

Comparative Politics at a Crossroad

Problems, Opportunities and Prospects from the North and South*

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Abstract: How has the field of comparative politics in the US evolved since the turn of the millennium? What might a scholar based in Latin America, a different working environment than the United States, do to contribute to comparative politics? Researchers in the US currently give disproportionate attention to matters of methods, tend to address narrow substantive questions, and pay inadequate attention to matters of theory. However, the research community in the US is diverse, and no trend dominates for long. In turn, few researchers in Latin America work in the kinds of circumstances conducive to careers focused fully on research that their peers in the US enjoy. Still, there are advantages to working in the periphery, including greater knowledge of the languages and cultures, a stronger ability to produce “thick knowledge” that sets research in context, and closer proximity to empirical phenomena of interest that can make the stakes of research more obvious. Moreover, Latin American scholars can benefit from selectively engaging with ideas and colleagues from the North. We thus see not only problems and obstacles but also opportunities for comparative politics in both the North and South.

Keywords: comparative politics, theory, methods, North-South collaboration, knowledge production, political economy of research.

La política comparada en la encrucijada: Problemas, oportunidades y perspectivas desde el norte y el sur

Resumen: ¿Cómo ha evolucionado la política comparada en Estados Unidos desde el cambio de milenio? ¿Qué pueden hacer los investigadores de América Latina, un contexto de trabajo diferente al de Estados Unidos, para contribuir a la política comparada? Los académicos estadounidenses actualmente dan una atención desproporcionada a cuestiones de método, tienden a abordar preguntas sustantivas estrechas y prestan poca atención a cuestiones de teoría. Sin embargo, la comunidad de investigadores en Estados Unidos es diversa, y ninguna tendencia domina mucho tiempo. A su vez, pocos investigadores en América Latina trabajan en las circunstancias

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conducentes a carreras plenamente enfocadas en la investigación, a diferencia de sus pares en Estados Unidos. Aun así, hay ventajas de trabajar en la periferia, que incluyen un mayor conocimiento de las lenguas y culturas, una capacidad superior para producir “conocimiento denso” y contextualizado, y una proximidad a los fenómenos empíricos de interés que puede hacer más obvio que es lo que está en juego en la investigación. Además, los académicos latinoamericanos pueden beneficiarse al vincularse selectivamente con ideas y colegas en el norte. Por lo tanto, vemos no sólo problemas y obstáculos sino también oportunidades para la política comparativa tanto en el norte como en el sur.

Palabras clave: política comparada, teoría, métodos, colaboración norte-sur, producción de conocimiento, economía política de la investigación.

Our book *Passion, Craft, and Method in Comparative Politics* (Munck and Snyder, 2007) offers a sweeping overview of the field of comparative politics in the United States (US) spanning nearly the entire twentieth century. We believe the book has enduring value. Indeed, this view motivated us to publish a Spanish-language edition of this book (Munck and Snyder, forthcoming). Still, the publication of a Spanish-language edition has driven us to think further about trends in, and the prospects of, comparative politics not only in the US but also in Latin America.¹

Our book focuses on the study of comparative politics as practiced in the US, because scholars based in the US are largely responsible for framing the discussion in this field since World War II. It is instructive to consider how work on comparative politics by academics in the US has evolved since the early 2000s, when we conducted the interviews presented in our book.² In

¹ In the US the term “comparative politics” commonly refers to a subfield of Political Science. However, it is also a subject matter studied by political scientists, sociologists, economists, historians and anthropologists. Here we use the term mainly in the second, broader sense. When we refer to the subfield of Political Science in the text, we capitalize Comparative Politics, as we do whenever we refer to a social science discipline.

² The 15 scholars interviewed for the book are: Gabriel Almond, Robert Bates, David Collier, Robert Dahl, Samuel Huntington, David Laitin, Arend Lijphart, Juan J. Linz, Barrington Moore, Jr., Guillermo O’Donnell, Adam Przeworski,

particular, we think it is useful to update the overview of developments in comparative politics in the US provided in our book and to consider whether the lessons of past errors have been learned (Snyder, 2007: 20-22, 27-29; Munck, 2009: 44-45). We thus address the question: How has comparative politics in the US evolved since the turn of the millennium and, in turn, what are the implications of these trends for sustaining a pluralistic field that avoids the excesses of previous hegemonic projects and that focuses on big, humanly-important questions?

We also look beyond the matters addressed in our book by broadening the scope to include scholarship in the South, and Latin America in particular. We seek neither to identify trends in nor to assess the contributions to comparative politics by scholars based in Latin America. Rather, we explore the prospects of Latin American scholars making their own, distinctive contributions to comparative politics, largely in light of the environments in which they work. We thus address a second question: What might a scholar based in Latin America, a different working environment than the US, do to contribute to comparative politics?³

We are cautious in our assessment of the prospects for comparative politics in both the North and South. We see problems and obstacles. Researchers in the US currently give disproportionate attention to matters of methods, fail to pay adequate attention to matters of theory, and tend

Philippe Schmitter, James Scott, Theda Skocpol, and Alfred Stepan.

³ The question about comparative politics in the US focuses largely on an “internal” aspect of the field, ideas, whereas the question about Latin America focuses more on an “external” aspect, the socioeconomic environment in which ideas are produced. This asymmetry of focus is purely due to limitations of space. Our book already considers scholarship in the US from a more externalist standpoint (Munck and Snyder, 2007; Snyder, 2007); thus, we do not repeat that information here and simply use it as a point of contrast. With more space, we would seek to combine internalist and externalist perspectives in discussing the social sciences in Latin America. For internalist accounts of the social sciences in Latin America that supplement our discussion, see Devés Valdés (2003, 2004), Portes (2004), O’Donnell (2007a), Munck (2010), and Svampa (2016).

to address narrow substantive questions. In turn, few researchers in Latin America work in the kind of circumstances conducive to careers focused fully on research that their peers in the North enjoy. Still, we also see opportunities. The research community in the US is diverse, and no trend dominates for long. In turn, there are drawbacks to working in the ivory towers of rich universities that people assume are the centers of creativity. Likewise, there are potential benefits to working in the periphery, closer to the field and where the stakes of research may be more obvious. Moreover, Latin American scholars can benefit from selectively engaging with scholars and ideas from the North.

