question reinforces the image of the starting of a process of bargained change as a product of political maneuvers and conspiracies in inner circles, a representation which is usually stressed in the literature on democratic transitions in the "strategic" approach.
two players with two alternatives for play, that is, in situations in which the pairs of relevant actors are continuists–rupturists and openists–rupturists. However, the formal characteristics of the game allow us to think that it is more likely to reach an agreement when the strategic situation corresponds to the features of the second game than when it corresponds to the structure of the first game, which is only manageable in situations of emergency (such as that which would correspond to a sudden power vacuum provoked, for example, by an external war). In the second game, fewer coordinated calculations and dissuasions by both actors are required to leave the vulnerable equilibrium; just one of the players can successfully initiate a move, that is, maintain a political initiative to which the other will adapt.

In spite of all this, we must stress that, even in the second game, the agreed outcome is not a strict equilibrium, but an efficient outcome which can be reached by the moving and threat powers of one player, which means that players may regard the agreement as a temporary compromise. In our case, they place the next stage of their interaction at the period after the electoral redefinition of their bargaining power, which always lends the future some degree of uncertainty.

In short, after the communists presented the reform proposal outlined above, Solidarity had to choose between a shift to accept reform and a foreseeable return to the previous status quo. In real terms, the agreement response had to concentrate on demobilizing strikers and insurgent protesters, and channelling the opposition's feelings towards the legal and institutional ways open by an invitation to participate in official parliamentary elections. In fact, during the weeks of the round-table talks, as well as in the later period leading up to the elections, Walesa himself had to travel to numerous factories, shipyards, and mines to try to convince strikers to postpone and moderate the expression of their anger. It is also significant of these tensions that, at that negotiating time, a radical wing of the movement founded Fighting Solidarity, a group of dissidents who promoted a boycott of elections; and, later, many local organizations of Solidarity pressured and campaigned against the recommendation to vote for all the agreed communist candidates, urging their followers to vote only for those of the opposition.

This resistance to the acceptance of reform by some groups of the rupturist opposition was to an extent paralleled by a resistance to agreement within the communist party, which publicly appeared mainly as an obstinate disagreement with some terms of the economic forecast among the official unions. In some cases, this dissension undoubtedly indicated the presence in the real political arena of actors others than those here formalized, that is, players with different preference orders on the same outcomes. But we can also introduce these resistances into the game as internal pressures on the negotiators from people with the same preferences in favor of holding strategies C and R respectively. This interpretation does not require us to assume that those dissenting actors had different information or different interpretations of the real situation, but simply that they made different calculations on the risks and the expected reciprocal behaviors of the other players in the same game that has been modeled here. This is also realistic enough and helps us to understand the complexity of the situation simplified in the form of a two-player game.

The fact is that the round-table between the openist communists and the rupturist opposition reached a formal agreement on all the subjects initially submitted for discussion and, on March 9th, they presented their shared proposals in a document of more than two-hundred pages in length. Its main points included, as announced: the legalization of Solidarity and its parallel rural and students' organis-
zations, with freedom of association and expression “within the democratic constitutional order;” some austerity economic measures; and parliamentary semi-free elections and non-competitive allocation of seats called for 4–18 June. The parliamentary seats were allocated as follows: in the Sejm of 460 seats, a national list and a number of local seats were reserved for the communists and their traditional allies, with a total of 65 per cent, while the remaining 35 per cent was reserved for the opposition; in the Senate (a chamber without legislative initiative), 100 local seats were open to competition. Therefore, the communists and their allies were guaranteed at least 53 per cent of a two-chamber joint session, enough to elect Jaruzelski as President with strong powers (although, as it is said, they expected much more). In any case, the strict communist party would have more than one-third of the Sejm seats, legally sufficient to maintain its constitutional leading role intact.

This project was just a redefinition of the rules of the political game that could be identified as an “incremental institutional change.” This is understood as an attempt by some players to renegotiate an agreement on formal institutions in response to changes in the relative bargaining power of players (for these concepts see North, 1990). The agreement was viable because it gave mutual guarantees on the priority interests of each player: freedom of association for Solidarity and maintenance of the communists’ dominant role, respectively. The expected chronology was as follows: non-competitive elections before the summer of 1989 (before the economic situation could worsen); two years without strikes in order to implement new economic measures; four years without competitive parliamentary elections; and at least six years with Jaruzelski as President.

