Studying Democracy and Teaching Classics: What Is Happening in the Field of Comparative Politics?

By Paulette Kurzer

In this essay, I assess how comparative politics is taught at the undergraduate and graduate levels and what our approach to teaching says about the state of the subfield. What do practitioners emphasize in a comparative politics course in light of the enormous global changes of the past decade? Which topics are included and which ignored? What should be included that is now missing, even at the cost of excluding something else?

I found that many undergraduate syllabi take as their starting point the triumph of the "third wave of democratization." Instructors use democracy and democratization as their organizing principle; this is reflected in the case studies covered in the courses. This choice comes at the cost of not studying countries or regions where democracy is underdeveloped or stunted. Many courses thus highlight a limited range of countries and conceptual themes while ignoring critical issues that dominate the headlines, such as the politics of nondemocracies and current U.S. national security preoccupations with rebuilding demolished states, containing Islamic fundamentalism, and disarming "rogue" states. In the not so distant past, national security concerns heavily influenced the structure and content of lower-level comparative politics courses, since instructors felt compelled to familiarize students with "totalitarian," or Soviet-style, regimes. Perhaps our excitement with the spread of democratic ideals and institutions has obscured the fact that numerous parts of the world are still governed by autocracies.

Graduate courses also emphasize institutional developments and democratic structures at the expense of new topics (such as ideas, culture, norms, and values), as well as older themes (such as welfare state policy, social and political mobilization, gender, the impact of international trade, and state capacity). Field seminars have become more narrowly focused than they used to be, aiming primarily to summarize the endeavors of earlier generations of scholars, assess knowledge, and advance theory related to state-society relations first laid out by the founders of the social sciences: Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Vilfredo Pareto, and Robert Michels.

I reached these conclusions by looking at more than 30 comparative politics syllabi from a balanced mix of public and private educational institutions.[1] Of those, approximately a dozen are for field seminars and 20 are for introductory courses. Syllabi with a focus on specific themes or regions were discarded on the grounds that the aim here is to present a summary of the subfield of comparative politics generally and to assess how we, as teachers, define its body of knowledge.

Undergraduate Courses

An introductory course in comparative politics is aimed at freshmen and sophomores, and seeks to accomplish multiple objectives. First, such a course is a useful way to introduce students to how societies and political systems are constructed, as well as how they differ and evolve. The purpose is to acquaint young Americans with the wide diversity of cultures, political systems, and national institutions found across the world. Another goal is to supply students with the necessary analytical skills to complete a degree in the social sciences or liberal arts. Here, the task is to help students formulate the kinds of questions that will elucidate how political systems emerge and why they are the product of convoluted trajectories involving particular decisions and choices. Additionally, since department funding and thus faculty positions may depend on the number of undergraduate political science majors, introductory courses in many state universities are a recruitment tool.

From the start, instructors in comparative politics face a critical decision: how to present the course materials. Should they emphasize the unique experiences of single countries, or should they tackle political science concepts, thereby exploring at greater depth selected topics? A country approach means assigning readings about individual case studies and then drawing broad comparisons across a limited range of political science concepts, such as party systems, economic development, or interest group mobilization. Leslie Anderson (University of Florida) teaches this kind of course; she begins with a thorough analysis of the historical factors, current political institutions, and policy processes in Britain, and then goes through several additional cases, concluding with Russia.

An alternative is to present course materials according to thematic concepts and use many countries to illustrate each topic. An introductory course co-taught by Ronald Rogowski and Michael

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Ross (University of California, Los Angeles) stresses three overarching issues: the development of the political system, variations in democratic institutions, and divergences in public policies among OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) states. The readings are analytical and reflect different traditions, and none focuses on a particular case study. A course taught by José Antonio Cheibub (Yale University) similarly explores how to measure democracy, how democracies die, and what kinds of governments are formed in democracies, by assigning relatively challenging readings that approach these issues from a broader conceptual perspective.

Each approach has weaknesses and strengths. A course that examines individual political systems at length can easily overwhelm students with details, none of which help them to appreciate the ramifications of, say, a multiparty system or coalition formation. But the alternative also has drawbacks, since it is possible for a student to complete the course with perhaps a solid grasp of certain theoretical concepts, but to remain basically ignorant of the features of any particular political system.