Comparative politics in the United States in the twenty-first century

A number of key changes in research patterns in the field of comparative politics in the US since the turn of the millennium can be detected. The emphasis on theory, especially rational choice theory, that characterized the 1990s, has declined sharply, whereas issues of empirical methodology and research design have taken center stage. The first decade of the twenty-first century saw a boom in quantitative research at the expense of qualitative research. The second decade has been marked by increased attention to *causal inference* in conjunction with a strong critique of observational research, including quantitative research, and advocacy of experimental methods. These changes have produced a significant re-configuration of the field of comparative politics, and their joint impact might be characterized as mixed. On one hand, there is considerable pluralism in theory and methods; thus, we caution against a monolithic portrayal of comparative politics in the US. On the other hand, we call attention to a problematic trend toward methods-driven social science.⁴

⁴ For complementary reflections on the recent evolution of comparative politics in the US, see Lichbach (2009), Humphreys and Weinstein (2009), Mead (2010), Kapiszewski, Maclean, and Read (2015: Chs. 2 and 11), Weyland (2015), and Wilson (2017).

Trends in theory: Rational choice theory, grand theory and middle-range theories

In the early 1990s, rational choice theory (RCT), inspired by microeconomics, emerged as a potentially hegemonic theory, sparking a “second scientific revolution” in comparative politics akin to the first, behavioral revolution (Munck, 2009). To its advocates, RCT was seen as providing a unifying theoretical framework and the universal “micro-foundations” that promised to consummate the elusive quest for a true science of politics (Geddes, 1991, 1995; Wallerstein 2001), and some scholars even asked, “Is rational choice theory all of social science?” (Lichbach, 2003). Indeed, three of the scholars we interviewed in *Passion, Craft, and Method*—Robert Bates, David Laitin, and Adam Przeworski—are strong and vocal proponents of rational choice theory. Laitin (2002) proposed a new tripartite methodology where formal models based on rational choice assumptions about human behavior formed the theoretical leg of a triangle, alongside ethnographic narratives, to help confirm causal mechanisms derived from the formal models, and large-N quantitative analyses, that tested the generalizability of findings.⁵ Similarly, Bates *et al.* (1998) proposed “analytic narratives” that combined RCT-based formal models with qualitative case studies and, in some instances, statistical “out-of-sample” analysis to test the generalizability of findings.

By the early 2000s, it was increasingly clear that the hegemonic aspirations of the strongest proponents of RCT and the associated mixed methods approaches relying on formal models (*e.g.*, Laitin’s tripartite methodology and Bates *et al.*’s analytic narratives) would not be realized. Indeed, several of the scholars we interviewed at the time noted that RCT showed signs of decline (Dahl, Linz, Scott, and Skocpol). Even some important early advocates of incorporating RCT into

⁵ Formal models are not limited to rational choice theory, because they may draw on different assumptions about behavior. Formal modeling can also be combined with evolutionary models, as in evolutionary game theory, agent-based models, and other kinds of computational models.

Political Science, most notably Jon Elster (2000), had become critical of rational choice approaches to the study of politics.

The decline of RCT in Political Science stems partly from changes in Economics, the very discipline that had provided the impetus for the rise of RCT in Political Science in the first place. In particular, Behavioral Economics, which explains human decision-making in terms of psychological, cognitive and emotional factors, increasingly displaced the simplistic assumptions about utility maximization that formed the micro-foundations of RCT. Although RCT continues to have supporters, it did not take over the field. Instead, RCT lost its vanguard position and luster and is now just one option on a plural menu of theoretical approaches to the study of politics that includes historical institutionalism, interpretive approaches, and more realistic and better-validated models of behavior.

The failure of RCT to achieve hegemony is only part of the story of how comparative politics has evolved over the past two decades. A more important trend, with broader implications for the field, has been the overall decline of *grand theory*, that is, theory that claims to offer a basis for a unified approach to the study of politics. Since the 1950s, there have been numerous efforts to develop overarching theoretical frameworks for the comparative study of politics (Janos, 1986). Structural-functionalism and modernization theory were influential in the 1950s and 1960s; dependency theory in the 1960s; pluralism, class theory and theories of the state in the 1970s and 1980s; and rational choice theory in the 1990s. In the new century, however, some scholars saw little payoff to a “battle of paradigms” (Lichbach, 2009, 2013). Thus, RCT was not replaced by another theory claiming to unify the field.

There are notable efforts to develop more modest theoretical frameworks, proposing what Dietrich Rueschemeyer (2009: 1) calls “theory frames,” understood as ideas that “guide hypothesis formation but do not themselves contain or logically entail a body of testable hypotheses”. For example, historical institutionalists

have developed more sophisticated understandings of sequences, temporality, critical junctures and path dependence (Pierson, 2004; Mahoney and Thelen, 2010; Fioretos, Falleti, and Sheingate, 2016). Some political economists and economists also revived the tradition of economic institutionalism and used their own theory frames to contribute to comparative politics (Mazzuca, 2015). Moreover, continuing a trend that goes back at least to the 1960s, scholars have developed “middle-range” theories with a self-consciously limited spatial and temporal scope (Merton, 1968: Ch. 2). Still, there has been a notable loss of theoretical ambition in the 2010s.

