

Is comparative politics dead? Rethinking the field in the post-Cold War era

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Most of the present leadership in the comparative politics field came of age, intellectually and as scholars, during the 1960s and 1970s. It was an exciting time. A host of new nations had emerged onto the world stage; there were exciting new approaches and methodologies for studying these changes; US foreign policy through such agencies as the Peace Corps and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) was paying serious attention to the Third World for the first time; and the developing nations of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East offered fascinating new ‘living laboratories’ for the study of social and political change. Not only was the subject matter new and challenging, but also during this period the comparative politics field advanced some of the most innovative and exciting theory and conceptual approaches in all of political science: studies of political culture, of political socialisation, developmentalism, dependency and interdependency, corporatism, bureaucratic–authoritarianism, organic–statism, transitions to democracy, and so on. The combination of new and exciting research terrains and provocative, innovative theory served to attract the best young graduate students to the field.¹

What made comparative politics and its conceptual theories so exciting during this period was that the questions they wrestled with involved large, complex, *systems* issues. These included the questions of capitalism versus communism, democracy versus totalitarianism or authoritarianism, free markets versus planned economies, political evolution versus revolution. When those early waves of young scholars fanned out to the developing areas in the 1960s and 1970s—and this is what made it so exciting—*all* the options seemed open: democracy, authoritarianism, Marxism, revolution, corporatism, totalitarianism, fragmentation and disintegration, and civil war. Quite frankly, none of us knew what the outcome of these conflicting viewpoints, forces, and systems might be; in a context of new, still inchoate, often violent politics, almost any outcome seemed possible.² And to many young students, it was this very uncertainty, the many competing options open, that seemed to make comparative politics so attractive as a field of study.³

But by now a lot of that excitement has faded. The great systems debates of earlier decades have been (mostly?) resolved. Democracy has largely triumphed

in the political sphere; certainly democracy is the only system of government that enjoys widespread global legitimacy. No regime wants to be called 'corporatist' or 'Marxist-Leninist' anymore; both of these *system* alternatives have been discredited. In addition, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the cold war conflict between capitalism and communism has largely run its course, and there is only one real superpower left. The success particularly of the East Asian economies and the failures of Cuba, Nicaragua and Eastern Europe demonstrated the advantages of private market initiatives over a totally controlled system. Obviously, there is and will continue to be debate between advocates of freer markets and state downsizing, and those who would preserve statism and a larger welfare state, but increasingly these involve the politics of compromise and moderation (socialist governments in the UK and Portugal following free market strategies, right-of-centre governments (under Kohl) in Germany and Spain expanding welfarism, virtually everyone else also seeking to combine free-market policies with strong social programmes) rather than the politics of either/or.

The great systems debates of the past are largely over, and with that change has come a decline in interest in comparative politics. A paradigm shift is under way: whereas in the 1960s the parabola that is the rise and fall of comparative politics was on the way up; today it is on the way down. Graduate students are less interested in the field because the excitement of new research fields and new theoretical frameworks has died down and, since the 1970s, there seem to be no great conceptual innovations or breakthroughs comparable to those of earlier decades. As such states as Spain, Portugal and Russia have (in varying degree) become democratic, joined Europe, and become 'normal' countries, they have also become more boring. The 'thrill' in comparative politics is gone; there are still a host of interesting and important issues to study but the great systems debates of the past appear to be over. There has been a certain 'decline of ideology';⁴ there is a certain 'end of history'.⁵ So the questions we seek to assess here are how and why the field went from exciting to boring, whether comparative politics is in fact dead, and what subjects are still interesting and worthy of study.

Comparative politics: the queen of the discipline

In 1955 Roy Macridis had launched a diatribe against traditional comparative politics.⁶ He accused the field of being formal-legalistic (studying formal institutions over non-formal political processes), descriptive rather than analytic, case study-orientated rather than genuinely comparative, and Eurocentric with its emphasis on Great Britain, France, Germany and the Soviet Union. Macridis's critique had a strong effect on the 'Young Turks' beginning to write in the field in those days. In addition, the revolution then occurring in political science more generally—behaviouralism, the study of decision making, the emphases on informal actors such as political parties and interest groups, research on public opinion and political processes—also had a profound impact on comparative politics.⁷

