

degrees of disciplinarity in comparative politics: interdisciplinarity, multidisciplinarity and borrowing

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Abstract

Despite renewed interest in the concept of interdisciplinary research, the social sciences have produced very little evidence for its feasibility or success. Acknowledging the diversity within comparative politics, this article argues that we have scant evidence of interdisciplinarity, some evidence of successful multidisciplinarity in problem-driven research and more frequent examples of cross-disciplinary borrowing, particularly when comparativists have reached a theoretical plateau in capturing new or persisting puzzles. There is little evidence to support the expectation that interdisciplinarity can create a new epistemology that exceeds disciplinary knowledge.

Keywords interdisciplinarity; comparative politics; multidisciplinarity

Over the past decade, the concept of interdisciplinarity has regained credibility in the social sciences, signalling the renewal of innovative approaches to social problems that cannot be understood within the confined, hierarchical and intellectually stifling traditions of the disciplines (see Moran, 2006). Leading universities are transforming core departments into multidiscipline schools and major external funders are investing resources to uncover barriers to interdisciplinarity in the social sciences

and humanities (Conrad, 2002; Griffin *et al*, 2005).¹

This article explores the facilitative conditions and impediments to cross-disciplinarity within comparative politics, maps out its goals and achievements since the last wave of interdisciplinary studies in the 1960s and 1970s and highlights obstacles to the creation of an integrated epistemology. Although the increased professionalisation of the sub-discipline reinforces disciplinary boundaries (Griffin *et al*, 2005), the

improvement in research training that has accompanied disciplinary commitments to the scientific method has also facilitated communication between core social science disciplines. The paper argues that interdisciplinarity, understood as a theoretically coherent epistemology produced by the *integration* of the disciplines that could not, by definition, emerge from disciplinary scholarship, is marginal within comparative politics and that the goals of interdisciplinarity are possibly in tension with the empirical, problem-focused nature of the sub-discipline. However, we can identify significant examples of multidisciplinary, whereby the disciplines contribute to solving a shared problem without synthesising theories or theoretically innovating outside disciplinary boundaries, within comparative research, and we have notable examples of cross-disciplinary borrowing, where concepts, theories and ideas are plucked from other disciplines to help solve new or persisting puzzles. The paper concludes by arguing that we have little evidence to support the anticipated virtues of interdisciplinary research (Moran, 2006), and the search for interdisciplinary theory may be broadly incompatible with the problem-focused and empirical foundation of comparative politics (see Conrad, 2002).

DEGREES OF DISCIPLINARITY AND COMPARATIVE POLITICS

Comparative politics is the broadest sub-discipline of political studies. The sub-field has grown in coherence and professionalism (Laitin, 2000; Caporaso, 2000), but remains something of a residual category for research that cannot be classified as international relations or political philosophy, and scholars of a single foreign country can be institutionally and professionally categorised as comparativists. Sitting alongside

case-specialists are scholars who study large classes of countries, such as the entire OECD, clusters of nations in diverse parts of the world, or seemingly distinctive political configurations, for example the Nordic countries. The work of comparativists can be situated at the micro, meso or macro level of analysis and their object of study ranges from single institutions to the historical antecedents of regime change to international political economy.

At face value, the problem-focused, empirical and complex nature of comparative politics suggests the need for multiple lenses to uncover multidimensional answers (see Klein, 1990). Unlike sub-fields that are primarily theoretically driven and ask questions derived from specific literatures, comparative politics remains directly engaged with empirical puzzles and cases. Despite transitioning from a largely descriptive field to a more conceptual and theoretical enterprise over the past four decades, with the arrival of the scientific method and the associated goal of generalisation and prediction (Gregor, 1971), for the most part comparativists remain closely connected with their case data (Caporaso, 2000). Their attention to 'explanatory accuracy', and thus specialisation, splinters the sub-field (comparativists must be fluent in relevant languages, grounded in unique histories and knowledgeable about systemic institutions and their consequences), and in so doing signals the potential benefits to be reaped from a cross-disciplinary approach to comparative problems (Caporaso, 2000: 699–700).