In the majority of the syllabi examined, the country and theme approaches are blended. Each week's reading is organized around a major theme, and one specific case is used to introduce the subject matter. Erik Bleich (Middlebury College), for instance, locates the concept of political mobilization within the context of the civil rights movements in the United States and Brazil. The same course also introduces economic development by bringing in the Japanese model of state intervention. Andrew Gould (University of Notre Dame) introduces the theme of early economic development by assigning readings on Britain, and he uses France to illustrate early political development.

Out of the 20 undergraduate syllabi gathered, eight adopt a thematic country examination, four take a straight analytical approach, six are hard to classify because they use both types of organization, and—here is the key—only two make a country-by-country comparison exploring the history, institutions, and political process. Apparently, years of debate on the flaws of this last method[2] have induced many instructors to emphasize themes but ultimately center the bulk of the readings on one case study. The benefits of this type of organization are obvious. Students are forewarned to pay particular attention to the theme that drives that week's lecture, and they will learn something about a key concept in comparative politics while immersing themselves in the country-specific features of a political system.

Since this approach is in vogue, a logical question is this: which themes are favored? Democracy is the big one. A large number of syllabi for introductory courses discuss conditions for democratic rule, collapse of democratic institutions, democracy in countries with deep ethnic cleavages, democracy in transitional economies, prospects for democracy, difficult versus peaceful democratic transition, and democratic consolidation.

So it makes sense that the case studies would contribute to the exploration of democracy. Of course, that decision does not totally belong to the instructors, since texts suitable for undergraduate courses must be available and most publishers prefer to commission chapters on large, "important" countries. Thus European countries—France, Britain, and/or Germany—are found in virtually every course that relies on a theme/country mix or organization by country. Other countries that find favor are Russia and Mexico, since they too are large and illustrate some aspect of the democratic experience. In fact, Russia is discussed in at least half of the undergraduate courses surveyed; Mexico appears in at least eight of them. The frequent inclusion of Mexico in an undergraduate course comes as a surprise—it has been understudied in the past—and may be a by-product of the North American Free Trade Agreement, which heightened interest in and concern about the long-term ramifications of free trade agreements on the American economy, immigration, and the environment. Also, many regions of the United States contain a sizable Mexican population. Other countries that fit the criteria for inclusion are Brazil, Nigeria, Japan, and India. Surprisingly, China is underrepresented; it appears in only three of the courses—the same number that examine South Africa. In contrast, two countries that we would not expect to find in an introductory course, the United States and Italy, make frequent appearances. At least six courses have a section on the United States, perhaps because many students are woefully unfamiliar with their own political system, and comparisons work better when students can relate cases to their own experiences. Another six courses cover Italy, a country that rarely used to appear in lower-level courses. The current fascination with Italy has a lot to do with the popularity of *Making Democracy Work* by Robert Putnam (with Robert Leonardi and Rafaella Y. Nanetti), one of the few bestsellers our discipline can claim and a wonderful study of civil society and democratic institutions in Italy.

But important topics and nations (or types of nations) are left out of this single-minded focus on democracy. Courses now seldom address traditional political economy issues, such as the welfare state, policy making, class and political coalitions, revolution, social mobilization, strategies for industrialization, and other topics inspired by neo-Marxist theorizing of the mid-1970s. Even more problematic is the lack of analyses of Islamic countries. A couple of courses cover Iran and a few look at the Middle East, but generally the Arab world and South Asia are ignored, with the notable exception of India. Likewise, East Asia, except for Japan, is understudied. And though the United States shares a 2,500-mile border with Canada, not a single introductory course that I examined includes a section on Canada, let alone Australia.

In short, regions or countries where democracy has made little progress are omitted, while cases of successful or intriguing democratic adjustments (e.g., Russia and Mexico) are studied at length. In the process, important information is lost. If we think of today's students as future taxpayers and voters, it seems odd that they learn about the quality of democracy in Italy but mostly remain ignorant about China, which contains 20 percent of the world's population and is a major trading partner of the United States, and whose weight in world affairs is bound to grow in the coming decades. If an instructor feels, as I do, that students should be made aware of the diversity of political systems, the existence of different economic trajectories, and dilemmas faced by different regimes, then China ought to figure prominently in his or her survey course.

The striking absence of the Middle East from these syllabi is at once expected and problematic in light of recent events. The

Middle East in general has received much less academic attention, at least by political scientists, than many other regions have, even though U.S. national security concerns are for the most part shaped by the conflict between the United States and Islamic countries. Since September 11, 2001, the U.S. government has set aside resources to fund an overseas publicity campaign for itself in Muslim countries. Shouldn't we, as academics, respond by investing resources to acquaint students with those cultures? One effective way to force students to assess their own biases against and ignorance of non-Western systems is to assign parts of Samuel P. Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations,* a strategy used both by Pippa Norris (Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government) and by Sven Steinmo (University of Colorado). And several courses examine Iran as an interesting case of revolution and challenges to the state. But overall, the comparative subfield does not seem to view the Middle East as a core area of interest.

