Comparative Politics: An Overview

Peter Halm

Introduction: the discipline of comparative politics

Ever since Aristotle set out to examine differences in the structures of states and constiuutions and sought to develop a classification of regime types, the notion of comparing political systems has lain at the heart of political science. At the same time, however, while perennially concerned with such classic themes as the analysis of regimes, regime change, and democracy and its alternatives, comparative politics is not a discipline which can be defined strictly in terms of a single substantive field of study. Rather it is the emphasis on comparison itself, and on how and why political phenomena might be compared, which marks it out as a special area within political science. Indeed, precisely because there is no single substantive field of study in comparative politics, the relevance and value of treating it as a separate sub-discipline has often been disputed (see the discussion in Verba 1985; Dalton 1991; Keman 1993a).

The discipline of comparative politics is usually seen as being constituted by three related elements. The first, and most simple element is the study of foreign countries, often in isolation from one another. This is usually how comparative politics is defined for teaching purposes, especially in Anglo-American cultures, with different courses being offered on different countries, and with numerous textbooks being published about the individual countries which are incorporated in these courses. In practice, of course, however useful this approach may be in pedagogical terms, there is

1 See Books II.b and IV.b of Aristotle's The Politics.
often little real comparison involved, except implicitly, with any research which might be included under this heading being directed primarily toward the gathering of information about the individual country or country system concerned. Indeed, one of the problems associated with the distinction is lack of distinctiveness of comparative politics as a sub-discipline lies in recognizing that an American scholar working on, say, Italian politics is usually regarded by his national colleagues as a "comparativist," whereas an Italian scholar working on Italian politics is regarded by his national colleagues as a "comparativist." This, of course, makes nonsense of the definition.

The second element, which is therefore more relevant, is the systematic comparison between countries, with the intention of identifying, classifying, and explaining, the differences or similarities between them, with respect to the particular phenomenon which is being analyzed. Rather than placing a premium on the information which may be derived about the countries, therefore, the emphasis here is often on theory-building, and the theory-testing, with the countries themselves acting as cases. Such an approach clearly constitutes a major component of political science, and political research more generally, and, indeed, has been the source of some of the most important landmark texts in the discipline as a whole (e.g., Almond and Coleman 1960; Almond and Verba 1965; Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Lijphart 1977).

The third element within comparative politics is focused on the method of research, and is concerned with developing rules and standards for how comparative research should be carried out, including the means of analysis at which the comparative analysis operates, and the limits and possibilities of comparison itself. Precisely because the act of comparison itself is so instinctive to both scientific and popular cultures, this third element is sometimes assumed by researchers to be straightforward and hence is neglected. And it is this neglect, in turn, which lies at the root of some of the most severe problems in the cumulation of research, on the one hand, and in theory-building and theory-testing, on the other hand.

Unusually, then, comparative politics is a discipline which is defined both by its substance (the study of foreign countries or a plurality of countries) and by its method (see Schmitter 1993). At the same time, the discipline’s method is not necessarily distinctive as a field of study in itself. In terms of its method, for example, comparative politics is hardly distinctive, in that the variety of approaches which have been developed are applicable within all of the other social sciences. Indeed, some of the most important studies of the comparative method (e.g., Przeworski and Teune 1970; Smelser 1966; Regin 1987) are directed to the social sciences as a whole rather than to political science per se. In terms of its substantive content, on the other hand, the fields of comparative politics seem hardly separable from those of political science, or court, in that any focus of inquiry can be approached either comparatively (using cross-national data) or non-comparatively (using data from just one country). It is evident, for example, that many of the fields of study covered in the other chapters of this book are regularly subject to both comparative and non-comparative inquiries. If comparative politics is distinctive, therefore, then it is really only in terms of the combination of substance and method, and to separate these out from one another necessitates dissolving comparative politics either into political science as a whole or into the social sciences more generally.

Given the impossibility of reviewing the broad span of developments in political science as a whole, and, at the same time, the undesirability of focusing on methods of comparison alone, a topic which has already received quite a lot of attention in the recent literature (see, for example, Collier 1993; Kemen 1995; Bartolini 1993; Sartori and Mortino 1993), this chapter will deal instead with three principal themes, focusing in particular on the contrast between the ambition and approach of the "new comparative politics" of the late 1950s and 1960s, on the one hand, and that of the current generation of comparativists, on the other (for a valuable and more wide-ranging review, see Daalder 1993). The first of these three themes, which is discussed in Section II, concerns the scope of comparison, which is perhaps the principal source of difference between the earlier and later "schools" of comparative politics. Although much tends to be made of the contrasting approach to institutions adopted by each of these two generations of scholars, and of the supposed neglect and then "rediscovery" of institutions and the state as a major focus of inquiry, this can be misleading, at least in the apparent absence of an institutional emphasis in the 1950s and 1960s owed more to the global ambitions (the scope of their inquiries) than to the earlier generation, and hence to the very high level of abstraction at which they constructed their concepts, rather than to any theoretical downgrading of institutions per se. Concomitantly, the rediscovery of institutions in the 1980s and 1990s owes at least as much to the reduction in the scope of comparison, and hence to the adoption of a lower level of conceptual abstraction, as it does to any theoretical realignment in the discipline.

The second theme, which is discussed in Section III, concerns the actual topics and questions which are addressed in comparative political inquiries, and where quite a marked shift in focus can be discerned, with...
much more attention now being devoted to "outputs" rather than to "inputs," and to the outcomes of politics and the performance of government rather than to the determinants of politics and the demands on government (see also Rögowksi 1993). This also relates to the changing scope of comparison, in that it clearly makes much more sense to ask whether politics matters—a question of outputs and outcomes—when the scope of comparison becomes restricted to just a small number of relatively similar cases. The third theme, which will be addressed here in Section IV, concerns some of the problems which are currently confronted in comparative research, with particular attention being devoted, on the one hand, to the role of countries as units of analysis, and, on the other, to the use and, indeed, virtual fetishization of indicators. The chapter will then conclude with a brief discussion in Section V of some present and future trends in comparative politics, focusing in particular on the renewed emphasis on context, as well as on in-depth case analysis.3

II Scope

Writing in the early 1960s, in a most valuable and broadly based review of the past and present states of comparative politics, Harry Eckstein (1963: 22) noted that comparative politics could then be characterized by "a reawakened interest in large-scale comparisons, a relatively broad conception of the nature of politics and what is relevant to politics, and a growing emphasis upon solving middle-range theoretical problems concerning the determinants of certain kinds of political behavior and the requisites for certain kinds of political institutions." Eckstein's reference point here was to the early stages of what is often now considered to have been the "golden age" of comparative politics, when a series of major and path-breaking research programs were initiated by Gabriel Almond and his colleagues on the American Social Science Research Council's Committee on Comparative Politics (founded in 1954). And what is perhaps most striking in this characterization, and what was also perhaps the most important feature of the new approach developed by the Committee, was precisely the attention which was beginning to be devoted to "large-scale comparisons." Rejecting the then traditional and almost exclusive emphasis on the developed world, and on Western Europe and the United States in particular, and rejecting also the use of a conceptual language which had been developed with such

3 For an earlier version of some of this discussion, focusing in particular on the comparative method, see May 1993.

limited comparisons in mind, Almond and his colleagues sought to develop a theory and a methodology which could at one and the same time both encompass and compare political systems of whatever sort, be they primitive or advanced, democratic or non-democratic, western or non-western. As Almond (1970: 16) was later to emphasize in a subsequent review of work of the Committee and of the developer of comparative politics in this period, their strategy had been intended to bring together scholars working on countries across the globe, and to persuade them that they were "members of a common discipline concerned with the same theoretical problems and having available to them the same research methodologies."

The broadening of concerns in a geographic or territorial sense was also necessarily accompanied by a broadening of the sense of politics itself, and, in particular, by a rejection of what was then perceived as the traditional and narrowly defined emphasis on the study of formal political institutions. Indeed, reading the work of the major comparativists of the 1950s and 1960s, one is constantly struck by an almost palpable frustration with the approach to the study of political institutions which had prevailed up to then. Two factors were particularly relevant here. In the first place, the traditional emphasis on institutions was seen to privilege the formal and legal aspects of politics at the expense of what might be termed politics "in practice," and to privilege the "official" story at the expense of what was increasingly believed to be an alternative and "real" story. Thus "realism" rather than "legalism" was to become the keyword for the new comparativists. Secondly, a broadening of the sense of politics was also required in order to incorporate a recognition of less formally structured agencies and processes which spread the scope of the political quite far beyond the formal institutions of government alone. This shift developed directly out of the new global ambitions of the discipline, with the rejection of legalism going hand in hand with the rejection of a primary focus on Western politics. Moreover, not only did this new approach allow for a more nuanced, more in-depth analysis of non-western regimes, but it also encouraged the new generation of comparativists to pay attention to less formalized aspects of politics even within the study of the Western regimes themselves. Thus students of Western European politics were now encouraged to abandon their "formal and institutional bias" and to focus instead on the "political infrastructure, in particular on political parties, interest groups, and public opinion" (Almond 1970: 14).

