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From Political Science Back to Politics: Learning to Teach Intro to Comparative Politics

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Of all the transitions facing an academic, perhaps none is more challenging than the move from graduate student to teacher of undergraduate survey courses. Most of us are taught little about how to make the factual, conceptual, and methodological skills we learn in grad school accessible to first and second year students. My own training was almost totally on the job, teaching my own course, and while the course was labeled "introduction" with no prerequisites, the deceptiveness of that label became quickly apparent. The textbooks contained an array of concepts which were explained briefly or employed as if their meaning was self evident: participation, legitimacy, development, the state, political culture, public policy, political economy, liberalism, capitalism, free markets, authoritarian.

Confronting that challenge was not simply a matter of defining terms; it required coming to a clearer understanding of what I was trying to teach. Most of us become political scientists because we are fascinated by politics. Caught up in the U.S. policy wars over Central America, I was drawn to a variety of questions that were initially about people, not concepts. Why did Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Nicaraguans make the variety of political choices they did in the 1980s? Why were some joining guerrilla organizations and others siding with the army? Working with Christian Base Communities or becoming evangelicals? Forming social movements or leaving for the United States? These

were questions about the politics of political identities for which political science was a means rather than an end in itself.

Few of my students wish to become political scientists. The majority take my Comparative Politics course because it is required within the major and they bring a wary sense that the subject matter will be distant and foreign—about "those" who live in far away places over "there." If they have a goal beyond getting good grades, it is to better understand the world they see on TV, interact with on the Internet, and in which they will soon be building an adult life. While it may seem obvious to assert that the goal of political science is a better understanding of politics, many comparative texts encourage the development of courses that are more about political science than politics. They take a snapshot of a system, rather than help students understand the politics of how it got that way. They emphasize concepts not people. In this article, I will explain an approach which has helped me bridge the gap between politics and political science, and between my graduate training and the worldviews of my students. Using my research interest in political identity as the foundation for my introductory course in comparative politics, I have been able to make the conceptual tools of comparative politics more meaningful to my students.

From Graduate Seminar to Introductory Survey

As a graduate student, I approached the first time I taught Introduction to Comparative Politics survey classes with something of an ideal-type mentality. I assumed there was a balance of history, institutions, political economy, policy making, and present issues that would reach that ideal. A read through several of the leading texts revealed a wide array of approaches, however. I decided a case study approach would allow me to learn more about a few countries, while

a thematic approach would stretch me too thin across too wide an area. Experience has convinced me that a case study approach is best if my goal is to generate an interest in politics. After working through two or three national cases in detail, students find comparison of electoral processes, political institutions, economic policy, or party systems more meaningful. More importantly, the political processes that have produced these national systems, and which may currently be transforming them, are far better understood. A thematic approach can teach students to recognize differences between systems, but provides a far too rudimentary grasp of how specific nations reached their current state and how they may change.

The central dilemma initially with a case study approach was how to present a relatively brief, complex, and yet coherent introduction to a foreign political system. My initial efforts were far from satisfying. I tried to balance accessibility and depth in integrating history and political economy perspectives with an overview of political institutions, political culture, and the public policy process. The best students learned a great deal, but too many were left confused.

The second time I taught the course I looked to my dissertation for some concepts around which I could structure my approach to the case studies. I had used Benedict Anderson's concept of nations as "imagined communities" as a tool for analyzing the issue of national identity in Guatemala. I realized that Anderson's language would be challenging to undergraduates, but I thought that his concept could help organize my analytic narrative of each country's history, institutions, political culture, and political economy. Anderson's concept avoided, on my reading, either cultural or structural reductionism by stressing the relationship between nations as culturally constructed communities and the structural contexts in which they developed. Technology, economic change, state policies, and intellectual developments

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all made it possible to, in Anderson's terms, "think the nation" but they did not determine what choices communities and individuals would make.