Yet comparative politics also generates a number of barriers to interdisciplinarity proper. A prerequisite for interdisciplinarity is conceptual precision (Conrad, 2002). Many core concepts in comparative politics lack clarity and their transportability across units of comparison (e.g. countries), let alone disciplines,

has always constituted a fundamental challenge (Gregor, 1971). Not only do many concepts travel poorly but also relevant variables in comparative politics are often resistant to agreed definition and measurement.²

Likewise, the dominance of positivistic frameworks in comparative politics has limited pluralism within the sub-discipline and lowered the capacity for interdisciplinary research outside the social sciences. As Marsh and Savigny (2004: 158) astutely observe, '[r]esearch from within other traditions [and disciplines] must still be judged against positivists' criteria: observation must be used in order to conduct a systematic empirical test of the theory that is being posited. Yet, that is not a standard most researchers from within an interpretist tradition could accept'.

Yet, perhaps ironically given that the quest for interdisciplinarity is partly a reaction to positivist dominance, the scientific method may have done much to improve the conditions for cross-disciplinarity *within* the social sciences. Statistical analysis demands a tight operationalisation of concepts and specific measurement criteria that can be replicated and validated to produce a set of data that may be assessed and utilised by the broader scientific community exactly *because* they are based on shared assumptions and techniques that are recognised across the disciplines. The limited scope for varied interpretation of quantitative data in a distinctively disciplinary manner can enhance both the scope and credibility of cross-disciplinary research. Positivist scholars draw on the same international data sets as economists, sociologists and social policy experts, for example, census data, IMF and OECD statistical indicators (Laitin, 2000). Interpretive research, with its looser concepts and rejection of rigorous measures, may be less communicable across the social science

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disciplines and less conducive to interdisciplinary theory-building.

The following sections explore degrees of cross-disciplinarity within comparative politics (which I call interdisciplinarity, multidisciplinary and borrowing), arguing that we have very little evidence that interdisciplinarity is either broadly achievable or generally desirable. We do, however, have substantial cases of successful multidisciplinary and, though considered a lesser achievement, cross-disciplinary borrowing has enlarged and contributed to comparative politics in important ways.

INTERDISCIPLINARITY

Exploring the achievements of interdisciplinarity within the social sciences, Conrad (2002: 2) concludes: 'Substantial interdisciplinary theory does not exist'. The history of interdisciplinarity within and beyond comparative politics overwhelmingly suggests that breaking disciplinary boundaries is extraordinarily difficult (see below). Reporting on the impact of the professionalisation of the disciplines on interdisciplinarity across the social sciences and humanities in eight European countries, Griffin *et al* (2005: 57) conclude, 'academic professionalization is a relatively conservative

process which in general is very anti-interdisciplinarity'.

In comparative politics there are few genuinely shared journeys across the disciplines, whereby the disciplines collaborate and exchange ideas to generate an integrated ontology and epistemology, even when interdisciplinarity has served as the explicit organising principle of new academic units that enjoy a range of institutional supports that are absent from most sub-disciplinary projects (e.g. Women's Studies, Post-Colonial Studies). Although we have areas of multidisciplinary and examples of borrowing, mainly from economics and sociology, we have a dearth of cases where scholars have broken free of disciplinary boundaries 'to create a new epistemology; to rebuild the prevailing structure of knowledge; and to create new organising concepts, methodologies, or skills' (Allen and Kitch, 1998: 276).

Let us take the case of Women's Studies, which was founded explicitly on the logic of interdisciplinarity and has been institutionalised in many American and British universities over the past three decades. Women's lives cannot be disaggregated along disciplinary lines and, therefore, to understand the experience of being a woman requires a holistic approach that not only draws on many academic traditions but also integrates their insights to produce new theories and knowledge. Despite developing its own organisational units within academic institutions, its own journals, conferences and academic appointments and, in some cases, even Ph.D. programmes for the professional development of a new generation of interdisciplinary scholars, Women's Studies, by its own admission, has had limited success in realising this goal: it promotes a multidisciplinary approach to curriculum design and teaching, but its research remains discipline-centric (Klein, 1990; Allen and Kitch, 1998; Bird, 2001), with even the core

journals in the field organised along disciplinary lines, for example, *Women & Politics* and *Politics & Gender*, because scholars must produce discipline-recognised outcomes from research. In Bird's (2001: 463) analysis, the manner in which the disciplines subsumed the new episteme within its established borders de-radicalised Women's Studies, dampening the reformative agenda that had been the interdisciplinary promise and illustrating the 'essential conservatism' of university institutions and academic disciplines.