Global ambitions, and the need to develop a more broadly defined conception of politics and the political system, had two important consequences. The first was simply the beginning of an extraordinarily fruitful
research program in comparative politics, the sheer scale, coherence, ambition of which has since remained unrivalled, and the recollection which remains enshrined in an image of this period as being the "golden age" of the discipline. "Comparative politics is [now] and has been disappointing to some," noted Verba (1985: 29) in a pessimistic review, "but disappointing in comparison to past aspirations and hopes." Since the golden age, it is often felt, the discipline has gone into retreat, with scholars complaining, at least in conversation with Verba, about "division, fragmentation, and atomization in the field... and the lack of clear definition, leadership, or a commonly held and agreed-upon set of theoretical underpinnings" (1985: 28). Second, conscious that "the challenge of comparative politics [was] to elaborate a conceptual apparatus in keeping with the vastly extended global scale of its empirical investigation" (Rustow, 1957/1963: 65), there also emerged a new approach to the study of politics which was to be encapsulated within the now much criticized notions of "structural-functionalism." Prior to this, as noted above, comparative politics had been dominated by the study of established, clearly defined, and economically advanced democratic systems, all of which were more or less characterized by an apparently sharp division between state and civil society, and by a conception of the state which viewed it as composed of specific (and comparable) institutions—executives, parliaments, bureaucracies, judiciaries, military forces, and so on—each playing its specific role within the system. Global comparisons, by contrast, implied not only the inclusion of non-democratic regimes, but also the very underdeveloped countries with so-called "primitive" political systems, in which was not only difficult to establish the boundary between state and civil society, but in which it was also sometimes almost impossible to identify specific political institutions with a specific purpose.

Along with global ambition, therefore, came the abandonment of emphasis on the formal institutions of government, and, indeed, the abandonment of an emphasis on the notion of the state itself, which was become translated into the more abstract references to "the political system." As Almond (1990: 192) later noted, this new terminology enabled scholars to take account of the "extra-legal," "paralegal" and "social" institutions which were so crucial to the understanding of non-western politics, and, as Finer (1970: 5) suggested, was required in order "to encompass state/non-state societies, as well as roles and offices which might not... be overtly connected with the state." Moreover, this new language could also serve the interests of those students who remained concerned with western politics, since even here a new wave of scholarship had begun to "discover" that governmental institutions in their actual practice deviated from their formal competences and had begun to "supplement" the purely legal approach with an observational or functional one. The problem now was not only what legal powers these agencies had, but what they actually did, how they were related to one another, and what roles they played in the making and execution of public policy" (Almond, Cole and Macridis 1955/1963: 53). Hence the emergence of structural-functionalism, in which certain quite abstractly defined functions were defined as being necessary for societies, and in which the execution and performance of these functions could then be compared across a variety of different formal and informal structures.

Since then, of course, this novel and path-breaking approach has itself been subject to extensive criticism and counter-reaction, with a new wave of scholarship emerging in the 1980s which stressed the need to return to the study of institutions and to restore primacy to an analysis of the state. If the approach of Almond and his colleagues might be characterized as one which "identified" the subject matter of political science as a kind of activity, behavior, or, in a loose sense, function... no longer limited in any way by the variable historical structures and institutions though which political activities may express themselves" (Easton 1968: 283; see also Fabbrini 1988), then the new approach which began to be asserted in the 1980s was one in which context became crucial, and in which it was precisely the "variable historical structures and institutions" which were now seen to play a central role (Thelen and Steinmo 1992). In the first place, institutions, and the state itself, now increasingly came to be seen as relevant "actors" in their own right, in the sense that they, or those who occupied their offices, were seen to have their own autonomous interests, and were thus also part of "real" politics (e.g. Skocpol 1985; see also Mitchell 1991). Second, and perhaps most crucially, institutions were also seen to have a major determining effect on individual behavior, setting the parameters within which choices were made and through which preferences were both derived and expressed (March and Olsen 1984; Shaple and Weingast 1987). Third, institutions, and institutional variations in particular, were also seen to have a major effect on outcomes, with the capacity of actors to realize their ends being at least partially determined by the institutional context in which they operated (e.g. Scharpf 1988; Thibaut 1994). From one reading, then, we appear to witness an almost cyclical process,
In which institutions, and possibly even the state, are initially privileged as the basis on which political systems might be compared; in which these institutions are later relegated as a result of the prioritizing of "a realism that recognized the processual character of politics" (Almond 1990: 192); and in which they then acquire a new relevance as part of that real politics itself, and as the context which determines individual behavior and performance. From this reading, therefore, we see a series of paradigmatic shifts (Evans et al. 1985), which travel right to the heart of comparative political analysis itself. From another reading, however, the contrasts are much more muted. In a trenchant review of some of the early work of the neo-stalinists and new institutionalists, for example, Almond was at pains to emphasize the real continuities which existed across the different schools, arguing that there was little in this so-called new approach which was not already present, either implicitly or explicitly, in much of the earlier literature, and that its terms were essentially "indistinguishable from 'behavioral' or structural functionalist definitions" (Almond 1990: 215).

But while Almond may have been correct in claiming that the reality underpinning the new terminology is less novel than has been claimed, the conceptual language involved is certainly different, and it is here that the key to the contrast between the two approaches can be found. In brief, it is not a problem of whether Almond and his colleagues neglected the importance of the state and of institutions more generally, or of whether Skocpol and many of the new institutionalists have now redressed that imbalance; this is, in the main, a fairly futile debate. Rather, and returning to the main question, it is a problem of the scope of the comparisons involved. For while Almond and his colleagues were consciously developing a conceptual language which could address the need for global comparisons, even when the particular analysis was in practice restricted to just one case or to just a handful of cases, much of the work engaged in by the more recent comparatists is explicitly adapted for application to a more limited (and often quite unvaried) set of comparisons; be it limited to regions (western Europe, Latin America, etc.), or even, as in the case of Skocpol (1979), Hall (1986), or Scharpf, (1988), to just a very small number of countries. The result is that while Almond and his colleagues were required to operate at a very high level of abstraction (see Sartori 1970), developing concepts which could travel to and be relevant for all possible cases, the more recent school of comparatists have contented themselves with a relatively middle-range or even low level of abstraction, in which the specificities of context become crucial determinants (see also below).

It is not therefore a problem of shifting paradigms, but rather a problem of shifting levels of abstraction, which, in turn, is induced by a shifting scope of comparison. In this sense, as was the case with the structural-functionalist "revolution" in the late 1950s and 1960s, the change is not so much a reflection of developments at the level of theory, but rather at the level of method. For once comparisons become more limited in scope, whether by restricting the focus to one region, or to a small number of cases, it becomes possible to bring into play a degree of conceptual specificity and intensiveness which is simply not feasible at the level of global, all-embracing comparisons. In other words, institutions and the state come back in not only because they are seen to be more important per se, but also because the lower levels of abstraction involved have allowed them to come back in, and have created the room for this type of grounded analysis. In the end, therefore, what is striking about the categories adopted by the structural functionalists is not the fact that they were more process-oriented, or that they were more society-centered, or whatever, which is in any case highly debatable (Almond 1990: 189-218); rather, what is striking about these categories is the enormously high level of abstraction which they required in order to allow them to travel from world to world, and in which institutional specificity was absorbed upward into the more abstract notions of role, structure and function. If institutions and the state have come back into prominence, therefore, it is at least partly because the scope of comparison has become more restricted, and it is this which is perhaps the most striking development within comparative politics in the last two decades or so.

This narrowing of the scope of comparison can be seen in a variety of ways. In the first place, and most practically, it can be seen in the now virtual absence of comparative analyses with a global, or even cross-regional ambition. To be sure, a variety of contemporary textbooks on comparative politics (e.g. Blondel 1990; Haggie et al. 1992), as well as a number of established courses, do attempt to remain inclusive, and aim to develop a framework which can accommodate first-, second- and third-world systems. With very few exceptions, however, contemporary research in comparative politics tends to be restricted by region, or even to a very small number of cases; notwithstanding the fact that there now remain few, if any, terra incognita. This orientation clearly stands in sharp contrast to...
least the ambitions which were originally expressed by the Committee on Comparative Politics in the 1950s, and to that earlier work which, even when restricted to just one or a handful of cases, persisted in applying concepts which were believed to be universally valid.

