**“Pravda for Playboy”: Situating David Edgar’s *The Shape of the Table* within debates on transitology**

Pádraig McAuliffe

School of Law and Social Justice, University of Liverpool, Liverpool, UK.

Email: p.g.mcauliffe@liverpool.ac.uk

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**Abstract**

David Edgar’s *The Shape of the Table* is a near-contemporaneous dramatization of the process regime concession and opposition conquest of power that characterised the negotiated transitions in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and East Germany. It is interesting in and of itself as an example of how one of the UK’s most notable socialist playwrights saw the varying elements of accommodation and confrontation in roundtable dialogues around 1989. However, it has further interest because in adopting an agent-centred, voluntaristic and bargained conception of transition, Edgar reflected and anticipated the initial scholarly response to these processes. While this “transitology” literature was later critiqued from the left for its liberal teleological bias and blindness to economic inequality in Eastern Europe, *The Shape of the Table* shows a greater awareness of the incipient dangers of liberal transition like poverty, apathy and ethnonationalism than this literature achieved at the time.

**Key words**: transitology, civil society, elites, post-Communism, liberalisation

**Introduction**

The pacted transitions to democracy in East-Central Europe (Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia and the German Democratic Republic) involved the renegotiation not only of government but the very nature of these states as political entities. The structure of the economy and the nature of citizenship would change fundamentally as Communist rulers gave way to democracies approximating Western European norms. New leaders in these states had to grapple with how to break with authoritarian rule, elicit the co-operation (or non-obstruction) of the former rulers and to build new democratic institutions. Before these transitions happened, scholars had developed concepts and analytical categories to assess the prospects for democratisation in state socialist regimes that were premised on levels of economic development or “modernisation” (Ekiert 289). However, once it became clear that the substance of transition in East-Central Europe was being driven less by structural factors like economic stratification or empowerment of the middle-classes than by negotiations between elites, a different lens through which to discuss post-socialist democratisation emerged in the apparent theoretical vacuum. The field of comparative politics began to adapt a specialised branch of study called transitology originally formulated to explain democratic transition from authoritarianism in Southern Europe (Greece, Spain, Portugal) and Latin America to the Eastern European context. Transitology foregrounded inter-elite attitudes, behaviour and negotiations in “roundtables”, best defined as formalized, orderly and legalistic discussions between the leaders of Communist regimes and dissident civil society elites in an attempt to defuse growing social unrest. Whereas once, government and civil society elites were considered relevant to democratisation only to the extent they gave relatively passive effect to long-term structural development and social forces they represented, now the comparative politics literature posited democratisation as essentially the by-product of their active, voluntaristic negotiation and decision-making (Bunce 708). Social change was considered “not as an autonomous social process, but as the realisation of the designs of a vanguard” (Guilhot 236).

 It is fitting that these “actor-based” approaches that emphasised contentious discussion and individual agency should attract the attention of a dramatist. Indeed, the published transcripts of roundtable discussions in Czechoslovakia “are sometimes so dramatic and so pointed that one wonders whether the playwright/president [Vaclav Havel] might not have “laid his invisible hand” on the book” (Calda 135). However, this only became apparent much later. At the time, the roundtables were something of a black box – Bermeo, for example lamented the fact that the decision-making relevant to democratisation took place “behind closed doors” and that as a result “understanding of decision making is necessarily weak because the decision makers themselves are operating with such low levels of information (386-387). There is probably nothing that scholars can do to remedy this.” Though the transition process would quickly give rise to “Himalayas” of published and unpublished research (Korbonski 139), in the year or two surrounding the fall of the Berlin Wall, there was little opportunity to peer inside the black box.[[1]](#footnote-1) It was natural, therefore, that a playwright might attempt to imagine how these negotiations were undertaken. David Edgar, one of the foremost socialist dramatists in the UK, stepped into the breach with *The Shape of the Table*, a treatment of roundtable negotiations in an unnamed East-Central European country. His plays have long been animated by the notion that “dramatic fiction can uniquely illuminate certain aspects of public life”. In a 1988 work *The Second Time as Farce: Reflections on the Drama of Mean Times*, Edgar argues that the power of what he calls “drama-documentary” is to be found “in its capacity to show us not that certain events occurred (the headlines can do that), or even, perhaps, why they occurred (for such information we can go to the weekly magazines or history books), but how they occurred: how recognisable human beings rule, fight, judge, meet, negotiate, suppress and overthrow” (58). As he noted in a 2003 Guardian piece, the negotiations, quasi-constitutional drafting and strategising that characterised the post-Cold War transitions in particular “fascinated” him. As he put it, “I wanted to really look behind all that was going on in the meeting rooms. One is very struck by the contrast between these grand, simple, majestic images and the detailed reality of the negotiations” (Clement). As this article goes on to show, he does this in the *Shape of the Table* by examining the ideologies, discursive techniques, compromises and clashes between fictional regime and opposition elites as political power is transferred.

 What is most interesting about the play is that it was written and performed at a time before these debates occurred. The play opened on 8 November 1990, one day before the first anniversary of the fall of the Wall. Most of the aforementioned Himalayas of print that articulated, complicated and contested the concept of transitology did not arrive until at least a year later (most notably Przeworski and Karl and Schmitter). Nevertheless, as the article later makes clear, *The Shape of the Table* depicts an agent-centred, voluntaristic nature of transition where “in each case the individual chooses responsibility and commitment” (Painter 133). This way of conceiving transition anticipates the comparative politics literature that subsequently developed to address Eastern Europe. However, the interpretative lens that was transitology was itself critiqued almost immediately. The first main source of critique came from the left. The core transitology idea that the true determinant of politics was the choices of political actors, as opposed to social structures, contradicted much Marxist theorising about transition (Guilhot 236). There was further disillusion on the left with the actual transition in East-Central Europe as forms of economic shock therapy were applied, featuring price liberalisation and privatisation amidst declining GDP and industrial production. This was thought to stem at least in part from the liberal-reformist conception of social change contained and reified in roundtables – transitology was critiqued for the teleological assumption that liberal democracy was the only conceivable endpoint of historical progression (Burawoy and Verdery). It was argued that the biases of this teleology led to faulty analyses that posited Western capitalism as the blueprint to be imitated and welfarism as something to be eschewed. The argument prevalent at the time that transition needed to be gradual, limited and controlled so as not to endanger democratic gains meant a concomitant rejection of any more revolutionary paradigm of social change (Guilhot 236).