Trends in methods: Qualitative, quantitative and experimental research

Turning to trends in empirical research, *qualitative research* has been less central to comparative politics in the twenty-first century compared to the twentieth century. Qualitative methodologists have continued their longstanding focus on matters of research design and taken significant new steps toward formalization and codification (Collier, 2011; Bennett and Checkel, 2015; Gerring, 2017), with an important novelty being their focus on *causal mechanisms* more than causal effects in addressing the challenge of causal inference (Waldner, 2012, 2015). Moreover, qualitative methodologists have invested much effort in thinking about mixed methods, focusing especially on how qualitative research can be combined with quantitative research (Lieberman, 2005; Seawright, 2016).

Ironically, although there has been a boom in research on qualitative methods since 2000, the number of substantive articles that actually employ qualitative methods published in top journals of comparative politics declined (Pepinsky, 2018). Still, while qualitative research lost ground in this regard, it also became institutionalized through the qualitative and mixed methods organized section of the American Political Science Association (APSA). And though the use of qualitative methods in research articles has clearly declined, it continues to be a

standard option used routinely in dissertations and books.⁶

In contrast to the trend seen in qualitative research, the first decade of the new millennium witnessed an explosion of *quantitative research* in comparative politics.⁷ This research drew on several innovations. On one hand, it benefited from substantial investments in production of more and better data. Cross-national data sets of broad, even global, scope and substantial historical reach, fueled a quantitative comparative literature on subjects such as democracy, political institutions, ethnic conflict and other forms of violence, political culture, and civic associations. This literature spawned a subnational counterpart (Giraudy, Moncada and Snyder, forthcoming), and another novelty in quantitative research—which began in the 2010s and is only starting to make a mark in comparative politics—has been the increasing attention to “big data.”

On the other hand, as a result of the “credibility revolution” in econometrics (Angrist and Pischke, 2010), recent quantitative comparative research has incorporated, though unevenly, advances in econometric techniques (*e.g.*, instrumental variables, regression discontinuity designs, propensity scores) specifically developed to tackle the challenges of causal inference with observational data (Morgan and Winship, 2015). Although conventional regression analysis remains the dominant empirical practice in quantitative comparative research, attention to causal inference is growing (Samii, 2016: 942–43).

The biggest methodological novelty, and the one posing the strongest challenge to established traditions, is the rise of *experimental research* since roughly 2010.⁸ Experimental research encom-

passes a family of methods. The inspiration for the experimental turn in comparative politics comes partly from the rise of randomized controlled trials (RCTs) in Development Economics, as seen most prominently in the work of MIT’s Poverty Action Lab, aimed at policy evaluation of anti-poverty measures and hence building an efficacious policy science (Banerjee and Duflo, 2011). In comparative politics, experimental research takes a variety of forms, including field experiments, “lab-in-the-field” experiments, survey experiments, and other deviations from true experimental designs where subjects and cases are assigned randomly to “treatment” and “control” groups (Dunning, 2012). Still, a common overarching concern of all varieties of experimental research is an emphasis on causal inference or, to use the now-fashionable term borrowed from Economics, “causal identification”.⁹

Although experimental research is still new in comparative politics, the claims made on its behalf are often rather strong. Thus, they deserve to be spelled out and assessed, even if briefly. The discussion about experiments can be framed fruitfully by drawing on the distinction between the internal and external validity of findings (Shadish, Cook, and Campbell, 2002). One of the strongest claims made about experiments concerns their ability to uncover true cause-and-effect relations, as opposed to mere associations, and hence to produce findings that are internally valid. This is a clear advantage of experimental over observational research. Still, the gains experimental research makes in terms of internal validity come at the cost of external validity.

Experimentalists promise to contribute to the accumulation of knowledge about rigorously identified cause-and-effect relations in narrowly-defined empirical settings (laboratories or locales) where researchers can perform what they often call “interventions” by means of “manipulation” of a treatment required to generate ex-

⁶ Within the broader literature using qualitative methods, some research combines formal models and qualitative case studies, in line with the earlier proposal by Bates *et al.* (1998) regarding “analytic narratives” (Lorentzen, Fravel, and Paine, 2017: 470–471).

⁷ This marked increase in the amount of quantitative research continued a trend apparent in the 1990s. For documentation of these trends, see Schedler and Mudde (2010), and Pepinsky (2018).

⁸ For documentation of this trend, see Druckman *et al.* (2006), Dunning (2012), and Rogowski (2016).

⁹ As Samii (2016: 941) states, “Identification refers generally to establishing that conditions sufficient for drawing an unbiased conclusion from data hold [...] and causal identification applies this notion to causal effects”.

perimental data. Moreover, there are interesting efforts afoot to establish the external validity of experimental results by running parallel experiments across different countries, as in the Metaketa initiative under the auspices of EGAP (Evidence in Governance and Politics Network), a cross-disciplinary network of researchers. Still, it remains to be seen whether such efforts to boost the external validity of experimental research will bear fruit. For now, experimentalists have only been able to offer small and isolated “islands of knowledge” of dubious generalizability.

Another way to frame the discussion of experiments is to pose a broader question: Can experimentalists contribute to the production of knowledge about important questions in comparative politics? In this regard, shortcomings of experimental research deserve highlighting. Because experimentalists focus on causal factors, understood as “treatments,” that can be manipulated by the researcher, they are concerned with narrow “What if?” or “effects of causes,” questions rather than more open ended “Why?” or “causes of effects,” questions. Moreover, experimental research has a bias toward temporally and spatially proximate and uniform causes, such as informational cues that can be administered as treatments with survey experiments and trainings. By contrast, a whole range of causal explanations that cannot readily, or credibly, be rendered as “treatments”—temporally remote “historical” causes (Stinchcombe, 1968: Ch. 3; see also Harsanyi, 1960), causes and effects that unfold at different temporal paces (Pierson, 2004: Ch. 3), spatially remote causes, and macro causes—are neglected. Thus, though some experimentalists deny that their methodological preoccupations constrain their theoretical imaginations and substantive agendas (Samii, 2016: 942, 950-952; see however Kinder, 2011: 527), the growing emphasis on causal identification appears to divert attention from theory and big, humanly-important questions (Bates, 2007; Deaton, 2010: 442; Huber, 2013).