Most likely, the absence of Muslim countries and China from the syllabi is not by design, but is the unintended outcome of using democracy as the organizing principle for a lower-level course. Such a course calls for some kind of theme, especially since the consensus has moved away from a country-by-country examination. For obvious reasons, the thread that runs through many syllabi is the amazing success of liberal democracy. Nonetheless, the world we live in, according to the media and our elected leaders, is threatened by "rogue states," terrorism funded by radical Islamic groups, and organizations at war with the American way of life. Yet the syllabi that I reviewed do not provide students with the skills to examine how U.S. global dominance is setting a new foreign policy agenda.

Graduate Seminars

Graduate teaching offers a different set of challenges since the objective is to train a future generation of political scientists in the fine art of the comparative method and, presumably, to help prepare them for an academic career. As expected, field seminars in comparative politics show more variations than undergraduate introductory courses do. However, graduate instructors seem to have a distinct preference for assigning older texts rather than delving into recent publications. It is not farfetched to state that somebody who attended graduate school 15 years ago would recognize many of the readings in present-day field seminars.

There is a surprising similarity in the way the graduate courses are taught. Comparative methodology is no longer really studied in field seminars and has instead been relegated to specialized methods courses. For the most part, instructors cover it in one week. Seminars such as Gerardo Munck's (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) or Marcus Kurtz's (Ohio State University) assign the first chapter from *Designing Social Inquiry*[3] and supplement it with a few articles from an earlier period, such as Arend Lijphart's "Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method" (1971), Giovanni Sartori's "Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics" (1970), or Alasdair MacIntyre's "Is a Science of Comparative Politics Possible?" (1971), in order to review contentions concerning the comparative method.

Rather than methodology, graduate seminars adopt theoretic themes to lend structure to the course readings; they usually identify structuralism/institutionalism, culturalism, and rational choice as the three principal approaches. This tripartite division is suggested by the only graduate-level comparative politics textbook currently on the market: *Comparative Politics: Rationality, Culture, and Structure,* edited by Mark Lichbach and Alan Zuckerman. The premise of this volume is that these approaches examine similar political phenomena, but from different angles. Of the 13 graduate seminar syllabi examined, only four do not include this book.

Many field seminars—offered in institutions as varied as the University of Washington, the University of Virginia, the University of Oklahoma, and George Washington University—interweave selections from Marx (or Marxian theorists like Anthony Giddens) and Weber, and a smattering of Durkheim (considered the father of structural functionalism) into the course readings. They use these older texts to cover the fundamental knowledge that constitutes the heart and soul of the social sciences.

When moving to the actual examination of the three competing approaches in comparative politics, many instructors, again, use older readings. For Markus Crepaz (University of Georgia) and Marcus Kurtz (Ohio State University), typical assignments to launch a discussion on structuralism include chapters from Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* and Theda Skocpol's *States and Social Revolutions,* as well as Alexander Gerschenkron's essay "Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective." Jennifer Widner (University of Michigan) and Stephen Silvia (American University) teach culturalism by surveying studies such as Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba's *Civic Culture* and Clifford Geertz's writings (for example, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture"). The readings on rational choice typically include early publications by Mancur Olson, Robert Bates, and Douglass North, as well as Jon Elster's edited volume on rational choice (1986).

The Lichbach and Zuckerman volume contains half a dozen chapters on what are considered the key issues in the subfield. Many courses follow this scheme and examine the state, electoral, and party systems; institutionalism (which appears as a key topic, not an approach); and social movements. Here, too, the preferred strategy is to lean on the classics. Interest group theory is represented by the works of David Truman, Charles Lindblom, and Suzanne Berger—all of them already in use by the mid-1980s. Readings on the state and state development include Peter Gourevitch's *Politics in Hard Times* (1986), Immanuel Wallerstein on world systems, and Peter Katzenstein's *Small States in World Markets* (1985). For political development, Sheri Berman (Princeton University), Marcus Kurtz (Ohio State University), and Stephen Silvia (American University), among others, have assigned Seymour Lipset's *Political Man* (1960), Samuel Huntington's *Political Order in Changing Societies* (1968), and Robert Dahl's *Polyarchy* (1971). Most of the courses have no overt geographic focus, but since many of the older readings reflect European experiences with revolution, state formation, party competition, and regime change, many courses end up being slightly biased toward Europe.