Huggan (2002: 245) identifies similar dynamics in post-colonial studies. The history of Black and African American Studies reveals analogous gains and challenges. Originally marginalised from the disciplines, the outsider status of Black Studies and its roots in political activism and area studies fostered innovation. Although its integration into the disciplines has gone beyond the addition of a previously neglected variable or case, expanding existing frameworks and theories to account for the African-American experience (Hanchard offers the example of social movement theory on this point), the disciplines have also 'disciplined' African American Studies. As with Women's Studies, scholars are primarily trained and institutionally housed in a core discipline, which controls their career structure and validates disciplinary knowledge (see Hanchard, 2004).

Aside from the conserving and conservative effect of academic disciplines and universities, limits to interdisciplinarity in comparative politics have been imposed by the time-bound nature of many research problems. Women's Studies shows that interdisciplinarity takes time to establish institutionally and academically, and once established it is subject to disciplinary capture. Moreover, not only are problems and agenda subject to disciplinary capture but also these problems and agenda (or at least our interest

in them) are a product of their time (see Bird, 2001: 473). The rationale for interdisciplinary centres devoted to East European Studies, for example, looks decreasingly valid and, in a globalised world, interdisciplinary centres built around area specialisations are losing intellectual justification, and areas such as African American studies, which place heavy emphasis on geographical region at the expense of generally applicable theory, currently swim against the intellectual tide (Hanchard, 2004).

Huggan's (2002: 271) research on post-colonialism also raises the larger and decisive question of whether 'the search for a "literal" interdisciplinarity is always likely to prove delusive'. If rigorously defined as the reciprocal integration of theory and knowledge across the disciplines, interdisciplinarity looks less convincing as an intellectual goal. The purpose of interdisciplinarity is to explain and theorise problems that cannot be captured through the disciplines alone (Moran, 2006). Yet problem-focused research is less concerned with inspiring grand theories than with gathering and evaluating empirical data. Assessing two comparative social science projects sponsored by the European Commission with the explicit aim of achieving interdisciplinarity (and where the conditions for interdisciplinarity were propitious since the research was problem-oriented, comparative, international, multidimensional and multidisciplinary), Conrad (2002) argues that such work could only in fact produce multidisciplinary, because the creation of interdisciplinary theory, a far more ambitious goal, is broadly incompatible with problem-oriented research.

Indeed, theory development requires a shared set of assumptions regarding the essence of the problem, the prime causal and expected consequential factors and agreement on the methods suitable to solve the puzzle at hand. The relationships between the clearly conceptualised

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variables must be specifiable and key tenets must be logically and coherently integrated. The likelihood of meeting these criteria across diverse, or perhaps even neighbouring, disciplines is not high, particularly given the breadth and complexity of empirical puzzles that invite cross-disciplinary research. As Gregor (1971: 579) points out, '[t]he necessary condition even for partial axiomatization is semantic and syntactic invariance. Yet ... most of the professional literature devoted to comparative politics is beset by vagueness and ambiguity'. Much the same is true for core concepts in comparative sociology. One important lesson that can be learnt from rational choice analysis is that if we want general theory, founded on universal principles, we must ask limited questions (see Levy, 2000) – and the very purpose of interdisciplinarity is not to ask limited questions; on the contrary, it is to use a variety of perspectives to help us understand much larger, complex problems that cannot be comprehended within the confines of the disciplines.