 The second main source of critique came from what Sztompa in 1996 called the “dilemma of the morning after” and the “dilemma of the brief honeymoon” – while transitology might explain why dramatic but bloodless change occurred, it provided no means by which to better understand or respond to the challenges now posed by ordinary democratic politics and economic turbulence (306-311). While power was transferred from dictatorships of the proletariat to democratically elected figures, it became apparent that the first elections after Communism’s collapse were more akin to plebiscites on the changes agreed than they were to the normal functioning of party-based democracy (Ágh 117). Democracy had yet to be institutionalised as a consolidated system of predictable processes. The field of consolidology began to replace transitology as the main form of comparative political study.

 What is interesting about Edgar’s avowed ambition to “set the present in history” (Painter 1) is not simply that he adopted the voluntaristic and agent-centred understanding of political change that underpinned transitology. It is also because as a socialist playwright *The Shape of the Table* reveals the sympathies and suspicion of liberal democracy that leftist critics of transitology shared. Edgar wrote the play because with the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe, socialism at home in the Thatcherite UK looked ever more like a failed project. Consequently, he instead wished to rehabilitate the “enabling, participatory side of the socialist dream” even while he shied away from forms of analysis associated with it (Clement 8). As Reinelt and Hewitt put it:

Edgar, like most of his Left playwright colleagues, was under no illusions about the oppressions of the Soviet system, but the viability of an alternative form of democratic socialism, that might evolve in the West while *perestroika* changed hard-line policies in the East, was still a possibility before the events of 1989 utterly changed everything (206).

Edgar employed deep research to explain what happened in East-Central Europe and why in the year before the play was first performed, subordinating his evident sympathy to socialism to description of how individual motives, professional ambitions, beliefs and prejudices led to political change. Like most of his works, *The Shape of the Table* is a “problem” play, not a “thesis” play (Kim 112). As such, it vindicates the arguments made by defenders of transitology that the focus on the motivations and interests of elites was a descriptive or analytical approach to a political reality, and did not necessarily assume or prefer that a given country would or should approximate a liberal democratic ideal type (Gans-Morse 338). What is also interesting about *The Shape of the Table* is the fact that Edgar anticipates some of the problems consolidology would later replace transitology to address – privatisation, nationalism and apathy. In so doing, he punctured some of the optimism evident in the transitological literature that if elites were sufficiently wise or skilful enough they could surmount any and all problems transition from socialism presented (Saxonberg and Linde 4).

 The *Shape of the Table* is interesting in and of itself as an artefact or document of how someone conceived of the Eastern Central European experience of transition less than a year *after* the fall of the Berlin Wall, and less than a year *before* the main academic attempts to conceptualise it became mainstreamed. This article explores how the creative representation of historical process in *The Shape of the Table* demonstrates that an interpretative lens similar to that employed by the comparative politics literature could be adopted by someone as troubled by the liberal teleology of transition as those who would later critique this area of study. It further illustrates how analysis by someone more sympathetic to the state socialist project could prove more adept at anticipating the risks of liberalisation like nationalism, oligarchy and destruction of welfare systems than relatively whiggish transitologists at the time. In so doing, the article proceeds as follows. First, I examine the concept of transitology as understood at the time. Next, I outline David Edgar’s orientation as a socialist playwright and his commitment to “faction” (the light fictionalisation of contemporary occurrences and characters to present audiences with a model of politics events). The article then summarises *The Shape of Table*, illustrating where and how Edgar understood transition as an agent-centred, volitional process similar to that in the transitology literature. After this, I examine the critiques of transitology from Eastern European area specialists as unduly simplistic and from leftist critics as overly sympathetic to capitalism, as well transitology’s gradual redundancy as the consolidology literature emerged to address the “dilemmas of the morning after”. The article concludes by showing how Edgar anticipated these critiques and developments in *The Shape of the Table*.

**Transitology and Roundtables in Context**

Three main reasons are usually adduced to explain the collapse of state socialism in Eastern Europe, namely economic inefficiency, structural incapacity to respond new problems and the exhaustion of ideological legitimation that resulted (Elster *et al* 52). The implicit social contract under which citizens remained politically passive in return for a sub-optimal standard of living had broken down. By late 1989, the East-Central European states were clearly democratising and embracing market economics. Comparativist studies of regime transitions and democratisation traditionally employed macro-oriented, structural or “functional” long-term paradigms that emphasized objective prerequisites for regime transformation. It was argued that democratisation could only occur under specific preconditions or determinants related to levels of socio-economic development, the role of civil society, class structure, legacy of authoritarian institutions and inherited political culture (Bova 126-127 and 138). In these traditional structuralist approaches “collective decisions and political interactions were largely underemphasized (and underspecified) in the search for the determining preconditions for democracy” (Edvardsen 213). However, in explaining the actual contours of likely/permissible change in Eastern Europe in 1989, structural conditions at best provided a background explanatory factor compared to more proximate and highly consequential intersections of individual or small-group intentions, actions and consequences (Korbonski 140). The established structural-functional concepts and analytical categories by which scholars had theorised change to democratic political processes were clearly inapplicable to the “velvet” (Czechoslovakia), “negotiated” (Hungary) and “self-limiting” (Poland) revolutions (Ekiert 289). Though there was a distinct bottom-up effect insofar as grievances and discontent among the masses spurred the demonstrations in Leizig, Gdansk, Prague etc. that made the bankruptcy of the regimes clear, the systemic change seen in Eastern Europe did not result in revolutionary change in the sense of class-based revolt from below. Communist elites found themselves negotiating and bargaining with civil society leaders as part of a “classical process of transitional, rather than revolutionary politics” (Henderson and Robinson 28).