Second, there is an increasing tendency for the profession as a whole to become compartmentalized into more or less self-sufficient groups of, for example, Europeanists, Africanists, and Latin Americanists, with very little communication taking place across the boundaries of regional expertise. In part, this is simply a consequence of the pressures for increased specialization; in part, however, it is also a consequence of increased professionalization, with the critical mass of scholars in the different fields of expertise and their associated journals, now having grown sufficiently to allow self-sufficiency. In a somewhat different context, Almond (1990: 13-14) has already famously referred to the development of “separate tables” in political science, by which groups of scholars are divided on the basis of both ideology (left versus right) and method (soft versus hard). Perhaps more realistically, however, we can also conceive of the separate tables being constituted by regional specialists, with their separate European, Asian, Latin American, and African kitchens, and, even within these parameters, being increasingly further subdivided by academic specialization with the party people eating separately from the public policy people, and with the local government experts eating separately from those involved in electoral research. Not only has the growth of the discipline acted to pull regional specialists off from one another, but, even within the different regions, it has also tended to foster the self-sufficiency of specialist fields each with its own narrow network and its own set of journals (or, to continue the analogy, with its own menu), accentuating the trend towards fragmentation which was already regretted by Verba in 1985 (see above) and also Keman 1993a; for a more sanguine view of the process, see Macridis and Brown 1986, and Dalton 1991).

Third, and perhaps most importantly, the methodological debate within comparative politics, and perhaps within the comparative social sciences more generally, has increasingly tended to stress the advantages of “small N” comparisons. Thus, for example, it is quite instructive to compare Lipset’s 1971 review of the comparative method, which devoted considerable attention to ways in which scholars could compensate for, or overcome, the problem of having to deal with just a small number of cases, with a similar and more recent review by Collier (1991), which devoted a lot of attention to the sheer advantages of small N comparisons.

From one perspective, this new attitude can be seen to gel with many of the sentiments expressed by much of the other recent writings on the comparative method, whether these be within political science, sociology, or history, or even within an attempted multi-disciplinary synthesis (e.g., Rabin 1987; 1991), and which lay considerable stress on “holistic” analysis and on the need for in-depth understanding of particular cases. From another perspective, however, and notwithstanding the shared desire to move away from global comparisons and universal categories, much of this contemporary work in comparative politics might better be seen as consisting of two distinct “schools” or approaches (see also Collier 1991: 24-6). On the one hand, there are those researchers who persist in attempting to derive generalizable conclusions or in attempting to apply generalizable models across a range of countries which, in contrast to the global ambitions of the first postwar generation of comparativists, is usually limited in terms of region or status. On the other hand, there are also those researchers who seem increasingly wary of multiple case comparison, even when limited to a relatively small N, and who stress the advantages of close, in-depth analyses of what is at most a small handful of countries, in which the advantages offered by looking at the whole picture are seen to outweigh the disadvantages suffered by limited applicability. Despite their contrasts, however, there is a sense in which each approach can lay claim to offer the best option for the future. As Collier (1991) notes, for example, recent advances in quantitative techniques now appear to afford a much greater opportunity for statistical analyses across relatively small numbers of cases, and may lend the conclusions derived from such analyses a greater strength and authority. Relatively in-depth qualitative case analyses, on the other hand, despite their obvious limitations, have the advantage of being more grounded, and, at least at first sight, can also prove more sensitive to the insights now being afforded by both the “new institutionalism” and the rational choice paradigm. Indeed, the renewed interest in case studies in recent years, and the associated emphasis on understanding the full context in which political decisions are made, has most certainly been stimulated by the potential offered by these new insights (see also Section V, below).

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1 See, for example, Rhodes’s (1994) discussion of state-building in the United Kingdom, which includes a trenchant defense of the capacity of the case-study to produce generalizable conclusions.

2 As, for example, is the case with the very cloudy argument by Schumpel (1994) concerning the capacity of governments to implement public policies.

3 See, for example, LIscia’s (1989: 119-134) application of his nested games approach in a case study of British Labour Party activists, Belgian consociationalism, and French electoral coalitions.
III Questions

In many respects, the broad direction of the questions addressed by comparative political inquiry has remained largely unchanged through generations, and perhaps even through centuries. How might regimes be distinguished from one another? What accounts for regime stability, and what accounts for regime change? Which is the "best" form of government? The attention devoted to these "big" questions has tended, of course, to ebb and flow with different generations of scholarship, with interest being recently reawakened in the aftermath of the recent wave of democratization (see, for example, Diamond and Plattner 1993), and being reflected most obviously in the extraordinary volume of new literature on transitions to democracy and on constitutional engineering and institutional design. Indeed, it is precisely this reawakened interest in democratization, and the search for general patterns and predictions, which may well restore a sense of global ambition to comparative politics, since it is really only in this context that students of developing countries are beginning to reopen lines of communication with those whose field has been largely restricted to the developed west, and that the expertise of students of the former "second world" is finally seen as being relevant to mainstream comparative politics.

But these are clearly the classic themes, the hardy perennials of comparative politics, and once we move beyond these it is possible to see quite important shifts in the sorts of questions which tend to be addressed. In a recent review of the state of comparative politics, for example, Rogowski (1993: 431) noted five trends from the 1980s which certainly appeared to suggest a new research agenda, and which included: "A far greater attention to the economic aspects of politics... Increased interest in the international context of domestic politics and institutions... An altered and sharpened focus on interest groups... A revival of interest in state structures and their performance... [and] Further work on nationalism and ethnic cleavages." This is, of course, just one list among potentially many, and even after the lapse of just a couple of years, one might be inclined to relegate the once pronounced concern with, say, interest groups, and give priority instead, say, to the burgeoning interest in transitions to democracy and in the working of democracy itself. Notwithstanding any such qualifica-

1 For one very good recent example, see the stimulating and very thoughtful debate on the respective merits of presidential systems and parliamentary systems among Lijphart, Sartori, and Stepan and Skach in Linz and Valenzuela (1994: 3-126). Indeed, it might even be said that it is here that we see the practice of comparative politics at its very best. And hence also, this being a recent debate, the ideal counter-argument against the notion that, in some way or another, the discipline has now begun to pass its sell-by date.

11 As well as, increasingly, onto the variance of historical traditions, where a more nuanced version of political culture and political traditions then also comes into play (see, for example, Castles 1993; Ketsestein 1984: 136-139; Putnam 1993). The danger here, however, is that an emphasis on the crucial role played by historical traditions may sometimes lead to essentially ad hoc explanations if not to a degree of fatalism.
Comparative political inquiries are now much more likely than before to ask about the differences which politics makes, rather than to ask what makes politics different. In other words, confronted with variation in institutional structures and political processes, contemporary scholars are now much more likely to want to assess the impact of this variation rather than as before, and most notably in the late 1950s and 1960s, asking why these differences have emerged in the first place, and this clearly indicates a major shift in the direction of comparative research.

Evidence of this shift can be seen partially in the variety of new trends noted by Rogowski (1993, see also above), as well, indeed, as in almost any reading of the contemporary literature (see, for example, Keman 1993b). It can also be seen, and perhaps more interestingly, in the trajectory of individual scholars and schools of research. Among individual scholars, for example, it is possible to cite the case of Arend Lijphart, who has for long been one of the foremost authorities in the discipline, and whose work has progressed over time from an inquiry into the conditions which gave rise to certain types of democracy to an inquiry into the consequences of certain types of democracy. Lijphart's first major work in the field of comparative politics concerned the elaboration of a typology of democratic regimes in which the various types identified, and most notably consociational democracy, were defined on the basis of two crucial determining variables—the degree of conflict or co-operation among elites, on the one hand, and the degree of fragmentation or homogeneity in the political culture, on the other, with the latter being located firmly within a conception of social divisions and social pluralism (Lijphart 1968). What is most interesting in this particular context, however, is that as Lijphart's work developed, and as he attempted to modify and build on these initial ideas, the specifically social side of the equation became less and less important, such that in his highly influential depiction of two more generalized models of democracy (Lijphart 1984), the question of the social determinants of the political structures with which he was concerned was essentially relegated to the margins (Lijphart 1984; see also Bogaards 1994). Ten years later, in his most recent work in this field, the change in emphasis was even more evident, with the inquiry now having shifted into the question of the performance of the different types of democracy, and with the question of determinants being almost wholly ignored (Lijphart 1994a).