While empirical problems are multidimensional and thus re-integrating disciplinary knowledge has a compelling logic, multidisciplinary may offer a more appropriate and achievable route to this end. Multidisciplinary is usually, if not always, portrayed as a secondary goal to interdisciplinarity. Yet in many respects it is a more viable and desirable agenda in sub-fields where empirics, complexity and a specialised division of labour dominate. Multidisciplinary, as we have seen in the case of Women's Studies and area

studies programmes, is also more compatible with the professionalisation of the disciplines.

MULTIDISCIPLINARITY

We have examples of significant multidisciplinary in comparative politics, ranging from development studies to public policy. Many problems addressed by comparativists are also of concern to sociologists, social policy experts, economists, historians and area studies specialists. Although there is variation in the extent to which knowledge deriving from these traditions is re-negotiated across disciplinary boundaries, comparative research questions tend to be multidisciplinary, in contrast to those posed by the more coherent and theoretical sub-fields of international relations and political philosophy.

The degree to which multidisciplinary research questions actually produce multidisciplinary answers fluctuates with both epistemological and ontological starting points, organisational supports and professional incentives for sub-field specialisation. One particularly successful area of multidisciplinary in comparative politics is the broad area of the welfare state. Here students of politics, sociology, economics, social policy and history contribute to a set of well-defined and broadly agreed research problems, enlarging our understanding of the welfare state beyond the contribution of any single discipline. Multidisciplinary has been explicitly promoted through institutional commitments, for example the forums of the European University Institute, and the welfare state research agenda and its methods of investigation are endorsed by mainstream professional journals in each of the core disciplines.

The very nature of the welfare state, of course, lends itself to a multidisciplinary approach in that it is multidimensional

and problem-focused in nature. The welfare state is explicitly about politics, policy, economics and society and its units and concerns are multifarious and complex. The spaces of the welfare state include the state, society and the market. Consequently, it is an object of study for economists, political scientists, sociologists, social policy experts and modern historians.

The core research puzzles of this heavily empirical field are also shared across the disciplines in that they map on to, with time delays, developments within the welfare state. During the 1950s and 1960s, comparativists from across the social sciences were concerned with explaining welfare state growth in affluent societies. Although their answers varied (from a logic of industrialism, to economic development to social democratic and class politics), there was and is a general consensus that these developments could be explained and that general patterns in welfare state politics could be captured. By the 1970s and throughout the 1980s, we find multidisciplinary questions and answers to the 'crisis' of the welfare state (see Hecló, 1981; van Kersbergen, 2000). By the close of the 1980s and into the 1990s, comparativists from across the disciplines were grappling with the smaller questions of just how much change was occurring in mature welfare states during the austerity years and how best to characterise these adjustments (retrenchment, restructuring, reformulation). By the late 1990s scholars sought to identify common patterns of welfare state reformulation, probing movements towards divergence and convergence across countries owing to globalisation, post-industrialism, demographic developments, reformulated social democracy and changing public attitudes (see Pierson, 1998; Iversen and Wren, 1998; Ferrera and Rhodes, 2000; Boeri *et al*, 2001; Alesina *et al*, 2001; Taylor-Gooby, 2005).

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Although welfare state scholars typically address their research questions to specific cases (or, more frequently, small groups of cases that cluster along comparable regimes), their assumptions, methods and variables are generally recognised and portable across the disciplines. There is a broad cross-disciplinary consensus regarding the core concepts of welfare state studies and how they should be measured, for example, the general acceptance of the Gini Index as a standard measure of inequality. Although comparative case study analysis remains more extensive than quantitative models, for the most part these works accept the underlying scientific premise that we can and should seek to explain developments within comparable welfare states using a limited number of key variables. The sub-field possibly presents as a case where positivism, broadly defined, has expanded communication across the disciplines.