 It was somewhat inevitable, therefore, when comparativists who previously analysed earlier negotiated transitional processes in Southern Europe and Latin America began to incorporate post-Communist countries of Eastern Europe into their models of democratic transition. Likewise, many concerned to understand post-Communist transitions sought a more comparative rubric into which analysis could be placed (Kubicek 300). This convergence ended the exclusion of the Communist world from almost forty years of comparative politics and its academic compartmentalisation as Sovietology or Comparative Communism (Ágh 12). A key guide here was Schmitter and O’Donnell’s seminal analysis in 1986 of Southern European and Latin American transitions where authoritarian leaders and organised oppositional elites carefully crafted terms for the relinquishing and acceptance of power during authoritarian collapse. O’Donnell and Schmitter attempted to capture the inherent uncertainty of transitions given the absence of behavioural or structural parameters to guide or predict outcomes. They argued that individual actions of leaders are not tightly defined by macro-structural factors during the breakdown of authoritarian rule, and that instead “elite dispositions, calculations and pacts” would determine whether and how a democratic opening would emerge (19 and 48). For example, individual gestures or manifestos by civil society elites could establish the boundaries for progress, while regime elites concerned for their future historical reputation might consciously accelerate their own replacement (49 and 25). They contended that (a) democratisation was possible, though more and less feasible, in any given context, (b) strategic bargaining between elites of the old and putative new regime was the most important causal variable in determining whether democratisation occurred, and (c) different patterns of this elite interaction would define the quality and institutions of the democracy that emerged.

 The post-Communist transitions once more revealed that while class analysis and economic analysis could explain collapse of regimes, they could not explain why outgoing leaders and opposition forces adopted democracy as the most preferable form of rule (Bermeo 368). In the likes of Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, long-term structural factors were at most having indeterminate impact on the choices regime and opposition leaders were making (Edvardsen 214). As Bunce noted, “whether there is a transition from dictatorship to democracy seems to depend heavily on the interests, values, and actions of political leaders, whether ensconced, downwardly mobile, or at least potentially, upwardly mobile” (707). The comparative politics literature at the time emphasized the strategic choices of political actors – a small coterie of leaders would play a disproportionate role in defining the parameters of democratisation (though democratic elites in Eastern Europe certainly maintained a dialogue with the masses). None of this was to argue that there was a defined teleology to transition or that interactions between regime and opposition were predictable. Particularly in Poland, the first state to start the transition from authoritarianism, liberal democracy was outside the range of contemplation until relatively late. Contingency would characterise transition. As such, the “transitions to democracy” literature represented the eclipse of economic, institutional and international structural factors by the volition and daring of moderating and compromising individual leaders as foci of study (Bermeo 366). It is notable that incoming East-Central European leaders like Havel, Roman, Mazowiecki and Dubcek looked to Spanish leaders in particular as exemplars of how to negotiate transition (Pridham 29).

 A “transitological” literature began to develop around the transitions in East-Central Europe. Bova (113), for example, argued that the transition from Communism “may usefully be viewed as a subcategory of a more generic phenomenon of transition from authoritarian rule.” Di Palma argued that Eastern Europe demonstrated how conciliatory politics on the part of actors on all sides in relation to constitutional choices, alliances, trade-offs and pacing could craft democracies. Munck and Skalnik Leff foregrounded the identity and strategy of individual actors as they shaped patterns of competition and rules of the game under democracy. Przeworski, like Linz and Stepan, was content to treat the Eastern European transitions in 1989 as one element of the wider global trend towards democratization. Karl and Schmitter examined the region through a transitology lens, but tempered the voluntaristic bias of the latter’s earlier work somewhat by acknowledging that the freedom of choice in negotiations during transition were cabined by the structured contingency of economic development, history and political institutions inherited from the old dispensation. Perhaps the most sophisticated treatment of these interactions is Przeworski’s model of “extrication” from the former regime whereby four separate groups interact strategically – hardliners and soft-liners (reformers) within the Communist authorities, and moderates and radicals amongst the opposition – to agree new democratic arrangements. Soft-liners and moderates could invoke the risk of revanchism or revolution on the part of their more extremist allies to foster compromise or to push boundaries.

 “Roundtables” were the figurative and often literal manifestation of this process, a form of bargaining between Communist governments and spokesmen for opposition or dissident civil society groups at meetings of semiformal and preconstitutional nature (Elster 3-4). Because of Communist opposition to civil society groups outside of the party, only Poland, with *Solidarnosc*, had a well-organised pre-existing opposition. In Hungary, Czechslovakia and East Germany, the opposition were usually small umbrella groups that came together organically (Garton Ash 3). Those negotiating for the government were usually dominated by well-defined elite pragmatist/reformist wings (understood in contradistinction to hardliners) that anticipated and contributed to change. As Marxist-Leninist doctrine became discredited and as Gorbachev’s Sinatra doctrine made clear the Soviet Union would not intervene, these elite reformers sought new political orientations with which to modify Communism, be it ethno-nationalist, liberal or market-driven (Higley and Pakulski 423, 420 and 419). Indeed, by accepting explicit bargaining with dissidents each regime “admitted what everybody knew – that it had no claim to represent the interests of the society over which it was governing” (Elster 3). At the same time, the opposition with their “self-imposed and exclusive” mandates knew they lacked the legitimacy to make binding decisions, and so elections became a core focus (Welsh 384). They differed widely in terms of make-up – Hungary’s various committees had thousands of meetings across two months, whereas East Germany’s Central Roundtable met only sixteen times. The core thing they had in common was an ethos of compromise – the “one overriding feature of round table negotiations involved power-sharing, attempts to reconcile the past division between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ and their aim was to make compromises acceptable to both sides.” (Welsh 385 and 384). While all sides understood both politics and the economy would have to be transformed, roundtable discussions predominantly focussed on the former. With the exception of East Germany, no decisions about the constitution were made except to remove references to the Socialist nature of the state or the Communist party’s guaranteed role in governance. Instead, the focus was on cabining the power of security forces and laying institutional foundations for a more liberal order, most notably by establishing the preconditions and modalities for free, fair and competitive elections. Power-sharing was usually agreed in the interim (with Hungary a notable exception) as a means of opening up political space to ascendant oppositions while saving face for the government (Elster 4). Most holdover communist elites were removed in the elections and replaced by opposition elites.