Along with the Macridis critique, in the late 1950s and early 1960s came the sudden emergence onto the world scene of a large number of new nations. The

decolonisation of that period doubled the number of independent countries in the world and opened up new research opportunities in a variety of heretofore unexplored countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. With the pioneering work of Gabriel Almond, David Apter, Lucian Pye, Sidney Verba, Myron Weiner and the Social Science Research Council/Committee on Comparative Politics, the study of 'non-Western'⁸ or 'developing' areas⁹ came to the fore. The growth of new and exciting theory accompanying these developments made comparative politics for a time the most innovative and provocative field within political science. For these reasons comparative politics during this period also attracted the best and brightest of political science graduate students who planned to write doctoral dissertations on the developing areas. 'Developmentalism' was the dominant conceptual paradigm at this time, incorporating both the effort to find and study development *and* the effort, through such agencies as USAID, the Alliance for Progress, the Peace Corps, and others, to bring development to less-favoured ('developing' or 'emerging') countries. It was obvious that not only were the developing nations very exciting to study but also that US foreign policy was also increasingly interested in them and was seeking to find a non-communist theory of development to counter the appeals of Marxism–Leninism. At the time (pre-Vietnam), most scholars interested in development saw no contradiction between their academic interest in development and the serving of US foreign policy goals, presumably incorporating the same objectives.¹⁰

Meanwhile, by the mid-to-late 1960s, many of the younger scholars trained in development returned from the field with their dissertations under their arms, having found precious little 'development'—functioning political parties or party systems, independent trade unions, functioning legislature, and so on. The sentiment eventually grew that it was not just 'their countries' that were 'dysfunctional' for lacking these assumed accoutrements of development, but that the theory of development was itself flawed and based on misplaced assumptions.¹¹ The critiques of the developmentalist approach and logic grew louder; at the same time the 1965 US intervention in the Dominican Republic, the escalation in Vietnam, the assassinations of Robert F Kennedy and Martin Luther King, and then the presidency of Richard Nixon and Watergate led many scholars to become thoroughly disillusioned with both the theory of development and the practice of US politics and policy on which so much of the developmentalist model had been based. The critiques of developmentalism were eventually so powerful and widespread that the theory went into eclipse and was largely ignored in comparative politics in the 1970s and 1980s.

Two main alternatives to developmentalism arose in the early 1970s and gained widespread attention: dependency theory and corporatism. Both these alternative approaches were strongly critical of developmentalism; both arose as conscious alternatives to it. Dependency theory,¹² mainly Marxian in origin, criticised the dominant developmentalism for ignoring domestic class factors as well as international market and power factors in development, and was particularly critical of US foreign policy and multinational corporations. It suggested, contrary to the earlier development theory, that the development of the already-industrialised nations and that of the developing ones would not go

together hand-in-hand; instead, dependency theory argued that the development of the West had come on the shoulders and at the cost of the non-West. The corporatist approach criticised developmentalism for its Euro-American ethnocentrism and indicated that there were alternative organic, corporatist, often authoritarian ways to organise the state and state-society relations besides the dominant liberal-pluralism that undergirded developmentalism.¹³ Although the dependency and corporatist 'schools' often feuded within and between themselves, between them they largely squeezed and criticised the developmentalist approach out of the picture.

During the later 1970s and on into the 1980s, still reflecting the backlash against developmentalism, a number of other theories and approaches emerged.¹⁴ These included bureaucratic-authoritarianism,¹⁵ organic-statism,¹⁶ and indigenous concepts of change.¹⁷ Later, in the 1980s, new subject matters, if not new approaches, came similarly to the fore: transitions to democracy, the politics of structural adjustment, neoliberalism and privatisation. Some of the early scholars of development resented these new approaches as undermining and breaking the unity of the field (as well as their own monopoly of it), but others saw them as adding healthy diversity, providing an alternative variety of approaches and enlightening subject areas not covered by the earlier developmentalist perspective.¹⁸

The debate and excitement within the field during this period of the 1960s through the early-to-mid-1980s reflected the large issues with which comparative politics had to wrestle. It bears repeating that these were *grand systems* issues. The ongoing debate between advocates of the developmentalist, dependency, corporatist, and other schools mentioned was not just an academic debate over proverbial small stakes; rather, it was a vigorous discussion about the future direction of developing and transitional nations themselves. Would they be capitalist or socialist; would they have liberal-democratic, corporatist-authoritarian, or communist-totalitarian political systems; would their path of development be by revolution, civil war, or gradual evolutionary change? Would they be viable as societies and nation-states or would they break down into chaos, ungovernability, and civil war; and what was the best political and economic system for achieving viability and avoiding breakdown?

Complicating all these already large and complex questions was the sometimes overt and sometimes covert foreign-policy issue: with which side in the Cold War would the developing nations be aligned and which model of all those discussed above would best assure the Cold War goals set by the superpowers? These were big issues; the stakes involved were enormous. The importance of the debate as well as the intellectual excitement created by the complex and often conflicting theories involved made comparative politics during all this period the most exciting field in the political science discipline and development studies the most innovative field in the social sciences.