Problem-focused in emphasis, welfare state studies have not been unduly encumbered by theoretical assumptions that isolate sub-disciplinary knowledge. Welfare state studies, of course, do draw upon theoretical lenses to help understand their cases. For example, diverse welfare state projects have drawn upon path dependence theory to document and explain stability in public policies in the face of social, economic and demographic pressures favouring change (Hacker, 2004; Natali and Rhodes, 2004). However, these studies start from the empirical observation of stability (or change) and utilise given theories to explain their observations. Welfare state studies may even demonstrate a degree of transdisciplinarity, whereby an overarching theory or conceptual framework achieves paradigm dominance across a number of disciplines, as in Gosta Esping-Andersen's seminal analysis of *Three Worlds of Welfare*, which charts three distinctive routes (the liberal, conserva-

tive and social democratic) through which affluent countries have come to define and deliver social justice. It is the sub-field's dominant statement and common reference point on the foundation and development of mature welfare regimes. Esping-Andersen's framework underpins the very concept of distinctive clusters of regimes and thus informs the units selected for comparison. Likewise, it serves as the baseline from which comparativists measure their principal research question: are welfare regimes maintaining their distinctive historically selected features in the face of post-industrial pressures or are they converging towards a liberal model in a globalised world?

Although Esping-Andersen's analysis has been subject to critiques regarding its insensitivity to issues of gender (Lewis, 1997) and scholars have suggested a fourth or possibly fifth world to capture the distinctiveness of the Southern European experience (Moreno, 2000), these multidisciplinary objections have enlarged and added precision to the dominant paradigm: in Esping-Andersen's later analysis, he and his co-authors focus heavily on the role of gender in recommending new welfare institutions (Esping-Andersen *et al*, 2002). Multidisciplinarity, in other words, may have led to a fuller reciprocity of knowledge through an incremental and reactive research sequence. Unlike interdisciplinarity, which envisages a synthesis of disciplinary episteme at a single point of time, multidisciplinarity accommodates a mixture of research patterns: specific projects may be multidisciplinary, but the

sub-field can also develop through temporally dispersed, cross-disciplinary reactions to projects that originate in a single tradition.

BORROWING

In contrast to multidisciplinary, where scholars come together to probe similar trends in the data, borrowing occurs when comparativists look outside their discipline in search of theories, concepts and ideas to help unravel new and persisting puzzles. Although borrowing is often portrayed as the lowest level of cross-disciplinarity, it is one of the more common channels through which scholars attempt to break free of disciplinary boundaries. When students of politics borrow from economics to understand their institutions through the lens of rational choice theory, they do not enter a reciprocal exchange of ideas or theories with economists. Rather they import economic theory to explain how and why political institutions function. Their goal is not to generate multi- or interdisciplinary theory, but to draw on extant theory in economics to fill a gap in comparative politics. Borrowing tends to occur when comparativists have reached a theoretical plateau, when they judge their political explanations to be inadequate or incomplete or when they seek to make claims to innovation by radicalising how their research problems are defined and answered.

Although often spurned as an intellectual goal (in part because theories developed in one discipline rarely apply successfully in another without extensive adaptation and in part because of disciplinary defensiveness and protectionism), like multidisciplinary, borrowing can expand our ideas and knowledge through an incremental, cumulative and reactive research sequence. Path dependence theory offers a good example of disciplinary enlargement through borrow-

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ing. A rigorous formulation of path dependence theory made its mark in politics with Paul Pierson's (2000) award-winning article, which explicated an economic interpretation based on increasing returns processes to establish why actors continue to make choices that appear sub-optimal in light of possible alternatives. A combination of past investments and continued net pay-offs render existing paths more appealing to policy-makers than potentially more efficient alternatives. Path-breaking change, therefore, occurs through exogenous shocks: unpredictable though not necessarily large events external to the institution overwhelm the replicating force of increasing returns and create a fresh situation where actors may choose from among new alternatives (path dependence theory's multiple equilibria). The newly selected path becomes entrenched over time as further investments deepen actors' commitment to the institution and increase their net returns.

