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Letter from the President

Building a Disciplined, Rigorous Center in Comparative Politics

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In the lead article of an important symposium on the future of comparative politics (*World Politics*, October 1995, p. 4), Peter Evans offered a strong defense of what he calls the “eclectic, messy center” in our field, located between the alternatives of general theory and deep immersion in specific cases. I wish to take his idea a step further by arguing that new developments in comparative politics challenge us to build a “disciplined, rigorous center.” This center should emerge from the interaction between, on the one hand, recent innovations in theory and method, and, on the other hand, approaches and tools that have traditionally been the distinctive strengths of comparative politics scholars.

My previous letters discussed three building blocks for constructing this center position: the dialogue between quantitative and qualitative methods, innovation in the tradition of comparative-historical analysis, and the interaction between theory-driven research and inductive learning from cases that can grow out of field research. First, regarding the methodological dialogue, I reported the view held by many scholars that the evolving tools for analyzing a small number of cases (small-*n*) that constitute comparative method are not simply a way station on

the road to advanced quantitative techniques. Rather, in substantive terms, we find in some literatures a sequence of learning in which scholars move from statistical studies to small-*n* studies, and not the other way around. Further, in methodological terms, writing on comparative method generates valuable insights in its own right. Small-*n* comparison remains indispensable to our field, and a creative dialogue with quantitative researchers is pushing work on comparative method in productive directions, including new perspectives on defining the universe of cases, selecting cases, designing contextualized comparisons, and carrying out causal assessment.¹

As comparativists engage in this methodological dialogue, they should note that from the discipline of statistics we continue to hear warnings that in some domains of research, including the social sciences, the assumptions entailed in advanced statistical techniques are routinely not met.² Obviously, advanced statistics does not provide all the answers to our methodological questions, any more than the comparative method does. We need the methodological tools of both the statistical and the small-*n* traditions, and insights drawn from each can strengthen the other approach. This dialogue is an essential component of a disciplined, rigorous center in comparative politics.

Second, the tradition of comparative-historical analysis, founded by Moore, Bendix, Lipset and Rokkan, and Tilly, has likewise seen substantial innovation. This tradition has been extended and consolidated through dozens of valuable studies, published in the 1990s, which use ambitious comparisons to address questions of great political and normative significance. These new studies are especially interesting because they are responding to sharp methodological critiques that have emerged in the field of historical sociology. We find criticism, for example, of the kinds of explanatory claims entailed in the macro, structural focus of comparative-historical studies, and also of procedures for causal assessment based on J. S. Mill's methods. Given the increased attention of comparative-historical scholarship to such methodological issues – including a focus on microfoundations, new understandings of path dependence, and the use of multiple strategies of causal assessment – this literature is a second component of a disciplined center.

Third, we have recently seen productive discussions of the interaction between theoretically-informed research and rich knowledge of cases that can create opportunities for “extracting new ideas at close range.” Such knowledge of cases not only serves to test hypotheses, but also is an indispensable source of new concepts and innovative research agendas. This multifac-

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eted interaction between cases and theory receives support from many sides. For example, forceful advocates of theoretical innovation – such as David Latin and Robert Bates, my predecessors as Section President – are likewise forceful advocates of creative field research. Another example is found in the allocation of funding by the Social Science Research Council, which emphasizes the anchoring of theoretically-driven disciplinary agendas in field research and area-based knowledge (see the report on SSRC funding by Hershberg and Worcester in this issue of the newsletter). Relatedly, the current \$25 million Ford Foundation program for “Revitalizing Area Studies” serves as a reminder that area-based knowledge remains a basic component of the international studies enterprise in the United States. Against this backdrop, scholars seeking to construct a disciplined center in comparative politics face a crucial challenge in promoting this multifaceted interaction between cases and theory: rigorous training in field methodology and in strategies of inductive research too often receives insufficient attention in methodology courses within political science. The discipline of sociology, which has a stronger tradition of offering courses on these topics, may provide useful models for graduate training in comparative politics.

I am convinced that these three developments in our field – the dialogue between quantitative and qualitative methodology, innovation in comparative-historical studies, and the interaction between theory-driven research and inductive learning from cases – create an opportunity for consolidating a disciplined, rigorous center in comparative politics. This center combines the substantive richness that can derive from deep engagement in cases with the well-articulated standards for formulating and testing hypotheses offered by new theoretical and methodological approaches. A fundamental goal of ongoing scholarship and of graduate training must be to support the kind of theoretical and methodological pluralism needed to sustain this center ground.

Notes

1. See, for example, Gerardo Munck, “Canons of Research Design in Qualitative Analysis,” *Studies in Comparative International Development*, Vol. 33, No. 3, forthcoming.
2. David Freedman, “From Association to Causation: Some Remarks on the History of Statistics,” *Statistical Science*, forthcoming. Also available as Technical Report No. 521 at <http://stat-www.berkeley.edu/tech-reports/index.html>. ♦