Similar shifts can also be seen among different schools of research, with the democratization literature offering perhaps the most obvious example of the way in which the explainers have moved from an emphasis on the "objective" social and economic conditions for democracy (e.g. Lipset 1959) to an emphasis on the importance of elite decision-making, on "voluntarism," and on the types of institutions and political structures involved. Whether democracy can emerge, therefore, and whether it can be sustained, is now seen to be much less dependent than before on levels of social and economic development and much more dependent on political choices (Rustow 1970), on "crafting" (Di Palma 1990), as well as on the outcomes of rational actions and information (e.g. Przeworski 1991). As Karl (1991: 163) puts it, "the manner in which theorists of comparative politics have sought to understand democracy . . . has changed as the once dominant search for preconditions to democracy has given way to a more process-oriented emphasis on contingent choice" (see also Karl 1991, more generally, as well as Whitehead, chap. 14, below). In a similar sense, the question of the consolidation and sustainability of new democracies is now also seen to be much more closely associated with the specific characteristics of the institutions involved (e.g. Linz and Valenzuela 1994). Here, then, as is also more generally the case in a variety of different fields of inquiry in comparative politics, the questions now revolve much more closely around what politics does, rather than what makes politics the way it is, with the result that, more than two decades after an early but very powerful appeal for just such a shift (Sartori 1969), comparative inquiries are now finally more likely to emphasize a political sociology rather than simply a sociology of politics.

IV Problems

On one level, work in comparative politics is often frustrating. The scholar expends much time and effort in gathering comparable cross-national data, ensuring that no relevant factor has been excluded from the analysis, and building a general and preferably parsimonious model which can explain the phenomenon in question wherever and whenever it occurs, only then to be confronted at some conference or other with some national expert who complains that it's really not like that at all here and who then goes on to offer a much more nuanced but essentially idiosyncratic "counter-explanation" (what Hans Daalder refers to as the "Zanzibar ploy"). On another level, of course, work in comparative politics allows one to be appallingly irresponsible, in that it is always possible to pre-empt the Zanzibar ploy by prefacing one's broad theory with the caution that while the conclusions are not necessarily true for any particular country, they are nevertheless certainly true more generally. In both cases, however, the real difficulty is essentially the same: although country tends to form the unit of
analysis and observation, the scholar must nonetheless work at one remove from country, and, regardless of whether the number of cases is limited or extensive, must translate a national experience into an operational category. And without wishing to enter into a discussion of the pros and cons of different comparative methods, this immediately presents those engaged in comparative politics with two particular problems.

The first of these problems was already alluded to by Rogowski (1993), and has frequently been highlighted in contemporary discussions of the discipline, and concerns the extent to which country continues to provide a meaningful unit of analysis. One aspect of this problem is the difficulty of identifying what is specific to national politics in an increasingly international environment. Insofar as comparative research does increasingly focus on outcomes and outputs, for example, then it is also increasingly likely to resort to explanations and determinants which lie outside the control of any one national state. To be sure, it is possible to construct a similar-cases research strategy in which the precisely same international environment is common to all the relevant cases, and in which it can then be taken as a given which will not explain any subsequent cross-national variation which might be found (see, for example, Scharpf 1988), but the opportunities for such a strategy are necessarily both limited and limiting (Mair 1995). In any case, to the extent that national institutions and national governments lose their capacity to mould their own national environments, then to that extent the study of comparative politics faces potentially severe problems. A second aspect of this problem concerns the sheer validity of country as a unit of analysis, even regardless of any relevant international context. The difficulty here is posed by the simple fact that countries themselves change over time, and hence in addition to puzzling over cross-national variation, researchers also need to be conscious of cross-temporal variation, in which country A at time X might differ markedly from country B at time Y (Bartolini 1993). Indeed, this difficulty becomes particularly acute when research is focused on institutional structures, since it is usually at this level that significant changes can and do occur. In other words, if institutions matter, how can those countries be analyzed in which these very institutions change? One possible solution to this problem which is emerging with increasing frequency is simply the dissolution of country into particular subsets of variables, with the recent study by Bartolini and Mair (1990), and most especially that by Lijphart (1994b), offering useful examples of

the gains which can be made by abandoning the notion of countries as single and indivisible cases and by the adoption of multiple observations from each country. The focus of Lijphart’s recent study is electoral systems and their political consequences, and it is precisely these electoral systems rather than countries as such, which constitute the relevant cases in the enquiry. Thus, for example, although France is one of the twenty-seven democracies included by Lijphart in his research, France as such does not constitute one of the relevant units of analysis; rather, the six different electoral formulae which France has adopted since 1945 constitute six of the total of seventy cases which are analyzed in the study (Lijphart 1994b). To be sure, this is far from a novel strategy, and a similar approach has long been adopted in comparative coalition research, for example. Nevertheless it is an increasingly common strategy, and suggests a much greater willingness to experiment with alternative units of analysis and hence to make provision for cross-temporal variation (Bartolini 1993).

The second problem involved here is perhaps more acute, and involves the reliability of the various measures and indicators which are used in order to translate national experiences into comparable operational categories, a problem which has become even more pronounced as scholar have attempted to build into their analyses measures of variation in political institutions and political structures. Social and economic explain have always proved relatively easy to operationalize, and in this sense the appeal of “objectivity” in the sociology of politics (Sartori 1969) has always been easy to appreciate, not least because of the apparent reliability of such sources of data as the World Bank, the OECD, the European Union, and even survey research. Once institutions begin to be measured and compared, however, reliability appears to falter, while at the same time hard data—in the sense of data which mean the same thing in every context—often prove unavailable. The result is an endless search for suitable “indicators” and even, at the extreme, the apparent fetishization of such indicators. One useful example of such an approach was the Lange—Garrett—Jackman—Hicks—Patterson debate which took in the page of the Journal of Politics in the late 1980s concerning the relationship between leftwing strength, as measured by party and organizational (in-trade-union) variables, and economic growth, and which was subsequently cited in a review of recent developments in the comparative method (Collier 1991:22), as “an exemplar of a methodologically sophisticated effort by several scholars to solve an important problem within the framework of a small-N quantitative analysis.” The debate did certainly represent a very valuable and important contribution to comparativ political research, and it was also certainly marked by a pronounce

14 And not just comparative politics: note Susan Strange’s (1995:55) provocative suggestion that with the waning of the state as the most important unit of analysis, “much of Western social science is obsolescent, if not yet quite out-of-date.”
methodological and statistical sophistication, with much of the to-ing and fro-ing between the authors revolving precisely around different methodological approaches. That is not to say, however, that it was also striking to see how the initial question of whether economic growth can be associated with left-wing strength was eventually transformed into a problem of statistical technique and case-selection, and how the more fundamental problem of how exactly left-wing strength could be measured and operationalized was essentially ignored. In other words, while the methodology was debated, the indicators themselves were taken for granted. And when one goes back to that debate, and looks to see precisely how these crucial indicators were derived, then one is directed to an article from the early 1980s in which the “the left” is “broadly defined to include Communist, Socialist, Social Democratic, and Labour parties, as well as several small parties that are to the left of centre on a Downsian ideological continuum,” in which leftists’ strength in government is indicated by the extent to which these parties control government, “as indicated by their control of portfolios in the cabinet,” as well as by “the strength of governing leftists in parliament” (Cameron 1984: 159), while levels of trade union membership and the organizational unity of labor are based on data reported in the Europa Yearbook (Cameron 1984: 165).

Now, my point is not that these indicators are worthless; far from it—they might well be very solid, and could certainly have been the best that could be found at the time of the original study by Cameron. What must be emphasized, however, is that they are simply indicators; they are not, nor can they ever hope to be, the real thing. And hence if a long debate is to rage in a reputable journal concerning the very important substantive question of whether leftists’ strength can be associated with economic growth, surely one of the first questions that springs to mind should not be about statistical techniques, but should rather be about the accuracy and reliability of the indicators themselves. For if the indicators no longer offer the best indication of what is supposed to be the underlying reality, then no amount of statistical engineering will result in the cumulation of understanding. In some notion of the “Downsian left of centre” the most appropriate dividing line to define left and right, or might some other measure not be tested? Is control over portfolios per se the best indicator of governmental influence, or might account not be taken of precisely which portfolios were involved? Might the level of membership in left-wing trade unions not offer a more appropriate measure of left-wing strength than membership in trade unions per se, and did the Europa Yearbook really continue to remain the best source of hard, reliable, cross-national data for this crucial variable? In the end, of course, these indicators might well prove to have been the best possible indicators then available to the contributors to this busy debate; what is simply surprising is that nobody thought to check this out.