 The distinctions between the roundtables emerged from their differing chronology, tactics and perceived power imbalances. Poland’s was first in 1988, originally promised on a limited platform of recognition by the government of *Solidarnosc* in return for its agreement to economic reforms. Though this was a dramatic departure from the core government claim to a monopoly of political power, opposition counter-elites did not believe the end of Communism was nigh and the government who initiated the process dominated proceedings, culminating in free elections the regime believed it would win (Korbonski 150-153). Only the astonishing electoral results of the semi-free elections in 1989 radicalised the talks and led to actual non-Communist government. In Hungary, the Communist government also entered the roundtable with nine different opposition groups in 1989 confident it could control proceedings given that Goulash Communism had already resulted in some negotiation with dissidents throughout the 1980s. The Roundtable became a “gigantic negotiating machine” compromised of nearly 600 experts in two committee and twelve subcommittees (Friedheim 483). Ultimately it “reflected the relatively equitable balance of power between rulers and opposition and the broad consensus for change”, culminating in a multiparty system and elections in March 1990 (Munck and Skalnik Leff 352). While Poland saw protracted negotiation and Hungary saw evolution, Czechoslovakia could observe and learn from these experiences. When its roundtable started in November 1989, it was apparent that Communist rule was collapsing there and in Eastern Europe as a whole. The nine roundtable meetings in Prague were essentially to regulate and ratify changes that regional politics made inevitable (Calda). The East German *Zentraler Runder Tisch* convened in East Berlin on December 7 of the same year after Egon Krenz resigned as head of government. The government met with representatives of the new citizens’ movements to discuss reforms before the inevitable national elections could be held. Half of the representatives at the roundtable stood for new oppositional groups and political parties, while the other half were from political parties and organizations that had been part of the *ancien* regime.

**Edgar’s Vision of Transition**

David Edgar has always been known as a, or perhaps *the*, playwright of the British left. Having emerged as part of leftist agitprop theatre collective *The General Will* in the early Seventies and co-founded the Theatre Writers’ Union, Edgar started his career by writing propagandist plays of a Marxist slant. As the Seventies gave way to the Eighties, his political position moved roughly from revolutionary socialism to social democracy. He began to abandon determinist metanarratives of historical progression, but remains widely recognised as having made a distinctive contribution to the socialist theatre movement (Painter 3, 4 and 9). Above all, as first Thatcherism came to prominence in British life and then state socialism collapsed in Eastern Europe, he has made leftist disillusionment his core theme (Peacock 137; Megson and Reinelt 372) most notably in *Maydays* (a panoramic history of the British left) and a trilogy of plays dealing with the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, of which *The Shape of the Table* was the first.[[2]](#footnote-2)

 Edgar’s work has always been animated by the belief that theatre is a necessary public forum for dramatizing social forces and provoking political consciousness (Borreca 136). His plays “address the most basic questions of how humans organize and govern themselves” (Reinelt and Hewitt 2). What is distinctive about Edgar’s plays is his conscious election not to promote specific political theories or ideals in the way his initial forays into Marxist agitprop theatre did. While never neglecting the totalising social structures of state, power and nation, a core preoccupation in his work is that “individual personality matters on the left and that you neglect it at your peril” (Megson and Reinelt 379). With his long-term interest in the performative aspects of politics, Edgar’s plays address the dialectic relationship between the individual’s subjective perceptions of public events objective reality in the social world (Borreca 137). He marries this concern for individual engagement with politics with a core conviction that the role of the socialist playwright is observation and discussion (Sakellaridou 57). He adopts what has been labelled as “faction”, a neopositivist embodiment of historical processes whereby schematic characters interact in almost documentary-style presentations of contemporary political struggles. “Faction” could thereby take the actual historical events in East-Central Europe and present the essence of that process without the responsibility of having to present facts literally, freeing the audience to consider the political and ideological issues in play (Megson and Reinelt 389 at footnote 36).

 As such, every character in *The Shape of the Table* is both the product of identifiable historical forces and a “connecting medium” for the most pressing issues at play in transition (Painter 133). Half of the characters are those who declare themselves representatives of civil society in the unnamed state. The most notable of these is Pavel Prus, a dissident writer forced to become a window cleaner and then a prison inmate by the regime. He leads the dissident umbrella group Public Platform and is joined by peasant leader Vera Rousova, student radical Andrei Zietek, Catholic intellectual Jan Matkovic and reformist ex-Communist leader Victor Spassov. These characters intend to reform governance, “taking it as axiomatic that such a government will have a majority of Ministers who are not members of the present ruling party” (Edgar 54).

 They are opposed by the spectrum of late-Communist positions: Josef Lutz, the hard-liner removed as First Secretary, Petr Vladislav (“a young technocratic apparatchik”), Michal Kaplan (a “reasonably liberal but basically machine Communist”) and Jan Milev (union leader). These stereotyped and didactically manipulated characters establish, negotiate and compromise the stakes in political change. It seems clear from the biographies of the characters that the unnamed country in question is Czechoslovakia (Prus, Spassov and Lutz are clear analogues of Vaclav Havel, Alexander Dubcek and Gustáv Husák/Miloš Jakeš respectively, while Public Platform strongly resembles Civic Forum). Edgar himself admitted this was the case but fictionalised the country so as to retain enough relevance to the Polish, East German and Hungarian transitions to avoid making the play a particularised commentary about only one country (Painter 132).[[3]](#footnote-3) The opposition mimic elements of those seen in East Germany, Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia inasmuch as they are for most part active dissenters from non-party intelligentsia like journalists, academics and cultural figures (see for example Reich and Konrad & Szelenyi). These hardy survivors of the past regime were figures who could serve (and self-presented) as the consciences of the nation whom the public could invest with symbolic authority. Like most of these bodies in real life, Public Platform is a social movement, as opposed to an institutional opposition or party-in-embryo (Lewis 23). The formerly disgraced Prus and Matkovic, like their real-life equivalents, demonstrate throughout the transitological axiom that individual heroics in refusing to leave the country and risking personal safety have a catalytic effect, enabling them to make the sorts of gestures familiar from the contemporary comparative literature that test now-uncertain boundaries of political behaviour (O’Donnell and Schmitter 49). In the play, opposition characters are somewhat younger than the regime (most notably twenty-something Zietek and the secretary Viktoria Brodskaya). They depart from traditional Marxist language to avow concepts of human and political rights, legality, and individual responsibility, a conscious reaction against the previously accepted alternative of “socialism with a human face” (Ekiert 306).