This explanation for institutional persistence had already been subject to powerful critiques in economics (Liebowitz and Margolis, 1990, 1995), and also soon attracted a number of critics in comparative politics (e.g. Schwartz, 2002; Peters *et al*, 2005). Most focused on the theory's weak ability to account for endogenously generated change (Crouch and Farrell, 2002; Deeg, 2001). In response to these

shortcomings, many comparativists embraced a much broader historical-sociological formulation of path dependence theory, incorporating negative as well as positive mechanisms of path replication and change (Mahoney, 2000; Ebbinghaus, 2005; Thelen, 2002). Although empirically convincing, in these accounts the search for path-beginnings and path-ends became little more than the specification of historical legacies and inheritances, and the causes and mechanisms of path creation became indistinguishable from the causes and mechanisms of path maintenance, raising questions about the analytic utility of the concept of a 'path'.

In response to this lack of theoretical rigour, Greener (2005) sought to synthesise a broad historical-sociological version of path dependence theory with morphogenetic social theory, a perspective imported from the field of realist sociology. Although an unsuccessful endeavour in that the cycles of morphogenetic theory did not map onto the concept of paths, the cross-disciplinary exchange over economic, historical-sociological and realist models of institutional development served to further our understanding of how institutions work: we have a greater sense about how issues of timing and sequencing affect outcomes, and comparativists have been invited to think more critically about how seemingly independent political choices at a given moment in time have longer historical antecedents (see Hacker, 1998; 2004; Tuohy, 1999).

Borrowing, as the above example illustrates, can not only expand comparative politics, it can encourage a multidisciplinary research agenda through a temporally dispersed research sequence. In the case of path-dependence theory, it may not have led to a compelling cross-disciplinary theory of institutional development, but it has opened a valuable debate about institutional feedback

processes and their mechanisms of change.

CONCLUSIONS

Arguably, comparative politics is the most well-suited sub-field of political studies for cross-disciplinary research thanks to its multidimensional, complex and empirical nature. Yet there is a clear hierarchy of cross-disciplinary research in the sub-field, ordered from interdisciplinarity, to multidisciplinary, down to borrowing. This hierarchy is based upon the degree of intellectual reciprocity across the disciplines and the anticipated epistemological innovation that should emerge from degrees of scholarly cooperation.

Often perceived as little more than failed attempts at interdisciplinarity, multidisciplinary and borrowing are clearly evident in comparative politics; indeed, the sub-field can boast substantial pockets of secondary and tertiary cross-disciplinarity that have advanced our understanding of politics in important ways. Although borrowing does not entail reciprocity, comparative politics has been enhanced by scholars incorporating and reacting to theories developed in economics and sociology, as the example of competing visions of path dependence theory illustrates. These efforts have possibly even generated some degree of reciprocity through a temporally dispersed, incremental, research sequence.

Genuine examples of interdisciplinarity, rigorously defined, are rare in comparative politics. The sub-field is perhaps ill-equipped to generate significant interdisciplinary theory, where problems, concepts, methods and anticipated relationships must travel effectively. Comparativists are attracted to both big research questions and empirical detail, and developing significant interdisciplinary theory from concepts that are often considered fuzzy and resistant to tight operationalisation is a tall order.

The search for a new episteme based on a reciprocal integration of the disciplines may even appear a rather ill-founded exercise in light of the history of first-wave interdisciplinary studies. The cumulative evidence from Women's Studies suggests that the barriers to achieving interdisciplinarity proper are extraordinarily high in comparative politics, owing to a combination of intellectual, organisational and professional constraints. The recent quest for interdisciplinarity is driven by a less radical and encompassing set of forces than earlier attempts at dismantling disciplinary boundaries and there is no obvious sense in which the

new search for interdisciplinarity is part of a wider window of opportunity or unique moment in time. Reactions against the positivistic leanings of the discipline are not supported by broader societal demands, and the forces of resistance to interdisciplinarity, including the professionalisation of the disciplines, are significantly stronger than managerial pressures for the de-construction of the disciplines. Perhaps the most desirable and realistic agenda for comparative politics is a multidisciplinary one, combined with a continued search for extra-disciplinary knowledge through borrowing.

Notes

1 A previous wave of interdisciplinary scholarship during the 1960s and 1970s came from a radical political and social critique. On the origins of the present wave, see the symposium introduction, and also Marsh and Savigny (2004), Moran (2006).

2 See Marsh and Savigny's (2004) instructive view of the new institutionalisms.

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