There are, of course, numerous other examples which might be cited in which potentially fallible or arbitrary indicators have been accorded an almost biblical status. The Castles–Mair (1984) data on the left-right placement of parties in a number of western democracies, for instance, are generally seen as quite authoritative, and continue to be frequently employed in studies which follow along similar lines to the work cited above. These data probably are authoritative; but it is also possible that they are not, and the picture which they draw, based on a relatively small number of expert opinions in one snapshot sample, should not perhaps be accorded the significance and weight which they normally receive, and should certainly not be automatically assumed to have a validity extending both long before, and long after, their actual application. The same might also be said of the various indicators which were initially developed by Hendriks–Hart (1984) as a means of elaborating his influential distinction between majoritarian and consensus democracies, and which have subsequently been incorporated in a variety of different analyses; although these particular indicators may well offer one of the best means by which these two types of democracy might be distinguished, they are not necessarily the only option, and any application of Hendriks–Hart’s indicators should certainly take account of the specific time period (1945–80) to which they apply, in that a different slice of time can lead to quite a different categorization of the cases (see, for example, Mair 1994). Robert Putnam’s (1993) modern classic on Italian democracy is certainly far-reaching in both its argument and its implications, and has been highly praised for its capacity to link patterns in contemporary political culture to their early modern foundations; but even here, despite the intellectual breadth of the study, the key measure of institutional performance on which the analysis depends is based on just a small number of indicators, some of which derive from observations which were taken in the course of only one calendar year (Morlino 1995).

The real problem here, then, as is often the case in comparative political research more generally, is that the analysis of the relationship between variables is assumed to be more important than the quality and reliability of the variables themselves, a problem which has become even more acute as increased priority has been accorded to various institutional and political factors, and their operational indicators. It is also a very severe problem, for despite the evident increase in statistical and methodological sophistication of comparative political research in recent years, and despite the very obvious theoretical ambition, the actual data which are employed
remain remarkably crude (see also Schmidt 1995). And since it is precisely this lack of solid comparable data which is encouraging the virtual fetishization of whatever indicators might be available, regardless of their potential fallibility, it must surely remain a priority for comparative political research to follow the advice laid down by Stein Rokkan on many different occasions, and to continue to stimulate the collection of systematically comparable data which can really "pin down numbers" (cited by Flora 1986: v-vi) on cross-national variation.

V. Conclusion: present and future trends

All studies in comparative politics share at least one attribute: a concern with countries, or macro-social units, as units of analysis or, at least, as units of observation (Ragin 1987; Keman 1993a). At the same time, comparative analysis will also often seek to arrive at generalizable propositions, which, in their most extreme form, would seek to explain phenomena whenever and wherever they occur. The inevitable result is a tension between an emphasis on country-specific factors, on the one hand, and universal relationships, on the other. But whereas the then new comparative politics of the 1950s and 1960s tended to place the emphasis on universal relationships, and thus global comparisons, the tendency within comparative research over the past decade or so has been to move away from general theory by emphasizing the relevance of context.

In part, this tendency reflects the renewed influence of historical inquiry in the social sciences, and especially the emergence of a "historical sociology" (Skocpol and Somers 1980; Abrams 1982) which tries to understand phenomena in the very broad or "holistic" context within which they occur (see also Thelen and Steinmo 1992, and Section II above). More general theories, by contrast, are seen to involve the artificial-disaggregation of cases into collections of parts which can then be compared cross-nationally, and in which the original configuration of the aggregated "whole" is forgotten (see Ragin 1987: ix-x). Understanding the full picture as a whole and in depth is therefore seen to be preferable to a more general explanation of particular fragments of that picture. In part, however, this return to context is also the result of exhaustion and frustration. When the universe of comparative politics expanded in the late 1950s and 1960s, and when data on more and more countries became available to comparatists, there developed an inevitable tendency to compare as many cases as possible, and research tended to be driven by the elaboration of deductive models which could then be tested with as big an N as possible. Explanations were then enhanced through either an expansion of data sets, or through a refinement of the explanatory variables, or through a clearer specification of precisely what needed to be explained. Much of the development of coalition theories in the period from the 1960s to the 1980s, for example, can be seen in this way, with an ever more extensive range of countries being included as cases; with more variables being added to the models, such as policy, ideology, governing experience, and so on; and with more precise definitions of what actually constituted a "winning" coalition (see the reviews in Browne and Franklin 1986; Budge and Laver 1992). In a similar vein, much of the work which sought to assess the impact of "politics" on public policy outcomes (e.g. Castles 1982) developed by means of taking in as many cases as possible, and then by enhancing explanatory capacity through the constant refinement of the measures and definitions of "politics" (involving party ideology, party policy, institutional structures, structures of interest representation, and so on), on the one hand, and the measures and definitions of "outcomes" (levels of expenditures, policy styles, different policy sectors, and so on), on the other. In both fields of study, therefore, the goal remained one of explaining the relevant phenomenon in as general a manner as possible, while seeking to improve the capacity to explain by a constant modification of measurement tools.

Most recently, however, this strategy appears to have changed, not least because the capacity to enhance the amount of variance explained has more or less exhausted itself, with a further refinement of the various models now appearing to offer little in the way of explanatory gains. Coalition theorists, for example, now tend to place much more emphasis on inductive models (e.g. Fridham 1986), and are now much more concerned with understanding the broader national context within which each coalition game is played out, while those who are attempting to explain public policy outcomes are now tending to revert much more towards in-depth, case-sensitive, holistic studies. Francis Castles, for instance, who has pioneered much of the best comparative work in this latter area, has recently gone from developing broad, deductive models in which context played little or no role (Castles 1982), to more culturally specific studies in which distinct, but largely unquantifiable "traditions" (the English-speaking nations, or the Scandinavian nations) are accorded an important role (Castles and Merrill 1989; Castles 1993), as well as to more country-specific studies, in which the national context appears paramount (Castles 1989). The result has been a returning away from more generalized models and a renewed emphasis on the deeper understanding of particular cases or countries, where, often inductively, more qualitative and contextualized data can be...
assessed, and where account can be taken of specific institutional circumstances, or particular political cultures. Hence we see a new emphasis on more culturally specific studies (e.g., the English-speaking nations), then nationally specific studies (e.g., the UK alone), and even institutionally specific studies (e.g., the UK under the Thatcher government). However, the recent and increasingly widespread appeal of the very disaggregated approaches which emerge within the "new institutionalism" (e.g., Teisberg 1990; Ostrom 1991).

At the same time, however, it would be largely mistaken to read the recent shift as simply a return to the old emphasis on the study of individual countries which pre-dated the efforts of the 1954 Committee on Comparative Politics, in that there remains a major contrast between the earlier single-country approach and the present rediscovery of context contrast which has now begun to play a crucial role in the development of comparative political science as a whole. For whereas the earlier focus on single-country studies was developed at a time when political science itself was at a very early stage of development, and at a time when the center was in disciplinary excellence were concentrated at most a handful of departments in a small number of countries, the present concern with context emerged following a massive expansion of the discipline in terms of both internationalization and professionalization (Dalder 1993). Formerly, example, collections of national studies such as that represented by the pioneering Dahl "oppositions" (Dahl 1966) were quite exceptional in that it was only rarely that scholars with expert knowledge on countries or cases could be found and brought together to discuss the applications of similar hypotheses to their countries or cases. Nowadays, however, there is a pool of resources has become quite commonplace, and forms a core strategy within many cross-national (but usually regionally specific) research projects in a variety of different disciplines. This is particularly the case within comparative politics, where the development of comparative training methods and paradigms, together with the expansion of formalized international networks of scholars (such as the European Consortium for Political Research, ECPR), have insured that political science scholars least in the different regions, have now begun to speak what is essentially the same disciplinary language. As a result, it is now relatively easy, more permitting, to bring national experts together and then to cumulate the knowledge into a broad comparative understanding which is at the same time sensitive to the nuances of different contexts (see, for example, Pridham 1986; Budge et al. 1987; Castles 1989; Katz and Mair 1994; Lijph and Shepsle 1994). And precisely because these local experts are being brought together, and then aggregated, as it were, it is proving possible through the combination of in-depth and more generalized approaches, to build up plausible, convincing, and yet sufficiently nuanced comparative accounts. In other words, as a result of the international networks and national collaboration which has been facilitated by the professionalization of political science as a whole, case-study analysis is now being linked to generalizable theories and models, thus offering a strong potential for strong potential for linking between these two traditionally distinct approaches. This, in turn, is the current stage at which comparative political research finds itself, bringing together of more case-sensitive, context-sensitive types of studies which, through team effort, and through collaborative effort, can genuinely advance comparative understanding, and can therefore contribute to the development of comparative politics. It is, to one, a form of comparison which is more fundamentally limited in scope than envisaged by the Committee; perhaps paradoxically, however, and to return to Eckstein (1963: 22), it is also a mode of comparison which seems much better suited to "solving middle-range theoretical problems," even though, as suggested above, these problems are now more likely to concern the consequences of politics, rather than, as Eckstein saw it, its "determinants."