This shortcoming of experimental research need not be fatal. After all, it is a legitimate scientific step to try to contribute to knowledge by addressing a manageable question embedded in a

large one. However, experimentalists have not shown much interest in pursuing this strategy of tackling parts of a big question. A concern with causal inference has arguably led students of comparative politics to give up on some of the field’s classic ambitions. Moreover, because they are often rather critical of all observational research, experimentalists tend to dismiss past accomplishments in comparative politics, which relied on observational data. Indeed, experimentalists even frame the challenge of accumulating knowledge as one purely internal to experimental research, doing little to consider how they could build on prior, non-experimental research (Dunning, 2016). Though this may change in the future, the new experimental research has thus far shown little concern with building on the decades of research on classic macro topics in comparative politics, such as political regimes, state formation, large-scale institutions, and national development.

In sum, the strongest promises to deliver progress in comparative politics are currently made by experimentalists. Put starkly, the experimental turn could even be seen as ushering in, or at least attempting to usher in, a third scientific revolution in comparative politics. However, as noted, much as when rational choice theory was on the rise in the 1990s, some of the limitations of experimental research are already apparent, and leading scholars of comparative politics (*e.g.*, Bates, 2007; Huber, 2013; Thelen and Mahoney, 2015) are deeply skeptical of betting the future of the field too heavily on experimental research. Thus, we expect the influence of experimentalism will wane as scholars adopt a more realistic view of the promise of experiments and the rightful place of this set of methods among the repertoire of tools used in the social sciences.

The reconfiguration of alliances and divisions: Experimentalists *versus* observationalists

The changes in comparative politics discussed thus far have been significant, resulting in a reconfiguration of the field. Some options that were seen as very promising not long ago are losing energy. For example, a strong affinity previously existed between rational choice theory and

large-N statistical methods.¹⁰ Their mutual complementarities seemed clear. Statistical analysis offered the tool of choice for testing empirically results generated by formal mathematical models. Conversely, RCT offered micro-foundations and causal mechanisms to account for macro correlations detected with statistical analysis. However, the decline of rational choice theory signaled a decay of the RCT-statistics alliance, leaving large-N research orphaned theoretically.

A potentially more consequential reconfiguration of affinities across camps and schools in comparative politics stems from the rise of experimentalism. Current research is organized less around different views about theory, as in the past, and more around the *nature of data*, namely experimental versus observational data. Although considerable strides have been made by large-N quantitative researchers in managing challenges of causal inference that arise when working with observational data, a fundamental divide exists between experimental and large-N quantitative research. Relatedly, the cleavage between experimental and observational research is also apparent in the context of mixed methods research; one of the most discussed and widely-used mixed methods approaches combines quantitative and qualitative observational data, two options that until recently were seen more as rivals than supplements.¹¹

New mixed methods options, less aligned with this new cleavage, are currently being explored. Many experimentalists recognize the importance of contextual, often local, knowledge for achieving strong experimental designs and also for identifying true natural experiments. For example, testing the effects of ethnic affinities on political behavior through field and lab-in-the-field experiments requires local knowledge

to identify valid cues that can communicate information about ethnicity to subjects (Dunning and Harrison, 2010). Likewise, research relying on natural experiments requires sufficient historical knowledge of the purported treatment to make a credible case that it actually occurred in an “as if random” manner (Kocher and Monteiro, 2016). Moreover, sound experimental research also depends on the ability to detect and unpack complex, “bundled” treatments as well as potential spillovers between treatment and control groups.¹² This, in turn, may require the contextual knowledge and understandings that are hallmarks of ethnographic and historical research. In short, some experimentalists do not advocate the use of experiments as self-contained methods, recognize the value of old-fashioned ethnographic fieldwork, and explicitly argue that experiments should be viewed as only one among multiple valuable methods.¹³

Still, the differences between experimentalists and observationalists inclined to ethnographic fieldwork remain considerable. A helpful distinction can be drawn between *ethnographically-informed experiments* and *experimentally-driven ethnographies*. In the former, qualitative information and open-ended “soaking and poaking” serve mainly to identify new potential causal mechanisms and hypotheses that lend themselves to testing with experimental tools, such as survey experiments and labs-in-the-field. By contrast, experimentally-driven ethnographies confine qualitative research to the narrower role of providing information necessary to adapt a preexisting experimental design to a new context. This context-fitting role of qualitative ethnographic knowledge can be seen in research on

¹⁰ In Political Science, this agenda was advanced in a coordinated way by the Empirical Implications of Theoretical Models (EITM) project (Aldrich, Alt, and Lupia, 2008; Clarke and Primo, 2012).

¹¹ Along similar lines, Thelen and Mahoney (2015) point out affinities between historical institutional, case-based and large-N research because of their shared reliance on observational data and non-experimental research designs.

¹² Experimentalists also make heroic assumptions about spatial independence, in addition to “tight bracketing” of information and knowledge that is not tethered to the goal of achieving a research design that maximizes efficient causal identification. On the implausibility of assumptions of spatial independence across subnational units and tools for managing, and even exploiting, this dependence, see Harbers and Ingram (forthcoming).

¹³ For a plea for multi-method research by a pioneer in the use of experiments in Political Science, see Kinder (2011). On affinities between qualitative and experimental methods, see Paluck (2010).

ethnic ties and political support, where the role of ethnographic research is to identify the kind of information, for example last names or dialects, that serve in different contexts as equivalent cues about the ethnic identity of politicians (Dunning and Harrison, 2010). In such instances, ethnography is tightly constrained by the requirements of the experimental design, resulting in “design-driven” research with a strong propensity to empirical tunnel vision, where information that does not serve the goal of efficient causal identification is likely to be dismissed as extraneous noise. Design-driven fieldwork stands in stark contrast to the open-ended “soaking and poaking” emphasized by qualitative researchers as an important method of discovery and insight.