The graduate syllabi under review tend to omit certain topics—political economy, for instance, even though it governed the

direction and substance of comparative studies 20 years ago. There are still readings on political economy, as the titles mentioned above suggest, but this vast literature is not central to most of the graduate syllabi examined. Most likely, it merits a separate course, as political economy has grown to be a subfield unto itself. Topics such as regional integration, the impact of the international system on domestic institutions, globalization and convergence, macroeconomic management, and the "withering" of state boundaries similarly receive only modest attention.

Also conspicuously absent from the course readings are newer approaches or issues found in political science generally, such as social constructivism, social theory, and postmodernism. Although every course contains a section on culturalism (in part because it is one of the three approaches recognized by Lichbach and Zuckerman), most comparative politics instructors merely pay lip service to the cultural or ideational dimension of politics; conversely, this dimension is currently in ascendance in the international relations subfield.[4]

Issues of ethnicity, nationalism, and national identity are only sparingly included in the comparative courses, despite the abundance of newspaper stories about how these developments constrain and reshape domestic political processes and relations among states.[5] These topics may be covered in courses specifically on globalization or ethnic politics. Nonetheless, analogous to the undergraduate focus on democracy, graduate seminars concentrate on the design of party systems, electoral rules, regime type and transition, interest intermediation, civil society and the state, and civic associations—at the cost of excluding important topics.

The focus on democratic institutions reflects the triumph of neoliberalism and the resurgence of democracy: political faith in the efficacy of markets combined with a rediscovery of civil society has shifted attention away from economic structure, state agency and action, gender and social equality, public policy, industrial strategies of economic development, and comparative labor unions. The Zeitgeist of the subfield is reminiscent of the 1960s and early 1970s, when trust in future progress was high and when capitalism had not yet been challenged by the rise of the New Left. As many others have observed, there may not be much left for the "left," as faith in the ability of the state (as distinguished from civil society) to secure more freedom, more equality, or better representation has been overturned. Privatization and deregulation dominate policy deliberations, while the proliferation of new democratic regimes underscores the significance of societal agents in understanding the emergence of new political institutions and market structures. It is no surprise that core seminars, which provide a survey of the field, mirror the objectives and sentiments of opinion leaders, whether they be elected officials or members of the popular press.

In short, since specialized themes in comparative politics have turned into their own courses, field seminars are largely freed to explore what some people, myself included, would call the quintessential body of knowledge—older, classic formulations of comparative politics concerned with the basic institutional configurations of democratic polities. This narrow definition of comparative politics has both advantages and disadvantages. It allows for an in-depth exploration of a long tradition of superb research; assigning the classics and then supplementing the readings with current materials results in a comprehensive review of the evolution of certain debates. But the downside of economizing on the range of themes or topics is that it leaves the impression that comparative politics is tightly bound by traditional political science concepts and that its main objective is to understand variations in the formation of institutional structures contributing to the organization of political life. Yet political science generally, and comparative politics specifically, has greatly benefited from selective borrowing from other disciplines, such as sociology, economics, anthropology, critical studies, industrial relations, and law. Whereas seminars recognize that the subfield has always had strong multidisciplinary roots (many classic texts are part of a larger social science tradition), these courses all but ignore the fact that other disciplines still shape and advance theory in comparative politics. Students are unfortunately left with the impression that the subfield has matured and is no longer willing to appropriate new ideas and concepts from other disciplines. My overall sense is that instructors have become more conservative and less keen to challenge conventional wisdom—a trend visible in society at large as well. Comparative politics is no longer cutting-edge, no longer ready to confront established conventions and push the boundaries of knowledge forward by asking new, challenging questions. In the long run, a tendency to focus on the past may jeopardize our effectiveness as teachers and, therefore, the subfield's viability.

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Undergraduate Syllabi

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Notes

1 The staff at *Perspectives on Politics* provided me with about half of the syllabi. I gathered the rest myself (approximately a quarter of these were posted on the Web). My goal was to compile a diverse sampling, so I included private colleges, as well as public and private universities, from across the country.

2 Bunce 2000; Caporaso 2000; Hagopian 2000; Kohli et al. 1995.

3 King et al. 1994.

4 Finnemore and Sikkink 2001; Philpott 2001; Reus-Smit 1999; Wendt 1999.

5 Anderson 1983; Laitin 1998; Smith 1987.