The organization of my course around the complex processes by which national identities have been constructed allowed four interrelated assumptions to operate:

- 1) National identities are not monolithic; they are almost always characterized by deep, historically grounded and institutionally embedded divisions which shape political debate and conflict. Conflicts rooted in competing conceptions of political identity are present in virtually every context—from the borders of China to the borders of Los Angeles.
- 2) National identities are never once and for all. The meaning of British, Iranian, or Chinese identities remain ongoing political issues. If national identities are "imagined communities," their invention and re-invention is a never-ending political task undertaken in the light of new conditions and experiences. When students look at a map, they tend to endow borders with an aura of stability which I try in turn to challenge.
- 3) Identities are framed partly in relation to an "other," an identity perceived as different. Cohesion is often the product of external threats whose political meaning has often been shaped by the political agendas of domestic political leaders. While nationalists present their communities as ancient and essential, the actual degree of internal coherence and external difference may be highly exaggerated and historically contingent on concrete political choices. Ethnic conflicts in India, Nigeria, or Russia, for example, are rooted in state policies, not timeless hatreds. Students often enter my classroom under the influence of the kinds of "ancient hatreds" arguments which are prominent in the press. The best antidote is analysis which views conflict as a political fact to be explained rather than a given.
- 4) Modern political identities, national or otherwise, are political artifacts shaped by the modern

world. The Kurds, Cree, Maya, and Chinese are all ancient peoples, but their contemporary identities are fundamentally shaped by their encounter with capitalism and the nation-state system. This does not mean that the political movements which invoke the past are fraudulent, but they are modern. This reinforces the earlier point that identities are never once and for all.

Identity, thus, is the place where structure and agency meet. While social scientists have long debated their "relative autonomy," closer analysis usually reveals a dynamic relationship between the two. As cultural choices, notions of identity and meaning cannot be understood outside of the context in which they are constructed nor viewed as simple consequences of that structural context.

These assumptions inform how I teach political culture. If the cultural conceptions which shape individual and collective notions of meaning and value are beset by contingency and external factors, political cultures are best understood as the porous institutional and intellectual boundaries within which interpretations of a community's identity are contested. Weber's essays on the "cultural sciences" teach us that politics is about conflicts over competing visions of how to live. While politics is played out within institutions and structures, between what Weber called "status groups," questions of personal meaning and identity are ever at stake. This agnostic dimension of political life is one of its principal fascinations. The study of political identities can make it visible by revealing what political actors, whether individuals or collective movements, want from politics. Machiavellian questions abound: How are we to act politically in a world shaped by *fortuna*? How can communities and institutions endure? By placing these questions, as answered by Bismarck, Nehru, Cárdenas, or Mao, at the heart of my discussion of institutional development and public policy choices, I keep the focus on political choices rather than concepts.

Teaching the Course

Anderson's work was too difficult for most of my students, but the notion of nations as "imagined" brought far greater shape to my organization of the case material. Students were intrigued by the idea of France or Mexico as cul-

tural products whose meaning was the source of ongoing policy disputes over the European Union or NAFTA. I spent less time on the mechanics of political institutions and focused instead on why those institutions were structured as they were. What kind of national community did De Gaulle or Adenauer envision? How have Diaz, Cardenas, Salinas, or the Zapatistas imagined Mexico? How do public policy choices such as the welfare state, neo-liberalism, indicative planning, the "social market," import substitution, or the Four Modernizations reflect efforts to forge particular kinds of collective identities? How successful have these policies been in legitimating the state as the institutional embodiment of a national identity?

With these questions at the core of my approach to the case studies, I offer little initial discussion of comparative theoretical issues. Until my students' factual knowledge of a few countries has increased, theoretical discussions are, in my judgment, a waste of valuable class time. Instead, I begin with a text or film which puts a human face on three central concepts: state, nation, identity. Michael Ignatieff's *Blood and Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism* did this admirably for several years. Ignatieff begins by making a distinction between civic and ethnic nationalism which is useful all semester. He then offers six brilliant narratives from Quebec to Kurdistan which have the great merit of showing students how identities are formed. Using his skills as a novelist, Ignatieff presents whole people and leaves much of the evaluation to his readers, raising questions that we will explore all semester. Where do political identities come from? How are state and nation related? How are they distinct? What makes each a source of cohesion? Under what conditions do they become sources of violence?