In sum, although the new cleavage between experimentalists and observationalists does not divide researchers neatly into two camps, it has reconfigured comparative politics. Until the 1990s the field was largely organized around the division between qualitative and quantitative researchers. Now, the distinction between experimentalists and the rest is the dominant force.

The uneasy coexistence of open pluralism and the hegemony of methods

It is complicated to offer a conclusion to this discussion of comparative politics in the US in the twenty-first century that takes into consideration, and makes sense of, all the various changes we have noted. The field of comparative politics is large, and our discussion of patterns could surely be more nuanced. Still, with the caveat that what we offer is tentative, we propose the following overall assessment of the field in the late 2010s.

In important respects, comparative politics in the US today can be characterized as *pluralistic*. New lines of thinking are launched. But new ideas about how to study comparative politics rarely displace old ones. Instead, they are simply added to existing ways of doing things, resulting in the accumulation of an increasingly diverse set of options.

With regard to theory, rational choice theory in the 1990s neither eliminated prior theories nor has it itself been vanquished in the 2010s. Before

this, the behavioral revolution launched a strong critique of institutional analysis in the 1950s and 1960s; yet institutional analysis not only survived the onslaught but came back with new vigor, and behavioral analysis similarly continued into the post-behavioral period that opened in the late 1960s. Other theories (*e.g.*, class theories of Marxist lineage, statist theories that can be traced back to Weber, or theories of political culture that can be traced to Tocqueville) continue to form part of the repertoire of ideas scholars draw on to build middle range theories.

With regard to methods, although the qualitative tradition predates the behavioral revolution and was criticized forcefully during the behavioral revolution and again in the 1990s, it survived and remains a routinely-used option. Likewise, though large-N quantitative research has been the main target of experimentalists in the 2010s, it has adapted to this critique and shows no signs of disappearing. For a number of reasons—including the sheer quantity of scholars working in the field and various non-scientific factors internal to the profession, such as rivalries among “schools and sects” that compete over professional resources like funding, prestige and power (Almond, 1990)—comparative politics is characterized by an enduring pluralism.

Additionally, scholars working in different traditions regularly participate in debates that go beyond any one tradition or research community, which in turn prevents the field’s pluralism from producing isolated “silos”. This pluralism is best characterized as *open*. A legitimate debate exists in the US about what standards should be used to assess the products of distinct communities of researchers. Moreover, most research communities recognize that all traditions should be assessed in terms of general standards. To be sure, some groups adopt a defensive posture, claiming not only that their research is distinctive but making the further claim that it can be assessed only according to self-defined standards internal to their research community. But these groups are neither large nor dominant.

Still, open pluralism is not the whole picture. Although no theoretical approach or paradigm is

currently hegemonic, and the threat to diversity posed by rational choice theory in the 1990s has subsided, a new threat emerged in the 2010s: the *hegemony of methods*. This is the view that how one studies a problem empirically is *the* most important aspect of research and that causal identification is the overriding methodological issue.

Of course, methods of empirical research are central to the social sciences. Thus, we do not suggest that methods *per se* are a problem. However, the view that methods are paramount and that causal identification is the one standard by which all methods should be assessed does have clear negative consequences. As discussed above, this view fosters the setting aside and downplaying of matters of theory. Moreover, it compels scholars to focus on questions deemed researchable using the favored methods. Methods-driven research has made scholars dodge tough theoretical challenges, for example how to unify theories of state formation and democratization. Likewise, it spurs a reluctance to tackle important explanatory questions, like why Latin America is the most violent and economically unequal region in the world, as well as descriptive, yet fundamental, questions about who really holds political power in the region.

Thus, there are some problematic tendencies in comparative politics, including the pervasive influence of methods in setting research agendas and a reluctance to take risks by tackling problems and questions that are not amenable to strong causal identification. These kinds of problems are not new, of course. They were already visible in the 1990s and early 2000s, as pointed out by some of the scholars we interviewed in our book (Linz, 2007: 206-207, O'Donnell, 2007b: 303-304, Przeworski, 2007: 496-497). Still, the threats posed by the hegemony of methods have clearly worsened over the past two decades.

In sum, while it is important to recognize the persistent pluralism and openness of comparative politics in the US, it is also critical to note that some changes adopted in the name of modernizing the field have come at a cost. The uneasy coexistence of open pluralism with the

hegemony of methods oriented to causal identification can be framed in terms of the familiar tension between tradition and innovation. Moreover, the centrality of this dilemma for the evolution of the field should be acknowledged. Indeed, the proximate future of comparative politics in the US will likely be driven partly by the interplay between forces that foster vibrant diversity, on one hand, and forces that favor a narrow methods-driven social science, on the other hand.

Doing comparative politics in Latin America

The social sciences have been affected strongly by the much-touted process of globalization. Social scientists around the world now have access to the same books, articles and even data. They can communicate instantaneously with remarkable ease. Many travel to conferences that are real international gatherings. The idea of transnational research communities is not far-fetched. Still, social scientists live and work in different places, economies and societies. And doing comparative politics in the United States, like the scholars interviewed for *Passion, Craft, and Method* and most currently active social scientists, is not the same as doing comparative politics in Latin America. In light of the distinct circumstances of working as a researcher in Latin America, and the recent changes in comparative politics in the US, what might social scientists based in Latin America do to contribute to social science knowledge and, more specifically, to comparative politics?

This question forms part of a larger discussion about the state and future of the social sciences in Latin America. Thus, we recognize that we will touch only briefly on many key issues and ignore others entirely. Moreover, we appreciate that this is a polarized discussion, and setting Latin American scholarship in relation to US scholarship is a framing that some will reject out of hand.¹⁴

¹⁴ Significant contributions, which offer different perspectives on the state of the social sciences in Latin America, include Lander (2000), De Sousa Santos (2009), Beigel (2010), Bialakowsky (2012), Garretón (2015), and Tanaka and Dargent (2015).