The eclipse of systems issues

As the 1980s dawned, the world remained a tumultuous and uncertain place. The first of the 'third-wave' transitions to democracy had begun but their outcome

still remained fragile and uncertain.¹⁹ The Cold War remained hot in such far-flung regions of conflict as Southern Africa, Afghanistan, Central America, the Horn of Africa, and the Middle East; and at the time the issue of which of the superpowers would emerge victorious was by no means certain. Marxism in its various forms, corporatism, authoritarianism, revolution, *and* democracy all seemed to be possible outcomes in many so-called developing nations. The Asian 'tigers' (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan) had begun to show impressive economic growth but the term Newly Industrialised Countries (NICs) had not yet been coined and no one quite expected the Asian NICs to blossom into global models.

But during the course of the 1980s and on into the 1990s, many of these earlier conflicts were resolved. More than that, after some 30 years of experimentation and experience (as distinct from the earlier theory), it became quite possible to say what works in development and what doesn't.²⁰ In addition, the older ideological, partisan and class passions began to fade in some countries or were ameliorated somewhat. Many countries whose economic, social and political systems had seemingly been 'up for grabs' settled down to become more normal, even 'boring' countries; democracy in one form or another was largely institutionalised. While it is not quite certain that history has 'ended' in some definitive way, it is clear that the older ideological conflicts have declined and that, along with the end of the Cold War, the great systems debates of earlier decades are largely over. Democracy, consumerism and neoliberalism or a mixed form of capitalism and social welfare appear to have emerged triumphant.

All of these real-world changes also carry immense implications for the field of comparative politics. Our purpose here is not to offer a complete or definitive analysis of all these transformations (impossible in a few pages), but to provide a region-by-region survey of some of the major changes in each area, to suggest how these have affected the great systems debates of earlier years, and then to explore the broad implications of these changes for comparative politics. A more detailed, systematic and thorough explanation must be reserved for a later time. At this stage our hope is to offer a provocation, a set of research suggestions, and a number of hypotheses in narrative form, not a full and final treatment.²¹

The first countries to experience the 'third-wave' transitions to democracy in the mid-1970s were the Southern European countries of Greece, Portugal and Spain. All three had long been perceived as being on the periphery of Europe, dependent on the centre in economic and political terms, and backward and underdeveloped socially, economically and politically. At the time of their transitions in 1974–75, *all* options seemed to be open: continued authoritarianism and corporatism, democracy, Marxian revolution, breakdown and fragmentation, even the possibility of civil war. These were exciting, large-scale systems issues; one suspects it was the systems-wide magnitude of the issues involved that attracted so many scholars to Southern Europe in the 1970s.

But since that time, Greece, Portugal and Spain have settled down, become 'normal' countries. They are so normal as to be almost boring politically. Democracy has triumphed, elections are held regularly, a more-or-less stable

party system has emerged, and in all three countries there have been at least two elections in which power has passed peacefully to the opposition—usually thought of as a key indicator of the consolidation of democracy.

All three countries are now members of the EUC and NATO. Per capita income has risen to roughly 70% of the European average and a stable middle class has emerged. Ideological passions have cooled, depoliticisation has taken place and consumerism has triumphed. Socialist governments carry out neoliberal economic policies while right-of-centre governments expand social welfare. Democracy's triumph has been so definitive and enjoys such high legitimacy that a left-wing revolution or a right-wing coup are unthinkable. All the great systems issues have been resolved; politics revolves around 'more or less' (a little less social welfare, a little more privatisation, or vice versa) rather than the make-or-break issues of the past. As elsewhere in Europe, there is widespread consensus on democracy, employment, stability, welfare, markets, continued growth, consumerism and something akin to a guaranteed income. Arguments still occur around the margins of these issues but not on the basics.²²

Some parallel developments have occurred in Asia. First, the authoritarian political systems of earlier decades in South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore have become more open, democratic, and pluralist. Second and relatedly, the authoritarian, state corporatism of the past has become more participatory and socially just ('societal corporatism'). Third, the economies of the area boomed: the four Asian Tigers (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan) became NICs and began to challenge the already industrialised nations on several economic fronts. Fourth, this economic boom spread to other, previously less-developed countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, The Philippines, Laos, Thailand); while, fifth, even such communist countries as China and Vietnam have seen the benefits of opening their markets even as they still utilise the political controls of a command regime. Sixth, India has now been a political democracy for 50 years; recently, and looking at the example of its Asian neighbours, it has taken steps to reform and free up its economy as well. Thus, in both the political and the economic realms, the future path in Asia, despite recent and probably temporary downturns, seems clear: greater pluralism and democracy coupled with a combined statist-bureaucratic and more open-market system.²³

A personal anecdote may help illustrate the point. In 1987 the author and Soviet Union specialist Jerry Hough were part of an academic delegation visiting Singapore. In a variation on the 'mouse that roared' theme, Hough made front-page headlines in all the Singapore newspapers by claiming—with only a little hyperbole—that it was 'little' Singapore that had won the Cold War! He argued that it was the dynamism and success of the Singapore economy (and that of the other Asian Tigers) that had shown to the Soviets, other developing countries, and the world that market capitalism was far more productive and superior to Marxist-Leninist economies. One can see why this assessment was so well received by the Singapore press: city-state-sized Singapore had become a model for the *world*.