As some of Ignatieff's chapters became a little dated, I have drawn on an excellent series from the *New York Times* exploring the complex transnational identities constructed by many recent immigrants in an era of cheaper long distance and airfares and new means of instant communication. Are these immigrants American? Dominican? Both? As we begin our case studies, I want students to already have the notion that national identities are always in flux to some degree by exploring the issue close to home. In the most recent version of the class, several short stories in Jhumpa Lahiri's collection *Interpreter of Maladies* supplemented the *Times* article.

At this point, the concepts of state, nation, and identity have been made somewhat less abstract. I then briefly introduce the four themes which provide the comparative reference points for our examination of the effort to establish legitimate political orders in each country:

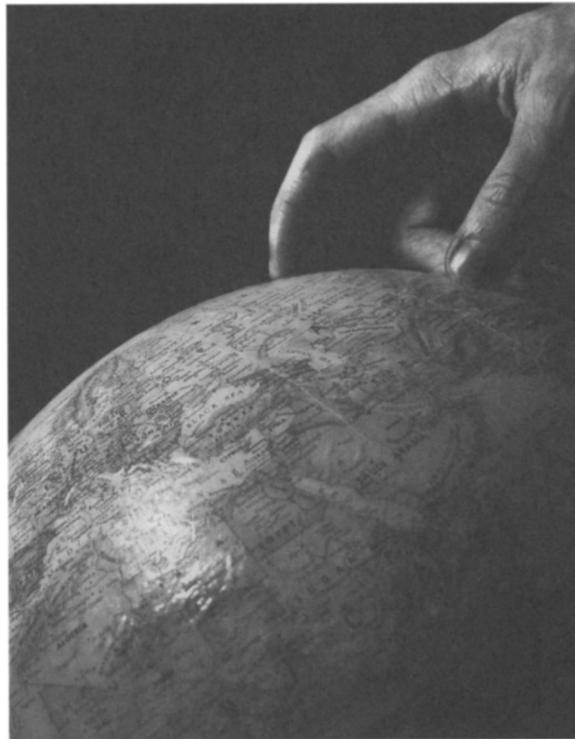
- 1) Building effective state institutions
- 2) Fostering economic development
- 3) Structuring political participation
- 4) Constructing a collective identity.

Rather than offering deeper discussion of the conceptual complexities of each of these issues, I use the cases to build a foundation for students to theorize with as we go. Kesselman, Krieger, and Joseph's *Comparative Politics at the Crossroads* provides an outstanding foundation for evaluating these issues. While students grumble about the level of detail in some of the chapters, the text is superior in several ways to any other text. Each chapter is written by a first-class scholar of that country. At the same time, each author skillfully adheres to the framework set down by the editors. Every other text I have used or examined is weakened by either the overreach of an author trying to write on too many countries, or the weak links between chapters in multi-authored texts. This text also provides the best coverage of historical and political economy issues. The sections on the evolution of the state focus on the crucial role played by the process of industrialization and the impact of globalization. Each chapter also effectively integrates the issue of identity into its historical, institutional, and economic analysis.

Analyzing the Case Studies

As I construct my narrative of each case, the politics of national identity is the lens through which my class views public policy, state-building, and participation. What are the purposes for which leaders exercise power? What are the conceptions of the nation and its identity which they hope to strengthen? How do the structures of political participation define the role of the public? What conception of the public good is present in public policy? What influences do economic policies and processes, either domestically or globally, have on notions of national community? A few examples:

Britain: How has Britain been imagined as a national community? How have political struggles over institutional power and participation shaped those conceptions? What was the impact of industrialization, colonialism, and decline? How did the policies of the "collectivist consensus" and Thatcherism also reflect conceptions of Britain as an imagined community? What conceptions of Britain inform current debates about European integration, devolution, and constitutional reform? Tony Blair's proposals to change the way Parliament is constituted provide a vivid example that even in the most seemingly settled of political contexts,



A Place in the World. Belanger's use of fiction, case studies, and periodicals, makes the conceptual tools of comparative politics more meaningful to his students.

the big issues are never resolved once and for all but are also open to debate and even transformation in the light of new challenges.