Peripheral advantages

Relative to their US counterparts, Latin American scholars enjoy some clear advantages in studying Latin American politics. These advantages, as rightly identified by Latin American scholars themselves, include greater knowledge of the languages and cultures (Bejarano, 2015: 144), and a stronger ability to produce “thick knowledge,” that sets research in context and historical perspective (Dargent and Muñoz, 2015; Vergara, 2015; see also Przeworski, 2007: 501-502).

Being physically in, or close to, the field also has advantages. Though conducting cross-national research can be expensive, a wide range of variation concerning many humanly important topics and outcomes at the heart of comparative politics can be found inside countries (Giraudy, Moncada, and Snyder, forthcoming). These topics include state capacity, the “intensity” of citizenship, political regimes, income and other forms of inequality, public safety, and human and economic development. Thus, scholars in Latin America can use their location to their advantage.

More broadly, at least some innovations are more likely to come from the periphery than from the center of disciplines, in part because scholars working at the peripheries of disciplines may be more open to diverse influences and better positioned to devise original combinations by drawing on internal and external sources of inspiration (Dogan and Pahre, 1993). In short, without diminishing the challenges that Latin American scholars face, it is important to note some valuable assets that they have.

Institutionalized and research-oriented careers

Everywhere, the production of knowledge is a mental process which depends on the curiosity, creativity, determination and discipline of scholars. However, scholarship flourishes most where careers as researchers are available and where a country is able to support a critical mass of scholars together with the infrastructure required for research.

In this regard, being a scholar based in the South entails a set of challenges not faced by most scholars in the North. The economic condi-

tions of researchers working in Latin America pose, with few exceptions, a considerable impediment to sustained scholarship. Unlike in the United States or Europe, where a tenured academic job usually guarantees a comfortable middle-class life, in Latin America researchers seeking a middle-class existence are routinely forced to seek multiple sources of employment, including working as consultants. The most basic condition for creativity, having time to dedicate oneself to research, is not readily available to a large number of scholars.

The economic conditions of researchers have changed over time. The rapid development of the Latin American social sciences in the 1960s and 1970s, a time when Latin American scholars made key contributions to the comparative study of economic development and authoritarianism, was fueled partly by the support of US and European foundations, which financed many independent centers of research, that is, not affiliated with universities, in countries under military rule. With the end of authoritarianism in the 1980s, many of these funds dried up. Moreover, because of the regional economic crisis in the 1980s and the subsequent turn to free-market policies, public funds for universities have generally lagged in terms of what is required for sustained knowledge production.

The level of funding for the social sciences, and the models for financing them, vary considerably throughout Latin America.¹⁵ Still, it is generally valid to posit that funding is insufficient to support a critical mass of full-time researchers, that is, a community large enough to generate and sustain a self-reinforcing creative environment. Achieving an adequate level of funding that could support a broad community of scholars in Latin America is a key challenge.

There are encouraging trends in this regard. Building on earlier initiatives to institutionalize the social sciences in Latin America, which were

¹⁵ On patterns in funding and institutional support for Latin American social sciences, see Trindade (2007), UNESCO (2011), Chernhya, Sierra, and Snyder (2012), and Durán-Martínez, Sierra, and Snyder (2017).

largely focused on sociology, important steps to develop Political Science in the region have been taken, and Political Science departments have built core groups of comparative politics faculty in a handful of countries, most notably Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru and Uruguay.¹⁶ Many scholars trained outside Latin America have returned to work at universities in the region. And professional networks within the region have been strengthened, as new forums for intra-regional interaction and collaboration among political scientists, such as the *Asociación Latinoamericana de Ciencia Política* (Alacip, founded in 2002), have been added to older networks, such as the *Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales* (Clacso). Though the social sciences in Latin America continue to be dwarfed by those of its neighbor to the North, a few centers of excellence have emerged and an intra-regional exchange among Latin American scholars has started to take shape.

The politics-research nexus

Another issue that merits consideration is the link between politics and research. Here, the centrality of politics in university life has posed, and continues to pose, an impediment to the development of the social sciences in Latin America. Political intrusion in university affairs, which is more likely in Latin America than the US, has costs. A change of government in many Latin American countries can bring about a major change in the leadership of top public universities, leading to changes in programmatic objectives or even the upending of professional careers. This is an obvious downside to a lack of university autonomy and institutionalization.

Moreover, politicized scholarship, which is blatantly ideological and more about taking a political position than advancing knowledge, still plays a role in many Latin American universities. Politicized scholarship is problematic in several respects. First, it competes for space with profes-

sional scholarship. Moreover, politicized scholars have even been known to block the careers of scholars who are more centrally committed to the production of knowledge. Indeed, as David Altman (2005: 71) holds, though Latin American universities are moving to adopt “clear rules that encourage meritocracy, and that include the evaluation of scholarly productivity,” this move is best described as slow and uneven. Thus, without denying the possibility of a creative tension between scientifically-oriented and politically-oriented scholars, the challenge of working in a highly politicized university environment, where politics sometimes trumps knowledge, should be noted.

At the same time, some common misconceptions should be dispelled. All universities, and especially public universities, play a role in forming citizens and should provide forums for political debate. Moreover, political motivation is important and legitimate in scholarly research. Indeed, the oft-noted disconnect between university life and politics in the US may help explain the esoteric, even stale, nature of much research on political questions there (Snyder, 2007: 11-14, 19-22). In short, there is no inherent contradiction between political partiality (*e.g.*, wanting democracy or social justice) and scientific objectivity, nor is political disinterest a desirable quality in a social scientist (Garretón, 2015).