 The Communist government also reflect contemporary trends, divided between “standpatters” resisting any and all change, “liberalisers” who accept some reform and “democratisers” willing to countenance power-sharing with the opposition (Henderson and Robinson 37). With the removal of Lutz as First Secretary after public protests, those that are left are identifiable more as pragmatists and reformers, reflecting a split between conservatives like Lutz and those relative soft-liners like Kaplan, Vladislav and Milev (who later leads the Communists’ democratic post-transition party) who recognise that social peace and faltering economic development cannot adequately legitimise the regime. Like most regime negotiators in roundtables, these characters attempt to maintain and preserve some of the achievements of state socialism and, as the next section explores, fear what will happen to the workers’ democracies after liberalisation.

 The scheme of the play is such that the end is a direct inversion of the start – it commences with a discussion between Prus the prisoner and Lutz the all-powerful regime leader, but as transition progresses through behind-closed-doors negotiations, it ends with Prus as President and Lutz as someone awaiting trial. The only set in the play is the small room where the negotiations take place, dominated initially by a massive table covered in a tablecloth. When Kaplan finally admits the opposition have forced constitutional alteration, he removes the tablecloth to reveal the large table is actually made up of smaller ones, symbolising the infinite variety of arrangements permissible once the Communist monolith fragments. Subsequent scenes trace different elements of the negotiation process at a variety of table shapes – by the last scene all that is left is the powerless Lutz at a single small table as the lights fade on the play and on state socialism.

 In between, these scenes, Edgar portrays the negotiation between opposition and regime. The play begins with First Secretary Lutz mulling over the use of force against public demonstrators and the possibility of fraternal Soviet help in crushing it (Edgar 14-16). These protests are reminiscent of those Czechoslovakian demonstrations in Wenceslas Square, and the reaction mirrors that of the snowball effect public protest in Gdansk, Leipzig and Prague had in Eastern Europe as it became apparent Gorbachev’s USSR would not intervene and the crowds would not disperse. Though some scholars characterised Czechoslovakia as a “reform through rupture” (Munck and Skalnik Leff 353) or a situation where the government “withered away” (Friedheim 494) as a result of the influence of mass protesting (the roundtable there happened only ten days after the Wenceslas Square events), Edgar understood that pacting, not mass mobilisation, would define transition. Indeed, even though the protests and strikes would validate the opposition and highlight the defection of the people from the Communist project, one of the notable things about Prus as leader of the opposition is the conscious distance he maintains from the radicalising potential of the protesters. As he puts it “Now you know the rule. As long as they’re in the street they’re a queue. They hit the square, they’re a mob” (Edgar 69). This aloofness would later form one of the core criticisms of real-life Eastern European pacts as elitist stitch-ups more generally. Indeed, at one point Prus notes that youth activists had burst into a Public Platform plenary working group and gave them small round plastic mirrors and warned of the risk of turning into those they were replacing (Edgar 71). This, in particular, was prophetic – by 1992, for example, the new Polish political Solidarity elite became “them” in a matter of months (Grudzińska Gross 145-146).

 The aforementioned structural indeterminacy of roundtable processes in “riding, managing and simply coping with” uncertainty are captured sympathetically in the play (Pridham, 30). As in real life, the protests and the roundtable in *The Shape of the Table* were part of a process of first learning and then updating beliefs that the population, the opposition and the government held about the other (Elster 18). Without negotiation and discussion, both sets of protagonists were acting behind a veil of ignorance with insufficient understanding about the distribution of power, the motives and interests of the other side (Elster *et al* 50). Initially, the opposition present a modest list of proposals. The new First Secretary Kaplan clearly believes he can manipulate transition in such a way that Communist control of government is fundamentally maintained, reasoning that cosmetic alterations akin to changing the colour scheme of a house or re-hanging the wall-paper are all the regime needs concede (Edgar 31-32). However, as in real life, it is clear that by condescending to meet the opposition, the hypocrisy of the regime is made manifest, with obvious loss of primacy. Gradually Kaplan loses his illusion of control, though initially the opposition are unclear how strong their advantages are. As Matkovic puts it at one point “when you’ve lost, it’s easy. Your opponents let you know. Delighted to. But when you’ve won - they tend to keep it to themselves” (Edgar 44). Edgar captures the “legacy of mutual distrust” that of necessity follows a situation where dissidents share an intimate space with their former jailers (Baylis 329). At the start of the negotiation scenes, the opposition remind regime figures of their prior imprisonment. By the end, the greater risk is that government figures will go to trial, but in between necessity compels a tentative *modus vivendi* to develop. As Bernhard (311) put it, “While the fundamental political cleavage of ‘regime/opposition,’ ‘state/civil society,’ remains intact in this phase, sometime after the opening of the negotiation a shift in the basic rules of conflict between the two sides occurs.”