However, the real results of the elections were a political upheaval that “breached the arrangement negotiated at the round-table” (Staniszkis, 1991, p. 80). The opposition candidates running for a minority number of seats got about 16.5 million votes, while the communist-backed candidates to a majority number of seats got only about 9.1 million votes. At the Sejm, only two of the 35 communists on the national list and three Peasant candidates (that is, just five out of 299 seats reserved for the ruling coalition) got enough votes to win the seat in the first round, whereas 160 opposition candidates out of 161 reserved seats did. A new mechanism had to be improvised to cover the seats reserved for the national list with new candidates, in an unexpected second round. In the confrontational elections to the Senate, 99 out of 100 seats were won by Solidarity candidates (and the other by an independent millionaire) (for the election results, see Pelczynski and Kowalski, 1990; Lewis, 1990).

These impressive and, even for the most immediate protagonists, unforeseen results fatally eroded the legitimacy of the negotiated project. Everybody realized that the negotiators at the round-table were misinformed about the real bargaining power of each party and accepted agreements that overestimated the strength and popular support of the communists. When the public was allowed to express its preferences, even in a limited way, the established lie which underpinned communist-dominated official life quickly vanished. The formerly misrevealed preferences against the authoritarian regime exploded and gave way to what has been called 1989, “the year of truth” (Ash, 1990). Although actors tried to remain attached to the previous reciprocal commitments, the planned chronology was rapidly overtaken by the new pace of events. The actors changed their priorities, and Solidarity, looking directly towards a more drastic change in the political and economic system, was going to be able to form the first non-communist government in Eastern Europe since the Second World War, presided over by the
Catholic Tadeusz Mazowiecki. Very soon, the traditional allies of the communists, the Peasants and the Liberals, decided to venture out on their own, thus depriving the communists of their expected parliamentary majority. Jaruzelski was still elected as President, but only by one vote and after four recounts, thanks to the organized absences, abstentions or spoiled votes of 36 Solidarity members. This did not prevent the abolition of the officially established “leading role” of the communists, the suppression of the adjective People's in the name of the Polish Republic, and the self-dissolution of the communist party in January, 1990.

However, in spite of the undermining of the entire political framework negotiated at the round-table and the bandwagon effect of the Polish example on other East and Central European countries, in which communist rule was rapidly toppled, the subsequent Polish process showed a considerable degree of “path dependence” on the misinformed agreements of the first phase of transition (for the concept of path dependence, see North, 1990). Unlike other cases, there were no revenges against the former authoritarian rulers. Also Presidentialism was maintained as a characteristic feature of the institutional framework. For this reason, the writing of a new Constitution was delayed not only until new competitive parliamentary elections had been held, but also until the new presidential elections (in which Lech Walesa won). Later, a highly conflictive situation between a President elected by runoff and a proportionally elected parliament, with more than 30 parties represented in it, generated a period of instability of governments and their supporting parliamentary coalitions which hindered the implementation of economic reforms.8

To sum up, we can say that, in some sense, the misinformation of actors made a pact possible and that this put Poland ahead on the path toward change, but that the subsequent Polish process also suffered damaging consequences derived from those misinformed agreements.

The Impossible Well-informed Agreement

For the sake of completeness, we shall look at what might have happened if the players of the Polish game had had complete and reliable information on their foreseeable payoffs.

In the light of the real results of the elections, the communist party would hardly have preferred the outcome rr, that is, the door to the elections which cast them from power, to the maintenance of its dominating role, either in conflict or acquiescence, that is, to the outcomes CR or Cr. Consequently, if the communist rulers had known what the electoral figures were going to be, its logical ordering would rather have been CR > Cr > rr > rR. On the other hand, far-sighted Solidarity leaders able to perceive rightly the misrevealed people’s opposition feelings as expressed through the elections, might have preferred the opportunity offered by rr to any other possible outcome. In that case, their preference order would have been rr > rR > CR > Cr.

Note that the differences between these hypotheses and the orderings previously used as realistic representations of actors’ preferences simply transfer the outcome rr from the party’s first to its third preference and from the opposition’s second to its first preference. However, in this new hypothetical game it appears impos-

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8. In the words of Wnuk-Lipiliski (1990), “the Round-Table agreement is more and more anachronistic and does not reflect the real balance of power; this very fact became during 1990 a new source of social and political tensions.”
Figure 3. Again, the first value in each cell represents the payoff to the row player, the party, while the second value represents the payoff to the column player, Solidarity. Circled is the only equilibrium of the game. There are no incentives to move.