The closer links between politics and research in Latin America can also have benefits. The centrality of politics in university life probably makes Latin American scholars, especially at public universities, far more attuned to political events, as the outcomes of political processes may have a strong impact on their careers. The politics-research nexus can also foster a broader understanding of what counts as political phenomenon—for example, music, the arts and other cultural aspects. A more encompassing understanding of *lo político* may, in turn, help temper the excesses of professionalization and the obsession with methods (Garretón, 2016: 5). More broadly, political engagement is often associated with an interest in having a broader impact and audience and, thus, in cultivating the

¹⁶ On the development of Political Science in Latin America, see Altman (2005), Baquero, González, and Morais (2013), and Barrientos del Monte (2014).

ability to communicate about one's research to multiple audiences outside the discipline and actually having something to say that matters. The ideal is to avoid the extremes of an academic life detached from political passions, on one hand, and treating research as just "politics by other means," on the other.

The international context of research

Finally, it is crucial to consider the relationship between scholars inside and outside Latin America, especially in the North. Because the Spanish-language edition of *Passion, Craft, and Method* aims to introduce to a Latin American audience the contributions of leading scholars who worked mainly in the US, we address this issue in detail.

Engaging the North. Any approximation between South and North is, of course, fraught with risks. A Latin American social science that is dependent on the outside will always be fragile. Thus, it is legitimate to ask whether the development of the social sciences in Latin America is helped or hindered by engagement with authors who live and work outside Latin America and who have to be read mainly in English. And it is important to clearly understand the dangers of opening up to outside influences.

The siphoning off of talent, that is, "brain drain", is an obvious problem associated with engaging the North. But a larger problem concerns the control of the research agenda (Luna, Murillo, and Schrank, 2014; Bay, Perla, and Snyder, 2015; Bejarano, 2015: 145; Luna, 2015: 151-54). Research priorities in US universities in particular are ever changing, and these changes are often driven by internal dynamics of competition among academics instead of by a concern with real world problems. Indeed, careerism arguably has a stronger influence on research trends than the pursuit of knowledge. Moreover, a lot of energy in US social science goes into studying substantive questions that are rather trivial and developing methods for the sake of methods. Thus, those who engage with US academia face an ever-present danger of being sucked into a research agenda they do not define, doing little

more than mimic academics in the US, and failing to contribute to what should be a priority for the social sciences in Latin America: understanding the political, social, economic and cultural problems of the region.

Still, it is important to note that there is nothing new about scholars in Latin America engaging and drawing productively on the work of scholars in the North. Max Weber's *Economy and Society* was translated into Spanish in 1944, twenty-four years before it was translated into English, and this key work was read in universities in Latin America well before it was incorporated into thinking in the US. European authors such as Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci have also been important points of reference for many Latin American social scientists. Leading figures of modern Latin American thought such as Raúl Prebisch, Celso Furtado, Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Guillermo O'Donnell kept abreast of trends in thinking in Europe and the US, debated ideas of scholars from the North, and drew fruitfully on these ideas. For example, Cardoso acknowledges that his book with Enzo Faletto, *Dependency and Development in Latin America* (1979), the *locus classicus* of dependency theory and a work conventionally viewed as offering a distinctively Latin American theoretical contribution, was inspired centrally by the work of two French intellectuals: Jean-Paul Sartre and Alain Touraine, especially the former's analysis of Marxism.¹⁷ Even José Carlos Mariátegui, widely seen as one of the first authors to break decisively with eurocentrism, was strongly influenced by the Italian intellectual Piero Gobetti, among others (Quijano, 2007: xl-xliv; Fillipi, 2017). We thus believe that the correct question to ask is not *whether* Latin American scholars should engage with ideas and peers from the North but *how* they can engage with them productively and beneficially.

Building collaborative relations with peers in the North. The 1960s and 1970s offer an instructive example of a mutually beneficial relationship

¹⁷ Personal communication to Richard Snyder, Providence, RI, October, 2007.

between academics in the South and North. Scholars in the US, such as Albert Hirschman and Kalman Silvert, played a pivotal role in establishing this relationship. More broadly, a key to the collaborative relationship between scholars in the South and North was the creation of institutionalized forums, such as the Joint Committee on Latin American Studies (JCLAS) of the American Council of Learned Studies (ACLS) and the Social Science Research Council (SSRC). As a matter of policy, half of the JCLAS's members were Latin Americans, and grants were awarded to scholars without restriction as to their country of citizenship (Hilbink and Drake, 2000). This example shows that, especially when there is solidarity between researchers in the South and the North—as was the case during the decades of military rule after the Cuban revolution—scholars can establish respectful relationships and collaborate as equals.¹⁸

Times have changed, however, and such institutionalized exchanges have waned considerably since the 1990s. In the early twenty-first century, Latin American scholars now face both a far more inward-looking academia and more career-driven academics in the North. Moreover, scholars in the North today seem less convinced than their predecessors that they have anything to learn from their peers in the South. To the degree that scholars in the North are interested in engaging their Latin American colleagues, many seem concerned not with establishing working relations with Latin American academics and collaborating as equals, but with finding assistants in the field to help gather data. In short, a valuable partnership that helped invigorate Latin American social sciences in the 1960s and 1970s, and that is especially important in contexts where a critical mass of full-time researchers is lacking, has weakened significantly. This loss of institutionalized opportunities for respectful exchanges among academics in the North and the South poses another challenge.

¹⁸ For a fuller discussion of the relationships between Latin American social scientists and both US and European scholars, see Munck and Tanaka (2018).