References


At the same time, however, this strategy also carries its own dangers. More specifically, the combined effect of both internationalization and professionalization now risks creating an essentially new type of profession, in which there are the genuine comparativists, on the one hand, that is, those who write and design such cross-national projects, and are then responsible for the cumulative interpretation, and the country experts, on the other hand, that is, those who, time after time, participate in these projects, interpret their own country or case in the light of the frameworks provided by the project initiators. This distinction, to be sure, need not be hard and fast, and those whose case it is to interpret country X for project Y may also develop their own projects and recruit their own teams of experts. In practice, however, much depends on the research and training infrastructure within the different countries, such that those national political science professions in which there is a greater emphasis on the need for cross-national research, and those in which funding is available for such research, will tend to produce the project initiators; whereas those in which the focus is more nationally oriented will tend to produce the country experts. It is thus no accident that comparative politics, and many comparative political science, is now disproportionately dominated by American scholars, who are the principal beneficiaries of the cross-nationally oriented American National Science Foundation.
RESEARCH TRADITIONS AND THEORY IN COMPARATIVE POLITICS: AN INTRODUCTION

Mark I. Lichbach
Alan S. Zuckerman

THE COMMON HERITAGE OF COMPARATIVE POLITICS

Comparativists inherit their dream of theorizing about politics from the founders of social theory. Their intellectual forebears represent the pantheon of Western thought. In the classic survey of the field’s intellectual origins, Harry Eckstein (1963) highlights the past masters.

Comparative politics ... has a particular right to claim Aristotle as an ancestor because of the primacy that he assigned to politics among the sciences and because the problems he raised and the methods he used are similar to those still current in political studies (Eckstein 1963: 3).

Machiavelli and Montesquieu, Hobbes and Smith are the progenitors who lived during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. The classic theorists of social science – Karl Marx, Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca, and Roberto Michels – established the field’s research agenda, mode of analysis, and contrasting theoretical visions. Several seminal theorists of contemporary political science – Harry Eckstein, David Apter, Robert Dahl, Seymour Lipset, Karl Deutsch, Gabriel Almond, and Sidney Verba – drew on this heritage to rebuild and reinvigorate the field of comparative politics. A shared, grand intellectual vision motivates comparativists.

Comparativists want to understand the critical events of the day, a position that ensures that dreams of theory address the political world as it exists, not for-
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in the structural transformations associated with the rise of capitalism, just as Marx developed a general strategy for a socialist revolution, and Weber grappled with the theoretical and normative demands of the bureaucratic state, and just as Mosca, Pareto, and Michels strove to understand the possibilities and limits of democratic rule, students of comparative politics examine pressing questions in the context of their immediate political agenda. The contemporary study of comparative politics therefore blossomed in response to the political problems that followed World War II. New forms of conflict emerged: Communist threat; peasant rebellions and revolutions; social movements, urban riots, student upheavals, military coups, and national liberation struggles swept the world. Government decisions replaced markets as focal points for economic development. New states followed the disintegration of colonial empires, and the worldwide movement toward democratic rule seemed to resume after the fascist tragedies. The challenges of the current era — domestic conflict, state-building, the political bases of economic growth, and democratization, to name but a few — stand at the center of today’s research, indicating that the need to respond to contemporary issues guides the field.

Comparative politics therefore asserts an ambitious scope of inquiry. No political phenomenon is foreign to it; no level of analysis is irrelevant, and no time period beyond its reach. Civil war in Afghanistan, voting decisions in Britain; ethnic conflict in Quebec, Bosnia, and Burundi; policy interactions among the bureaucracies of the European Union in Brussels; government agencies in Rome, regional offices in Basilicata, and local powers in Athens: the religious bases of political action in Iran, Israel, and the United States; the formation of democracies in Eastern Europe and the collapse of regimes in Africa: and global economic patterns are part of the array of contemporary issues that stand before the field. Questions about the origins of capitalism; the formation of European states; the rise of fascism and the collapse of interwar democracies; and the transition to independence after colonial rule are some of the themes of past eras that still command our attention.

Second, comparativists assert an ambitious intellectual vision in that they approach these substantive concerns with general questions in mind. Anyone who studies the politics of a particular country — whether Germany or Ghana, the United Arab Emirates or the United States of America — to address abstract issues, or comparative politics. Anyone who is interested in who comes to power, how, and why — the names, places, dates of politics in any one place or another — in order to ask something about the politics of succession, or the determinants of vote choice, is a comparativist. In other words, students of comparative politics examine a case to reveal what it tells us about a larger set of political phenomena, or they relate the particulars of politics to more general theoretical ideas about politics.

Comparativists therefore insist that analysis requires explicit comparisons. Because events of global historical significance affect so many countries in so short a period of time, studies of single countries and abstract theorizing are woefully inadequate to capture epoch-shaping developments. More than three decades ago, when the founders of the contemporary field of comparative politics initiated the most recent effort to merge theory and data in the study of politics, they therefore established another of the field’s guiding principles: The proper study of politics requires systematic comparisons.1

Finally, comparativists assert a grand intellectual vision in that their generalizations are situated in the context of the Big Questions of social thought: Who rules? How are interests represented? Who wins and who loses? How is authority challenged? Why are some nations “developed”? These questions have produced much contemporary theorizing about the connections among social order, the state, civil society, and social change, especially in democracies. Comparativists engage the basic issues that inform social and political thought.

In sum, comparative politics follows the lead of the grand masters in their approach to substantive issues, to the scope of inquiry, to the nature of theory-building, and to the enduring problems of social thought. As comparativists address politically significant matters, explore a range of political phenomena, propose general explanatory propositions based on systematic evidence from multiple cases, and address Big Questions, they move along a path first marked by the founders of social science.

THE COMPETING TRADITIONS IN COMPARATIVE POLITICS

In spite of this shared dream, long-standing disagreements separated the field’s forebears and contrasting research schools characterize current efforts to build theories in comparative politics. When many of today’s senior scholars were graduate students, their training included courses that compared psychological and culturalist approaches, institutional studies of political organizations, structural-functional and systems analyses, cybernetics and modes of information theory, pluralist, elitist, and Marxist analyses, modernization theory and its alternatives of dependency and world-systems theories, and rational choice theory, to name the most obvious. Most of these perspectives have disappeared and some have formed new combinations. Today, rational choice theories, culturalist approaches, and structural analyses stand as the principal competing theoretical schools in comparative politics. Rational choice theorists follow a path laid out by Hobbes, Smith, and Pareto; culturalists continue work begun by Montesquiou and developed by Weber and Mosca; and structuralists build on Marx’s foundations and add to Weber’s edifice. The themes and debates of contemporary comparative politics are therefore rooted in the enduring questions of social thought. They continue to lie at the center of work in all the social sciences.

Rationalists begin with assumptions about actors who act deliberately to maximize their advantage. This research school uses the power of mathematical reasoning to elaborate explanations with impressive scope. Analysis begins at the level of the individual and culminates in questions about collective actions, choices, and institutions. Following the path first charted by Downs (1957), Olson (1965), and Riker (1962), rational choice theory has spread to address diverse problems: from electoral choice to revolutionary movements, from coalitions to political economy, and from institution formation to state building. Here, the clarity of mathematical reasoning takes pride of place, powerful abstract logics facilitate a shared understanding among the members of the research school.

As comparativists engage in fieldwork in diverse societies, they grapple with the need to understand varied ways of life, systems of meaning, and values. As students who cut their teeth on the abstractions of modernization and dependency theory encounter the realities of particular villages, political parties, and legislatures, they seek to ground their observations in the politics that is being analyzed. Following the lead of social and cultural anthropologists, many comparativists adhere to Geertz’s (1973) admonition to provide “thick descriptions.”

Culturalists therefore provide rich and detailed readings of particular cases, frequently drawn from fieldwork, as they seek to understand the phenomena being studied. This stance usually joins strong doubts about both the ability to generalize to abstract categories and the ability to provide explanations that apply to more than the case at hand.