 This is most apparent in the escalation of opposition demands. Much depends on the opposition’s insistence that forms of words matter – changing the terminology of a document from “the principles of socialist democracy” to “principles of socialism and democracy”, for example, is what allows the decoupling of one-party rule from economic policy (Edgar 47). While initially the dissidents request some moderation of the economic regime, alterations of education policy and a judicial inquiry into the treatment of protestors, Public Platform greet the acceptance of these requests with more thoroughgoing demands for alterations to the form of government and the security forces. They argue that the opposition should have a majority in the interim power-sharing Government of National Understanding and control of the all-important Communications, Justice and Interior Ministries (Edgar 54 and 58). When the regime complains about “welshing” on previous agreements, Prus points to ongoing demonstrations in the street and reiterates their status as the genuine representatives of the public will (Edgar 55). Edgar’s intention is to illustrate the dizzying speed and bewildering momentum of the transitional moment(s):

Each scene ends with some sort of resolution and a sense of what happens next; then the next scene comes and the goalposts have moved and the stakes are upped. The character you think has just won is suddenly out on his ear. And each shift is a surprise to somebody. Each is a moment when you think you’ve gotten to a point of rest and you haven’t. (Clement 7).

These goalposts shift almost entirely to the advantage of the opposition as the regime concedes more and more. Indeed, at one point Prus warns his fellow dissidents that it is not in their interests to win too quickly, because they need the pragmatically acquiescent Kaplan to remain in situ in order that he may transfer power entirely to the people’s movement (Edgar 59). It emerges that non-prosecution of most of the *ancien regime* is a price the opposition will pay to smooth transition (Edgar 77-78), echoing the quid pro quo in most East European transitions where autocrats concede democratisation on the understanding they would not be prosecuted (Nalepa 21-22). By the middle of the second Act, negotiations have culminated in Kaplan’s admission that he will shepherd transition to electoral democracy through and then resign (Edgar 63).

**Changing Debates after *The Shape of the Table***

With his “faction” technique, Edgar took political transition in East-Central Europe, changing names and modifying incidents “in order to present a model of reality and usually identifiable occurrences to an audience who are invited to test what they see against their experience of the happenings to which it relates” (Reinelt and Hewitt 214). However, the voluntarist model of reality we see in Edgar’s late 1990 play and which characterised the comparative politics literature at the time was to fall out of fashion as the decade progressed. Much of this was due to the collapse of the popular dream of a short and seamless transition to a welfarist democracy (an optimism not shared by Edgar, as we will see). Two trends in particular were important: firstly the rejection of the transitology paradigm, and secondly the emergence of a different set of concerns beyond the transitional moment in consolidology. These would obscure the apparent primacy of elite-driven accounts of transition.[[4]](#footnote-4)

***Challenges to Transitology***

As noted earlier, transitology attracted critics for its voluntaristic emphasis insofar as it deprecated the influence of structural factors. As it gradually became apparent that level of economic development had considerable impact on democracy’s actual quality and sustainability over time (Fish), the limitations of this approach became apparent. It was also argued that emphasis on elite perspectives “assumed the near-absolute malleability of East European political environments” and so failed to actually explain why certain preferences were arrived at (Jowitt 36). Instead, this nascent discipline merely presented them descriptively as game-theoretic without offering any predictive value over when transition would or would not succeed (Ekiert 216) or offering any testable hypotheses (Kubicek 301). The readily apparent failure to achieve elite consensus after transition on a host of difficult political, economic and cultural matters threw these limitations into stark relief. So too did the rapid turnover of elites in subsequent elections. As Baylis put it, “the writers, pastors, and historians who first moved into the political vacuum left by the collapse of communist rule often fell victim to their own idealism and inexperience: they have in many cases been replaced by economists and lawyers” (318). Disenchantment with elites over post-transitional economic struggles was accentuated by the very evident “wall of indifference” between political elites and the masses (Welsh 382). Surveys of citizens regularly reported low levels of engagement as citizens routinely expressed the view that their opinions did not matter and there was little they could practically do to change things (Kubicek 299). Indeed, present-day politics in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia is strongly informed by a populist sense that there exist “post-Communist or liberal elites that supposedly rob the people of their own country” (Müller 57). Some traced the roots of this alienation to the type of politics reified in transition. Comparativists in the discipline retained a suspicion of the masses insofar as their populist economic demands might prevent democratisation – Karl, for example, noted that in Latin America “no stable democracy has resulted from regime transitions in which mass actors have gained control even momentarily, over traditional ruling classes” (8). As exemplified above in relation to *The Shape of the Table*, while insurgent civil society was indispensable in initiating transition, they quickly became demobilised and sidelined by emergent civil society elites once negotiations started (Bernhard 312-313). The marginalisation of mobilised publics as a potential liability in the process of transition was thought to have underpinned their subsequent disengagement from politics.

 A more particularised critique emerged from those who specialised in Eastern European area studies. At a fundamental level, scholars in this area argued that premature theoretical model-building of transitology served the cause of understanding change less well than empirical inquiry, and that it was an insufficient basis for comprehensive theorisation of post-Communist politics (Meiklejohn Terry 336). The dilemmas raised in Eastern Europe were too idiosyncratic to permit incorporation in broader, generalising comparative perspectives. Above all, while the minimal or proceduralist vision of electoral democracy emphasized in transitological literature might suffice to explain non-Communist Latin American and Southern European transitions, area specialists argued that post-Communist Eastern Europe was seeing a far more unprecedentedly complicated triple-track transition in economy and society as well as politics.[[5]](#footnote-5) Unlike previous sites of transition, East-Central European states had “to undergo a thoroughgoing economic, social, cultural-behavioural, political-institutional and international transformation, all at once and quickly rather than taking them more or less gradually and sequentially” (Wiarda 491).