A few caveats to this characterization are in order. New networks between the North and the South are being built, in part by taking advantage of the considerable number of Latin Americans now working in the US and Europe (Freidenberg and Malamud, 2013). Most of these initiatives link scholars in Latin America to peers in the US, either within established organizations—such as the American Political Science Association (APSA) and Latin American Studies Association (LASA)—or within new organizations and more fluid initiatives, such as the *Red para el Estudio de la Economía Política de América Latina* (REPAL), which brings together scholars based in the US and Latin America with a shared interest in comparative political economy, alternating the location of its annual meetings between the US and Latin America; and the Methods Institutes at the PUC in Chile and previously, under IPSA's auspices, at the USP in Brazil. Some universities in the US have extended invitations to scholars from Latin America to visit the US for brief periods. Other initiatives have connected scholars in Europe and Latin America.¹⁹ Moreover, compared to the networks of the past, current networks are more inclusive, especially with regard to women.

In short, there are positive signs with regard to North-South collaboration. Latin American scholars do have some allies in the North who are committed to the development of the social sciences in Latin America and who are interested in having a respectful and productive dialogue with their colleagues in Latin America. Moreover, there are new networks that offer opportunities to Latin American scholars for real collaboration. Thus, though the tradition of South-North collaboration has weakened, there are some positive trends that should be recognized, extended and strengthened.²⁰

¹⁹ Also noteworthy is the role of the University of Salamanca, and Manuel Alcántara, in founding Alacip.

²⁰ We do not mean to suggest that scholars in the South should only seek to collaborate with scholars in the North, and in the US in particular. Indeed, interesting recent South-South collaborations have emerged, not only among Latin American scholars, but with scholars in Asia, especially India, China and

Drawing selectively on ideas from the North. The content of exchanges between scholars in Latin America and the US remains a thorny issue. As noted, there are strong tendencies in US academia and a core to the field of comparative politics that could be called the “mainstream.” Moreover, the Northern mainstream is a moving target, and following it is therefore not likely to be a recipe for success. There is a real danger that by the time cutting-edge ideas have been assimilated in Latin America, they have ceased to be cutting-edge or have been abandoned in the North. In the best of cases, Latin American scholars will always be one or more steps behind what scholars in the North consider the “in” ideas. Such a strategy would lock Latin American scholars into the role of consumers rather than producers of innovations in knowledge. Thus, while disengagement from ideas flowing out of US academia should be avoided, the potential gains from engagement may nevertheless prove elusive.

However, another option, which Juan Pablo Luna (2015: 160) calls “the middle way” exists or, at least, could be constructed. It is possible to draw actively on ideas produced in the US in a way that does not commit a scholar to follow a certain line of thinking. In this regard, the persistent pluralism that characterizes comparative politics in the US offers a distinct opportunity for Latin American scholars to draw *selectively* from this Northern stock of theoretical and methodological ideas (Weyland, 2015).²¹

Being a selective appropriator of useful ideas is far from easy. First, local constraints can make

South Africa. For example, political scientists at the PUC in Chile have collaborated with colleagues in India, and colleagues at the University of San Martín in Argentina with colleagues in India as well as South Africa. However, the incentives for North-South collaboration and for collaboration with the US in particular are, at least in the medium term, quite strong (Luna, 2015: 157-58).


²¹ Latin American scholars need not look only to the US for theoretical and methodological ideas that can be selectively appropriated. There is a longstanding tradition among Latin American social scientists of drawing on European ideas, and exciting possibilities exist for creating new and original combinations by triangulating among influences from the US, Europe and Latin America itself.

it difficult for Latin American scholars to tap into and exploit the full range of pluralism in the North. Career incentives may pressure some, especially junior scholars at top Latin American universities, to package their research so it can potentially be published in a handful of highly-ranked peer-reviewed journals in the US that seem to take seriously only submissions that employ “gold standard” methods and theories. Scholars in some Latin American universities may also face pressures to collaborate only with colleagues at top-ranked institutions in the US. Moreover, the ability of Latin American scholars to draw on the pluralism in the North may be further hindered by access to a limited set of colleagues and potential collaborators in the North. Consequently, although the mainstream of US comparative politics consists of a plural set of theories and methods, the range of feasible options from this set may be curtailed for scholars in the South. Still, while the margins for maneuverability may be narrow, we caution against the fatalistic and self-defeating view that Latin American scholars looking to the North face a reified monolith that offers few, if any, opportunities for selective appropriation.

Whereas individual scholars may have little, if any, ability to alter the range of *de facto* pluralism on which they can draw, other factors more within their control can help increase the likelihood of successful selective engagement. For example, it helps to cultivate a healthy dose of skepticism about the promises made by proponents of the latest theoretical or methodological turn. Somewhat harder, it is critical to develop a keen eye for distinguishing the “wheat” from the “chaff,” that is, the important, deep and likely-enduring ideas from the trivial, superficial and likely-fleeting ones. Still, perhaps the most fundamental element for successful selective engagement is having a strong, even visceral, commitment to developing a Latin American perspective on Latin American realities coupled with a clear sense of one’s own research agenda, the issues one seeks to address, and the problems one wants to solve. These ingredients will make it far easier to identify which ideas are use-

ful and which are distracting or pernicious. To put it more forcefully, without a sense of purpose, grounded in intellectual and perhaps normative commitments, the likelihood that a Latin American scholar will simply be swallowed up by the Giant to the North seems very high.

Conclusion

We have considered the study of politics from two standpoints: the North and the South. We have sought to shed light on both the problems that hinder progress and the opportunities that could lead the field of comparative politics in a more positive direction in both the North and South. Clearly, not all is well in the social sciences in the North. Likewise, the state of the social sciences in Latin America is far from optimal. Still, we see important opportunities for progress both in the North and South. While we are uncertain how the tensions in US academia we discuss will play out or what steps could be taken in Latin America to improve the conditions for knowledge production, the past and present of comparative politics give us reason to be cautiously optimistic. Together, the field's persistent pluralism, the opportunities it may offer for creative and selective appropriation by scholars in the South, and the emergence of exciting new networks of collaboration linking scholars across Latin America to each other and also to colleagues in the North, give us hope that knowledge about politics will grow in the years ahead because of contributions by scholars working both in the US and in Latin America. 

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