Structuralists draw together long-standing interests in political and social institutions. Many emphasize the formal organizations of government; some retain Marx’s concern with class relations; some study political parties and interest groups; some combine these into analyses of how states and societies interact; and some emphasize the themes of political economy. Although these scholars display diverse patterns of reasoning, from mathematical models to verbal arguments, and many modes of organizing empirical evidence, they continue to follow Marx’s and Weber’s contention that theory and data guide social analysis.

As Alan Zuckerman’s essay indicates, these research traditions take strong positions on the methodological issues that divide comparativists. Rational choice theorists seek to maximize the ability to provide universal laws that may be used in nomothetic explanations. They consider problems of reliability—the concern with the evidence required to support generalizations from the particular to sets of cases—as a challenge to research design. Cultural interpreters maximize the importance of credibility as they describe the constellations of particular cases and minimize the value of generalist research expectations. They interpret particular events, decisions, and patterns, eschewing any need to tie explanations to general principles. Structuralists who follow Marx offer universal theories that include causal accounts. At the same time, they struggle to tie reliable descriptions into powerful generalizations; they grapple self-consciously with the requirements of case selection and how best to move from the particular analysis to the set of cases about which they seek to theorize. Comparativists’ long-standing debates over method thus reappear in the three research traditions.

However, as Mark Lichbach’s essay indicates, the dispute among the schools goes beyond the ideographic-nomothetic divide. The traditions differ with respect to ontology: Rationalists study how agents employ reason to satisfy their interests, culturalists study rules that constitute individual and group identities, and structuralists explore relations among actors in an institutional context. Reasons, rules, and relations are the various starting points of inquiry. The traditions also differ with respect to explanatory strategy: Rationalists perform comparative static experiments, culturalists produce interpretive understandings, and structuralists study the historical dynamics of real social types. Positivism, interpretivism, and realism are the possible philosophies of social science.

Moreover, as both Zuckerman and Lichbach indicate, no school displays a rigid and uniform orthodoxy. Rationalists debate the utility of relaxing the core assumption that defines individuals as maximizers of their self-interest. They differ as well over the proper form of explanation, some seeking covering laws and others proposing causal accounts, as they debate the necessity of transforming formal models into accounts of events. Continuing the debate initiated by Marx and Weber, structuralists differ over the ontological status of their concepts: Are social class, ethnicity, state, and other concepts that characterize this research school natural types? Are political processes best seen as determined and closed-ended or probabilistic and open-ended processes? Structuralists differ as well over the proper methodology of comparative research, in which Eckstein (1974), Bagem (1987), Rigg and Becker (1992), and Skocpol and Somers (1986) have offered significant alternative positions (see Collier 1993 for a review of this literature). Most recently, Collier and Mahon (1993), Collier (1995), and Saren (1994) illustrate further developments concerning the proper formation of concepts and King, Keohane, and Verba (1994; 1995) initiated a productive debate over issues of research design in comparative politics. On the latter, see especially Bienen (1995), Brady (1995), Caraman (1995), Collier (1995), Lass (1995), Mahr (1995), Rogowski (1995), and Tharow (1995). There is a natural affinity between studies of research design and comparative methods that is frequently overlooked. King, Keohane, and Verba (1994; 1995) argue that there is only one scientific method. Hence, their structures resemble those proposed by Cook and Campbell (1979).
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the utility of nomothetic and causal explanations. Culturalists disagree over the theoretical importance of generalizations drawn from their fieldwork. May one derive or test general propositions from the analysis of a particular village? Do public opinion surveys provide an adequate picture of people's goals, values, and identities? They differ over the nature of explanations in comparative politics as well. Some culturalists reject any form of covering law or causal accounts, offering only interpretations of political life in particular places; others move toward the mainstream of comparative politics, incorporating values and systems of meaning into theories that adhere to the standard forms of explanation. In short, as Lichbach makes clear in his essay, ideal-type rationalists, culturalists, and structuralists need to be identified so that we may recognize how practicing comparativists employ a battery of ideal-type strategies in their concrete empirical work.

Comparative politics is dominated today by rationalist, culturalist, and structuralist approaches. What explains the imperialist expansion of these schools and the disappearance of earlier approaches? As Lichbach's and Zuckerman's essays in this volume demonstrate, these schools share an ontological and epistemological symmetry. They offer - indeed force - choices along the same dimensions. Furthermore, at a more fundamental level, the themes of the research schools rest at the heart of the human sciences: Reason, rules, and relations are unique to social theory. Focusing on these themes sets research in the social sciences apart from the physical sciences, providing a fundamental basis on which to theorize about political phenomena. Rationalist, culturalist, and structuralist theories are thus embedded in strong research communities, scholarly traditions, and analytical languages.

ADVANCING THEORY IN COMPARATIVE POLITICS: AN OVERVIEW OF THE ESSAYS IN THIS VOLUME

The extraordinary range and importance of the topics examined by comparativists, the powerful and competing research schools that characterize the field, and the scholarly pedigree of its work invite periodic assessment of the state of comparative politics. In the early 1960s, Harry Eckstein and David Apter (1964) edited a collection of essays that established the field's questions. In 1970, Robert Holz and John Turner gathered together a set of contributions that raised the level of theoretical sophistication. Both volumes guided research in comparative politics.¹


RESEARCH TRADITIONS AND THEORY

A field advances through explicit dialogue about the relative strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures of the research traditions of which it is composed. Theory is a collective and contentious enterprise. While scholarship is the work of single scholars, knowledge accumulates as competing groups of scholars accept and reject claims about the world. We have therefore organized this volume around the theme of competing research traditions in comparative politics. Because too much analysis in comparative politics is guided by the expectations, assumptions, methods, and principles of rational choice theory, culturalist analyses, and structuralist approaches, assessments of the state of theory and prospects for advancing theory need to focus on these research schools. As the authors of the essays in this volume examine the research traditions in comparative politics, they assess knowledge and advance theory, seeking to direct research in the coming years.

Because research in comparative politics centers around distinctive topics, we have also selected four themes around which to examine the interplay between theory and the three schools: the analysis of mass politics (especially regarding electoral behavior), social movements and revolutions, political economy, and state-society relations. Why did we choose these topics? Taken together, they encompass much of the research done in comparative politics. Each displays a history of sophisticated theoretical and empirical work that stretches over several decades. The comparative study of voting behavior begins in the interwar years. Because most people who engage in political activities do so only at the ballot box, this research examines the political behavior of the largest set of people; here the study of politics moves its focus away from politicians and bureaucrats, government agencies and political parties, and the abstractions of state and society. The systematic analysis of social movements and revolutions descends directly from Marx and Weber. It also links to studies of regime transformations and the bases of stable democracies. Beginning with Adam Smith's theories, the analysis of the political economies of advanced industrial societies has become the focus of the largest segment of research on the political institutions and public policies of established democracies. As comparativists study state-society relations, they follow a path first marked by Marx, Weber, Mosca, Michels, and Pareto. As they study the formation of states, they blend abstract theorization and detailed empirical studies.

A study of these particular topics has the additional virtue of moving the analysis beyond the field of comparative politics. Examining the successes of the research schools with regard to each of these topics also casts light on the utility of various analytic techniques: Electoral analyses typically use quantitative techniques to study survey results and work on state-society relations includes the results of qualitative studies, while research on both social movements and revolutions and political economy varies in the use of quantitative and qualitative modes of analysis. Finally, these research themes also cast light on the relations between theories developed in comparative politics and those that characterize related fields in political science and the other social sciences. The research
themes thus tell us about the utility of hypotheses devised to explain electoral behavior and social movements in the United States, the value of methods and arguments drawn from economists in the study of political economy, and the significance of anthropological approaches for the analysis of state-society relations. In sum, as we analyze these four research topics, we shed light on central issues of theory in comparative politics and the social sciences more generally.

We have divided the essays into three units. The first, containing the chapters written by Margaret Levi, Marc Howard Ross, and Ina Katznelson, offers briefs for each of the research schools. The essays summarize each analytic tradition's core principles, noting variations within the approach and presenting recent work that points to new combinations. The next unit contains the chapters written by Samuel H. Barnes on mass politics, Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly on social movements and revolution, Peter A. Hall on the political economy of established democracies, and Joel S. Migdal on state-society relations in newly formed states. The concluding unit contains essays by Mark I. Lichbach and Alan S. Zuckerman, returning the focus to the theme of advancing theory in comparative politics.