Iran: The policies of every Iranian regime in the 20th century embody widely diverse responses to the country's weakness relative to the West. The failure of the Shah's White Revolution programs, in spite of their technological and economic achievements, illustrate the profound consequences in failing to put forward a persuasively inclusive vision of the nation. Similar questions are essential to evaluating the prospects for change under reform-minded President Khatami as well as

in looking more generally at current, yet perennial, debates over the relationship between Islam, modernity, and democracy.

Mexico: The policies of the PRI can be understood as a sophisticated and successful effort to turn the diverse political aspirations within the Mexican Revolution and fashion policies into a more inclusive vision of Mexico as a nation. The legitimacy of the PRI from the 1930s into the 1970s, in the face of persistent corruption and periodic repression, cannot be fully understood without a discussion of identity. The same can be said for the turn toward neo-liberalism over the last two decades. Miguel de la Madrid, Carlos Salinas, and other PRI *tecnicos* did not abandon import substitution economic policies because they were forced to. They "imagined" Mexico in accordance with new conceptions of economic and management rationality. Conceptions of national identity are harder to change than, say, non-tariff barriers, however, and the battles over free trade, liberalization, and democracy are more explicable when they are seen as part of a process by which Mexico's national identity is being renegotiated.

In each case, identity is a window into what politics is about in each context. But, the ability to carry out comparative analysis remains the most important goal of the course. At the beginning of each semester, many students find that goal a bit intimidating. Knowing little about any particular country, they wonder how they will be able to compare participation or legitimacy cross-nationally. Using identity as a thread humanizes foreign institutional structures and policy debates. They are seen as the products of human actors with concrete political ends. Those ends are often not realized of course, but the failures only further humanize the processes and begin to provide a basis for comparison. When I ask students to compare the "role of the state" in "managing a market economy" in Britain, France, and Germany, the question is less abstract if the human dimensions and impact of policy goals are visible. Students are still evaluated, nonetheless, on their analytic ability in comparing the relative achievements of Thatcherism, indicative planning, or co-determination. When students consider why there was a revolution in Iran but

not in India or Nigeria, or evaluate the rise and fall of one-party rule in Mexico and the Soviet Union, they are far more able, and interested, in comparing outcomes analytically when they better understand the sources of human aspirations and conflict which drive politics in each place.

The Other End of the Telescope

At the end of the semester, having explored eight case studies, my students read Cristina Garcia's novel *Dreaming in Cuban* in order to explore the philosophical and existential dimensions of identity in more depth and closer to home. It is the story of three generations of women in a Cuban family. In learning their stories, we have an opportunity to consider the relationship between how an individual constructs her sense of identity and the broader political forces shaping national identities. Having learned of the various ways that French, Mexican, or Iranian states have sought to construct particular conceptions of national identity, Garcia's novel allows students to watch the process from the other end of the telescope. Each woman's life reveals insights into the politics of state and nation building which surround them.

The women are Celia, still in Cuba and an ardent supporter of the revolution; her daughter Lourdes, who is living in Brooklyn and is fiercely anti-Castro; and Lourdes' daughter Pilar, a young Cuban-American punk-artist who loves Lou Reed and longs to know more of the grandmother she has not seen since she was a baby. We work with a definition of nationalism offered by Michael Ignatieff: "the claim that while men and women have many identities, it is the nation which provides them with their primary form of belonging" (1994, 5).

Does Cuba, we ask, provide Celia with her "primary form of belonging"? On the surface, her dedication to the revolution and her hope that it will create a less predatory political culture than the one in which she grew up make it appear so. But students can see ambiguity in her relation to her nation. In some ways, it seems like a refuge from the disappointments and failures of family life. As one student put it, "politics is a refuge from her broken heart." The politics of how Cuba and the United States imagine each other has contributed heavily to permanently wounding her links to the family. As one student noted in an

essay: "this is not the source of belonging she always wanted, but the only acceptable source she was left to choose from." Another argued:

She had this love of Cuba, but it wasn't enough. She shared commitment and ideology, yet her free spirit made her different from other Cubans. Celia was like the sea, always changing and always constant. How does one like that find belonging?