 More substantive critique of transitology’s core premises also developed. Critics argued that the discipline was marred by a teleological “End of History” assumption that liberal democracy was the only inevitable and worthwhile endpoint for transition (e.g. Burawoy and Verdery 15). While Gans-Morse convincingly contends that the argument about liberal democratic teleology is over-stated (323) and Karl and Schmitter argued that observing the role of elites in transition is distinct from a preference that they adopt this role in perpetuity(975), it is undeniable that transitology restricted the question of transformation to the legal-institutional rather than structural factors of political economy. This was problematic as large numbers of people disadvantaged by economic changes began to emerge from those elements of the population which enjoyed access neither to the old redistributive system nor to income generated by new markets. The seeming neutrality of transitology in relation to the economy was believed deceptive. The post-transitional exclusion of Communists meant leftist and centre-left parties could not form governments, while IMF and European Union conditionalities fostered neo-liberal economic responses to the ongoing reality of poverty like austerity and often botched privatisation. Freedom of choice and economic liberation led in almost all Eastern European states to economic contraction in the short- to medium-term and permanent economic stratification. Because democratisation and marketization could not be separated, transitology became conflated with neo-liberalism (Gans-Morse 334), particularly when non-distributivism appeared central to transitional theorising. Przeworski, for example, argued for lowering the stakes of transition by ensuring that existing structures of production and distributions of income were left intact, even where this promoted inequality (63). Critics contended that it was “troubling to think that demands for the redistribution of property *and* power cannot go hand in hand and that electoral democracy must be built upon the patience of the poor” (Bermeo 374).

 With transition essentially completed by the Act Two, Scene One, the final two scenes of *The Shape of the Table* are a rumination on the possibilities and dangers Edgar foresaw in the immediate aftermath of the dictatorship of the proletariat’s fall. Certainly, Edgar notes and testifies to the inefficiencies of really-existing socialism. As the young opposition secretary Brodskaya puts it, “the “so-called socialist society”…promises a new Jerusalem but offers tangerines. Which pledges the collective liberation of all mankind but actually makes people feel greedy, selfish, cynical and sly. In which no-one actually feels responsible to anyone or anything beyond themselves” (Edgar 62) Nevertheless, Edgar’s sympathy to socialism is evident throughout, most notably in the final scene where the former Communist First Secretary Lutz debates the inevitable inequalities of untrammelled capital accumulation with the new liberal Prime Minister. The Jewish Lutz, earlier an anti-Nazi partisan and concentration camp internee, is shown to have honour commensurate with that of the opposition. He sincerely laments that transition signified the end of the project of “building socialism” where “the immense and boundless untapped energies and talents of the masses would be liberated, every peasant would be Aristotle, every worker Michelangelo” (Edgar 79). Edgar clearly sympathises with Lutz’s impassioned argument that the outgoing government are “reneging on our promise to the working class to end the crime of capital accumulation and the exploitation of one man by another” (Edgar 56). As Painter puts it, his words begin to sound less like automatic jargon Lutz typically engages in, and more like sincere protest in the face of the market economy’s future dangers (133). The brave new world of capitalism fills even the oppositionist Rusova with foreboding:

“I wonder if ‘out there’ they’ve really grasped what’s going on. If they realise they’re exchanging the Red Flag for the pop song. Pravda for Playboy. The hammer and sickle for the strip joint, cola tin and burger bar. To have expelled the Germans and the Russians to hand the whole thing over to America.” (Edgar 60).

***The Emergence of Consolidology***

The disillusionments outlined above reflected dissensus over policy, community interests and ideology, making apparent that while power was transferred from Communist rulers to democratically-elected leaders, resolution of society’s most fundamental dilemmas had yet to be institutionalised. Scholars began to distinguish transitology from the similarly universalising proto-science of consolidology. If transition studies were dominated by the macropolitical uncertainty or chaos of moving between two different systems, consolidology studied to a greater degree the meso- and micro-political routinisation of politics as basic freedoms of speech, group and (party) association became normalised (Ágh 7-8). In transitology, democracy was conceived as an outcome achieved by one-off agency, but in consolidology it was understood as an ongoing process of institutionalising and qualifying that agency. Simply put, the transitional literature was of less analytical utility in the constructive phase of democratisation. While policy programmes had to replace dissident sloganeering, the rules of the democratic game had yet to be established. This lead to “debilitating conflicts over turf - the most visible among them between presidents and prime ministers (in Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia) or presidents and parliaments (in Poland and the former Czechoslovakia)” (Baylis 323). As noted above, the umbrella groups that assumed power transmuted into distinct parties once the binding issue of opposition to authoritarian rule dissolved and the differences subsumed by this necessity came to the fore (Kitschelt 455-458). The fragmentation of these political forces fostered dangerous types of radicalisation as other elements of the aforementioned triple transition, namely economic transformation and the reconstitution of civil society, gave rise to distinct dilemmas for new governments as struggles over identity (national and religious), the free market and regionalism came to the fore. Successor parties to the old Communist governments in the likes of Hungary and Bulgaria and ethnonationalist parties (most obviously in Yugoslavia) emerged to complicate the “End of History” liberal-democratic utopia. Above all, it became apparent that the salience of ethnonationalism in post-Communist politics was inversely related to levels of economic prosperity (Vachudova and Snyder 14). The initially optimistic citzenry became characterised by what Ágh called transition fatigue “reflecting not merely frustration at the failure of high expectations of a rapid and painless transition to be realized, but also weariness at too many contradictory changes at the same time, coupled with economic restrictions and austerity measures” (Ágh 19). Popular attitudes to new political authorities were characterised by suspicion, ignorance of political issues, apathy and electoral absenteeism (Sztompa 119). Amid these necessarily different issues, calculations and behaviours, some argued that the exaggerated forms of political causality associated with individual agency were of less salience than they were in transition as a more complex array of factors came to the fore (Bunce 709). Indeed, it was posited that many of the problems facing Eastern Europe in years after *The Shape of the Table* like governmental instability, ethnonationalism’s rise and political apathy could be attributed to “the premature eclipse of bargaining and compromise in conflict resolution” by elites (Welsh 391).