In this game, the party has a dominant strategy, C, to which Solidarity adapts, producing the equilibrium outcome of confrontation, CR, with payoffs 4-2. Even assuming coordinated moves or appropriate use of threat-powers, it does not seem possible to leave that conflict outcome, which represents the situation created after the repressive turn of 1981 and the initial state of this game. On the one hand, the party, which is placed at its most rewarding payoff, has no incentive to abandon its dominant strategy. On the other hand, Solidarity could not expect anything from the hypothesis of its unilateral shift to strategy r; besides momentarily receiving its worst possible payoff, 1, it would inflict a loss on the party, which would pass from payoff 4 to 3; but if the party reacted to that shift by shifting to r, it would obtain nothing but a further loss to payoff 2, without any hope of positive response from Solidarity. Therefore, in the hypothetical well-informed Polish game, no player has any reason to expect rewarding reactions to its shift from the equilibrium outcome. In other words, if the players of the game had had complete information on the people’s hate of the communist rule and, therefore, they had been able to more rightly forecast electoral results, a well-known situation of sharp conflict between opposition and repression would have probably remained. Conversely, official lies concerning the popular legitimacy of the communist regime induced a confident agreement in negotiations and, as a consequence, a surprising defeat of one of the parties.

In Conclusion

There are a number of crucial points and findings which may be summarized from the above analyses. They affect the characterization of state-socialism, the theory of transition and democracy, and the appropriateness of the use of game theory.

Firstly, some characteristics of state-socialism regimes in Eastern Europe, beyond the totalitarian cliché, seem relevant if we are to understand the margins of interaction between rulers and opposition, and their effects on political changes. The recognition of a limited pluralism within those regimes, with forms of interest representation and partial participation in the political institutions, allows us to identify the possibility of an agreed reform of the authoritarian regime as an outcome of the political game. Both concessions from rulers and
from the opposition can then be better understood, leaving aside subjective accusations of betrayal or attribution of basic mistakes to the actors in defending their own interests. In fact, negotiations on reform are part of the strategies designed to obtain mutual benefits from an enlargement of that pluralism which would channel social tension and stabilize the situation. Specifically, the legalization of a previously restricted activity of the opposition comes with the side-payment of contributing to legitimize the communist domination.

Secondly, the emphasis on strategies and choices, which often produces unintended and unexpected results, seems particularly appropriate to analyse processes of transition from authoritarian rules. This approach allows us to enlighten the margins of interaction between political actors in a non-totalitarian regime outlined in the above paragraph.

However, an external inducement for one actor to change preferences has been relevant for the analysis of the Polish process. Specifically, changes of leadership and orientation in the Soviet Union allowed the conversion of the Polish communist rulers from a ‘continuist’ to an ‘openist’ orientation. Since it would seem difficult to explain the changes in the Soviet Union without taking into account the basic economic failures of the socialist-state experience, we must conclude that some “structural” conditions for political change (although different from the prerequisites usually stated by the “sociological” tradition) cannot be totally neglected. To put it briefly (although this would require further methodological elaboration), the structures appear as a more or less remote background for the playing of actors in the first row of the scene in the short and the middle term. However, not only the background and the point of departure, but the way to change itself, leaves its mark on the subsequent institutional framework and the working of democracy after the early phases of political change.

Finally, some tools from game theory, which focuses on situations in which actors have at the same time conflictive and interdependent interests, have demonstrated their validity for applied analyses of strategic behaviors in the real world. The realistic assumption of an initial state of the game; the importance of imperfect information of some players on their own and others’ expected payoffs (in the Polish case, in order to facilitate agreement); and the role of asymmetries of power and the political initiative of any of the players (formalized as the first move and the order of successive moves), are among the features which can help to explain the real viability of some outcomes which are not considered strictly stable equilibria in the standard theory. These outcomes can be reached as merely provisional results of the game, but they can be durable enough to act as steps toward further changes in the relationship of forces between actors. Thus, the process of political change may be better understood as a succession of strategic games, in which the outcome of a game is taken as the initial state of another game, and only at the end—often within the limits of a more constrictive institutional framework—is a stable equilibrium produced.

References