Lourdes' attitude toward the United States seems equally ambivalent. Her conception of the U.S. as an imagined community is heavily framed by the fact that it is not Cuba and that it has allowed her to reinvent herself. But at the same time, U.S. freedoms, as re-

[Students] are far more able, and interested, in comparing outcomes analytically when they better understand the sources of human aspirations and conflict which drive politics in each place.

flected in the choices made by her daughter Pilar, frighten her. As one student put it, "While Lourdes sings the praises of the U.S., we have to wonder . . . In her eyes is the greatest attribute that it is not Cuba." Another student wrote that "America is a defiance to the country which scarred her. This in no way makes Lourdes complete. She searches for fulfillment of a void through her sticky buns, excessive sex, and money."

Pilar's imagined United States is two countries: the one she embraces as an artist in New York, and the other she feels alienated from—of "food like people who live in Ohio eat." Pilar's Cuba is an idealized place where the politics of the revolution are secondary to her sense that a part of who she is remains there to be discovered in the culture and life of her grandmother. A visit to Cuba reveals the degree of repression she would confront as an artist in Cuba, yet her ambivalence toward the U.S. remains. She knows that she does not fit with many

white Americans' "imagined community," and she is not really interested in trying. Her "primary form of belonging" seems to be as an artist from Brooklyn, yet students recognize how American she is in insisting on her individuality.

In these ways, *Dreaming in Cuban* humanizes what students have already learned in a more analytic fashion: identities, including national ones, are complex and messy, and the process of creating them is never ending. The novel puts a semester of learning to work reflecting on the issue of citizenship in the United States. Will Pilar's sense of self, if shared by other immigrants, lead to what Arthur Schlesinger despairingly called "the disuniting of America"? In what sense is there a "we" in this country? The special power of Garcia's novel as a teaching tool is that it cannot be translated into a political ideology. The dogmas of each character emerge not from abstract ideas but from richly drawn human lives, which explains why the book has appealed to students across the political spectrum. The majority identify most strongly with Pilar because whether or not they agree with all of her ideas they recognize her dilemma. One student wrote that the United States "fills my head with knowledge, freedom, and opportunity, but it leaves my heart empty."

At this point, I return to the *New York Times* series on immigration. Students are initially taken aback, and in some cases appalled, by the perspective of immigrants who consider themselves both Dominican and American; at home in Mexico and the United States and inclined to return a good deal of their earnings to their communities of origin. We are then able to ask questions about what a citizen owes to his or her nation. When nearly half the citizens by birth in the U.S. don't vote and directly or indirectly invest their money all over the world, is it fair to hold immigrants to a higher standard? The question points to the continuing challenge of maintaining a United States national identity. As students ponder these issues, they are made to rethink, and perhaps be less dismissive of, concerns about the spread of U.S. culture into Europe, Asia, and elsewhere. They are also compelled to see the relationship between cultural forces such as multiculturalism and structural forces such as economic and technological change. These immigrants point to new challenges facing nation states and the possibility of increasingly transnational forms of political identity.

Conclusion

In his lecture on “Science as a Vocation,” Max Weber urged his audience to find the “demon who holds the fiber of his very life.” By returning to the issues which first drew me to the study of politics, I have made my Comparative Politics course a sort of laboratory in which the issues I studied in graduate school get broken down to their component parts and examined in a variety of political settings. My loyalty, thus, is to politics, not political science. While I have tried to suggest what my approach can offer in the classroom, the ambiguity of identity as a concept may frus-

trate some, or may not speak to their own passions for the study of politics.

For my students, however, an appreciation of ambiguity is essential. Technological change will place them in work contexts in which complete knowledge is unavailable, every option carries risks, and the boss doesn’t have the correct answer in his or her desk. International political factors will almost certainly influence their ability to carry out their jobs. They may remember little of the mechanisms by which laws are made in Germany, the names of Nigeria’s military rulers or ethnic groups, or India’s political institutions. But they may be able to retain a

framework for thinking about the central issues shaping politics in those countries and compelling responses from U.S. policymakers, citizens groups, or private companies. What do markets mean to Chinese or Russians? How do Iranians see the United States? What does being English mean? Who will win, for now, the political struggles over these questions and with what policy implications? My students’ answers will not be perfect, of course, but I believe I have given them a better chance to ask the right questions. More importantly, I believe I have helped give them more reason to want to ask those questions.

Note

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