 As with economic decline, Edgar shows that an agent-centred conception of transition could be reconciled with a scepticism about liberal democracy and its ability to meet human needs. While Edgar attends more to the divisions within the Communist government, he also illustrates dissensus between the members of Public Platform, most notably the complaints of the relatively radical Andrei Zietek, a student in his twenties impatient with the pace of change and too young to remember a time when the socialist promise made sense. By the play’s end, Prus becomes Head of State (like his real-life analogue, Vaclav Havel), but the reforming socialist Spassov is omitted for being too far to the left, while Zietek ends up touring Washington to speak at right-wing congresses (Edgar 72 and 78). This was prophetic – soon after the first performances of the play pro-reform elite coalitions across East-Central Europe would split (e.g. Civic Forum itself would split later in 1991 into two parties, Vaclav Klaus’s Civic Democratic Party and Jiri Dienstbier’s Civic Movement), even if they remained within the democratic consensus achieved early within the wave of transitions (Higley and Pakulski 423).

 Edgar is also clearly ambivalent about how the material shortcomings amidst cradle-to-grave security is giving way to the riskier liberal environment of competition, aspiration and individual independence. New Prime Minister Prus himself presents a distinctly underwhelming imaginary of liberal progress. Stating a wish to return “back to normal”, he states “Please, no more adventures. No more heroism. Certainly no more unimaginably splendid futures. Just, let’s get back to the normal, ordinary way of doing things. The way that works. The way they do them in the West” (Edgar 80-81). These statements occur in the context of a dialogue between the now-powerless Lutz and Prus, where Lutz argues that Marxism-Leninism has been a compelling answer to the question of how to organise a polity, the defeat or loss of which leaves a vacuum in human aspiration for a better society (Edgar 76-83). Edgar certainly did not see the political future as actualising the End of History – *The Shape of the Table* bears eloquent testimony to his fears and uncertainties about the future. Later, the Dubcek-type former opposition figure Spassov speaks of “voices whispering in people’s ears. The people who felt safe before. The demons we’re letting loose” (Edgar 75). By the end of the play, the deposed Communist leader Kaplan crows that racist attacks on gypsies, a Vietnamese guest-worker and Jews have taken place under the new liberal dispensation (Edgar 75). As Edgar put it

Two ideas of egalitarianism and emancipation have come under huge threat …. It will become possible to hold and express views about theories of genetic difference about people ... The people living under those regimes viewed themselves as being governed by peasants. The technocratic classes who brought about their overthrow take the view that ‘We were run for forty years by people who should have stayed on the factory floor where they belonged’ (Painter 136).

**Conclusion**

*The Shape of the Table* is a somewhat abbreviated but nevertheless accurate depiction of what Friedheim calls the “dialectic of regime concession and opposition conquest” that characterised the negotiated transitions in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and, to a lesser extent, East Germany (489). It shows how individual emotion and experience, as well as ideological affinity, help explain political change causally. It is interesting in and of itself as an example of how one politically engaged playwright saw the varying elements of accommodation and confrontation between those who would change or maintain the old order in 1989. In writing this play, Edgar did not have the advantage of in-depth English language reconstructions of the roundtables that would emerge in subsequent years, nor did he have the benefit of the analytical discourse of transition that emerged during its drafting and afterwards. If the play *post*dicted the still opaque process of transition in Chamberlain’s far away country between people of whom the British public know nothing, the play’s *pre*diction about marketization and nationalism in East-Central Europe was borne out very quickly. The rift Edgar anticipated between the people and the democratising liberal elites took longer to be realised, but today seems realised in the populist Europe of the Visegrad Four (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary). The sneering words of the retiring First Secretary Kaplan to Spassov that the language of liberalism cuts less ice outside the capital, and that ordinary people take Public Platform for “effete self-advertisers” (Edgar 68) are words that could come from the populist Victor Orbán today.

 Close observation of the transitions in East-Central Europe independently led Edgar to conclusions that would subsequently and independently be reified in the extension of transitology to that region, then critiqued, then finally marginalised by the passing of time. A play of “pure politics in action” (Peter) it shows how a disorganised civil society without any defined concept of transformative agency and a government riven between hard-liners and soft-liners could form a transitional vanguard compromising with each other to facilitate a relatively frictionless shift to liberal democracy in what hitherto would have appeared unpropitious circumstances. As an explicit dramatization of dialogue between archetypes, *The Shape of the Table* has aged better than the overly-optimistic and over-simplistic theoretical attempts in transitology to scientifically explain the changes that occurred in 1989 – indeed, the play was revived to extremely strong reviews as recently as 2014 (Billington). It does, however, demonstrate clearly that a voluntaristic, elite-driven understanding of transition could be adopted by someone sceptical of the whiggishness that surrounded transition to democracy, by someone who retained a belief in the “enabling, participatory” ideals that animated socialism at a time when the intellectual prestige of real socialism was it its lowest point (Edgar 1988, 249). That this was possible is something that was lost in the critique of the transitology literature as it became associated with faulty interpretations of empirical evidence by area specialists and with a simplistic linear teleology of transition to liberal democracy as the “End of History” by critics on the left. As well as doing justice to the uncertainty about process and result the protagonists of Eastern European transition must have felt, *The Shape of the Table* artfully vindicates the idea of comparativists that courageous individuals could take risks, force changes and channel the forces of history. In so doing, it also punctures the technocratic optimism that skilful negotiation could overcome all structural legacies or historical pathologies, reflecting the distinct ambivalence of a socialist who accepted the weakness of real socialism, but regretted the withering of the ideal of a more egalitarian society.

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1. Though some of the later stages of roundtables were broadcast on radio and television by opposition actors keen to highlight the times of secret deals were over, though the most important issues had largely been decided by these points. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The others were *Pentecost* (1994) and *The Prisoner’s Dilemma* (2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Notably, there is no parallel to the conflict between Czech and Slovak elites over the structure of the bi-national state that precipitated the “velvet divorce” of Czechoslovakia’s component parts. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. But see how Gans-Morse convincingly challenges the idea that a hegemonic transitology literature exerted the dominant influence on study of post-Communism, arguing that review of the literature reveals a wider array of approaches (323). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For a summary of the differences (including international context, role of mass mobilisation, history of state stability, ethnicity and mode of transition), see Meiklejohn Terry. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)