THE ESSAYS

Margaret Levi contends that rational choice theory displays several critical strengths. It demonstrates the potential gap between personal interest and the public good, individual behavior and collective action. It offers testable theories, providing the ability to make sense of a correlation or a set of events through a plausible and compelling story that identifies causal mechanisms and universal principles. Rationalists in comparative politics, she maintains, are committed to explanation and to generalization. Levi also sets out differences within the research school. Members of this analytic tradition differ in the extent to which they believe that the core principles can be tested. They vary as well in the form of explanation: Some search for very general causes and others offer causal explanations. Levi maintains that the major task confronting comparative rationalists is to offer explanations that compel both logically and empirically. To that end, she develops the method of analytic narratives, in which rational choice theory provides the principles that guide a narrative history of a political process. This method offers a bridge between rationalists and the other research schools. No matter the detail in an analytic narrative, maintains Levi, rationalists remain distinctive. They are almost always willing to sacrifice nuance for generalizability, detail for logic.

Marc Howard Ross argues on behalf of culturalists. He maintains that two distinct, but not unrelated, features of culture are relevant to comparative politics. First, culture is a system of meaning which people use to manage their daily worlds, large and small; second, culture is the basis of social and political identity which affects how people stand and how they act on a wide range of matters. Culture is a framework for organizing the world, for locating the self and others in it, for making sense of the actions and interpreting the motives of others, for grounding an analysis of interests, for linking collective identities to political action, and for motivating people and groups toward some actions and away from others. The effects of culture on collective action and political life are generally indirect, and to appreciate fully the role of culture in political life, it is necessary to inquire into how culture interacts with interests and institutions. Ross proposes that a postmodern, intersubjective understanding of politics is compatible with the belief that comparison is central to social science, no matter the complexity of social phenomena. Interpretations, Ross maintains, lie at the center of cultural analysis. The interpretations of particular political significance are built from the accounts of groups and individuals striving to make sense of their social and political worlds, and the term refers both to the shared intersubjective meanings of actors and also to the explicit efforts of social science observers to understand these meanings and to present them to others. Ross presents interpretations as a methodological tool in the comparative study of culture and politics for understanding processes like the construction of ethnic and national identities.

Ina Katznelson develops a macroanalytical mode of analysis. Katznelson presents a picture of society that is composed of important and significant social relationships, political processes, and economic interactions. Individuals are defined by these connections, as structures constrain their perceptions and choices. Katznelson believes that the most significant processes shaping human identities, interests, and interaction are such large-scale features of modernity as capitalist development, market rationality, state-building, secularization, political and scientific revolution, and the acceleration of instruments for the communication and diffusion of ideas. He offers an approach that examines the relationship of history and analytical social science; structural theory after Marxism; the special status of the state, and the question of behavioral and strategic microfoundations. He proposes a configurative approach, standing in opposition to the microanalytical and positivist currents that are increasingly important in political science. Finally, he offers a stirring call for a return to the world-historical vision of structuralists like Barrington Moore.

Samuel H. Barnes reviews the research traditions with regard to mass political behavior, concentrating first on turnout in national elections and then on partisan choice in established democracies. He maintains that research on the determinants of the decision to take part in an election display the strengths and weaknesses of each of the research schools. None has solved this problem, whether conceived as a question of aggregate variation across various countries and different points in time, or as the single act of casting a ballot for any one person. Barnes regards partisan choice as a more complex problem. Reviewing evidence that the mobilization of publics in established democracies has shifted from social to political to cognitive bases, he maintains that there is parallel support for the claim that rationalist perspectives have replaced structuralist arguments in this research area.
Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly synthesize approaches to the analysis of social movements and revolution, denying either the need or the utility of deciding among them. Research in this area, they maintain, requires theories that join structural and rationalist factors — political opportunity and mobilization structures — with cultural factors — framing processes. Charting a research agenda, they call for comparisons across different types of contentious actions and movements and across different political settings that take into account particular national histories. Their chapter introduces a research agenda that includes the analysis of patterns that flow over time, taking seriously the metaphor of cycles and revolutions. Here, they lead comparative politics back to the theoretically informed study of a single country. Their effort joins with other process models, displaying a mode of explanation that accounts for political phenomena without offering a single general covering law or one general causal explanation.

Peter A. Hall examines theories of the political economy of advanced industrial societies that emphasize interests (drawing on rational choice theory), ideas and values (the work of culturalists), and institutions (structural approaches). In a systematic and comprehensive survey, Hall reflects on the accomplishments of all of the research schools, noting as well the lacunae present. The essay examines the potential for integrating themes, underlying existing developments that lie at the intersections of the schools. Noting that much recent research has concentrated on explaining cross-national differences in economic policies and performance, Hall concludes by stressing the need to return to broad and fundamental themes: the relationship between the state, seen as the architect of a general interest, and the market, seen as a mechanism for interchange among private interests, and the consequences of this interaction for the overall distribution of well-being in society.

Joel S. Migdal defends the centrality of the state against recent attacks on its analytic importance. The analysis of the state, he maintains, is unnecessarily cut off from other political phenomena. Locating the source of the problem in the overwhelming influence of Weber on the study of the state, Migdal maintains that the various perspectives — culturalist, rationalist, and structuralist alike — have tended to isolate it as a subject of study, penned into its innermost and posing over its organization in order to understand how it succeeds in gaining obedience and conformity from its population. This sort of analytic isolation of the state, he claims, has led to a mystification of its capabilities and power. Finally, Migdal develops an argument on behalf of the "limited state." He seeks to accomplish this goal by blending the largely ignored culturalist perspective with the more dominant institutionalist approach, as well as shifting the analytic focus away from the state as a freestanding organization and toward a process-oriented view of the state-in-society.

Mark L. Lichbach addresses the central problem of this volume: the interpretation and understanding of the debate among the competing research traditions that characterize contemporary comparative politics. He offers a four-part thesis on improving the state of theory in comparative politics. First, if we approach theory by believing that our field consists only of a "messy center," our search for better theory will end almost immediately. Second, if, on the other hand, we embrace creative confrontations, which can include well-defined syntheses among the strongly defined research communities in our field — the rationalists, culturalists, and structuralists — reflexive understanding of theorists and their theories will flourish. Third, contemporary comparativists can gain the most out of such a dialogue by appreciating the historical context of the development of social theory. Finally, contemporary comparativists can also gain from such dialogue by recognizing that the approaches offer a critical commentary on the challenges of modernity which, in turn, help us appreciate the significance of rationalist, culturalist, and structuralist thought.

Alan S. Zuckerman also addresses the central problem of this volume. He does so by directing attention to the relationship between theory and the standards for explanations in comparative politics. He notes that the accepted form of explanation — covering laws and causal accounts — display significant deficiencies, providing unreasonable standards for assessing explanations. Furthermore, Zuckerman maintains that nomological and causal explanations share an ontology that includes a common set of causal processes, whether in the size of cause and effect, and microprocesses as determinants of structures. Structures are useful tools for testing explanatory hypotheses. The successes of theories in comparative politics have been due in large part to the use of these methods. Theories that use more reasonable standards for explanation in comparative politics allow for more creative comparisons; complex statistical techniques join methods that assume linear relationships among variables; analysis join individual and social variables. New theories emerge, maintain Zuc- reman, and the ability to explain political phenomena advances.

THE WAY AHEAD

The rationalist, culturalist, and structuralist research traditions set the agenda for contemporary comparative politics, just as they do in the study of American politics, international politics, and social science even more generally. 4 Advanced theory in comparative politics therefore requires that we understand and assess these three research schools. Absent a focus on these approaches, symposia on the

4This point is documented in Lichbach's essay.
CONCLUSION


REFORMULATING EXPLANATORY STANDARDS AND ADVANCING THEORY IN COMPARATIVE POLITICS*

Alan S. Zuckerman

And if you ask me how, wherefore, for what reason? I will answer you: Why, by chance! By the merest chance, as things do happen, lucky and unlucky, terrible or tender, important, or unimportant; and even things which are neither, things so completely neutral in character that you would wonder why they do happen at all if you didn't know that they, too, carry in their insignificance the seeds of further incalculable chances (Joseph Conrad, cited in Kellert 1993: 49).

[U]nforeseen catastrophes are never the consequence of the effect, if you prefer, of a single motive, of a cause singular; but they are rather like a whirlpool, a cyclonic point of depression in the consciousness of the world, towards which a whole multitude of causes have contributed (Gadda 1937: 1984: 2).

The Danube does not exist, that is as clear as day. The Danube is not something, not the water, not the molecules, not the dangerous current, but the society: the Danube is the form. The form is not some mantle beneath which something still more serious lies hidden (Estherby 1994: 24).

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David Collier