Latin America's political systems are more fragile than those of Southern Europe and its economies less developed, but many of the same trends present in Spain, Portugal, Greece and even Asia are also present in Latin America.

Indeed, the two Iberian countries, especially Spain, like to present themselves as models for Latin America. Here are a few, perhaps surprising, statistics for comparison: in 1960 Latin America was 70% rural (and agrarian reform was a major issue); now it is 70% urban. In 1960 Latin America was 70% illiterate; now it is 70% literate. In 1960 Latin America's per capita income was in the \$300–\$400 range; now it is quadruple that, and most countries have reached middle-income levels. Latin America is currently one of the most dynamic areas economically in the world. In 1977 (at the height of the wave of bureaucratic–authoritarianism) 14 of the 20 Latin American countries were under military rule and in three other countries the military was so close to the surface of power as to make the line between civil and military all but invisible. In 1997, in contrast, 19 of the 20 countries (all except Cuba) could be said to be democratic or en route to democracy.²⁴

Polls show that 80%, 85%, or even 90% (depending on the country) of the population support liberal, democratic, representative rule. Almost no one (2%, 3%, 5%, depending on the country) wants Marxism–Leninism or a return to authoritarianism and corporatism anymore. While the legitimacy of democracy is thus high, the precise meaning of democracy ('controlled', 'tutelary', 'delegative', 'Rousseauian'—democracy with adjectives) is not so clear-cut. Moreover, the public support for what we think of as democracy's essential pluralist underpinnings—political parties, trade unions, etc—is often low, in the range of 10%, 15%, or 20%. Electoral democracy has clearly triumphed in Latin America but liberal democracy has not yet been firmly entrenched.²⁵ Nor are Latin Americans fully convinced of the efficacy of a neoliberal economic order—although they lack a viable alternative model.

As was the case with Southern Europe, a large number of young scholars was attracted to Latin America in the past because of the excitement and romance of the major changes taking place there and because it offered a marvelous laboratory of social and political transformation. Latin America was a systems area *par excellence*. Democracy, revolutions, coups, guerrilla struggles—all the options seemed possible. But with democracy now triumphant, most guerrilla movements suing for peace or reconstituting themselves as political parties and joining the electoral political process, and *coups d'état* a thing of the past in most countries, the great systems conflicts of previous decades have died down. Latin America, too, like Southern Europe and Asia, is now more prosperous, more middle class, less ideological, more consumerist, more affluent, thus providing a stronger socioeconomic base for democracy.

While Latin America is presently strongly democratic, its democracy is not so firmly established or institutionalised as that of Southern Europe. The precise meaning of democracy (patronage in Brazil, welfarism in Uruguay, often organic and corporatist elsewhere) is still not entirely clear, and the institutions of democracy are often weak. The large, well endowed South American countries have in general stronger economies and better institutionalised political systems than the weaker countries of Central America; hence there is still the possibility of a *coup d'état* in some of the latter countries, although probably not a whole wave of authoritarian takeovers as occurred in the 1960s and 1970s. In addition, the Latin American political process is still more anomic, chaotic and conflict-

prone than in the more developed countries, with street demonstrations, strikes, riots, structured violence, property takeovers, etc., that have the potential to produce more open-ended politics. Equity and social justice issues are still critical, class and racial divisions remain sharp, and the neoliberal agenda has not yet produced the economic gains expected.²⁶ However, with both Marxism–Leninism and traditional statism/mercantilism discredited, there is presently no real alternative to the neoliberal model. Political debate has largely concentrated on the pace and extent of these changes, not on the need for reform itself. Once again it is the politics of ‘more or less’ rather than that of either or that is emerging triumphant—less dramatic than Latin American politics in the past but probably more hopeful, too.

Russia and Eastern Europe are presently going through many of the same systems changes as did Southern Europe, Asia and Latin America in previous decades. Indeed, one is struck by the remarkable parallels between these four areas. To use a now almost forgotten phrase from W W Rostow,²⁷ it may be that not only was Marxism–Leninism a ‘disease of the transition’ (to modernity) but also that authoritarian–corporatism was similarly a ‘disease’ of the same transition. That is to say that both Marxism–Leninism on the Left and authoritarian corporatism on the Right were products of a certain vulnerable stage of the transition from tradition to modernity, a stage and time period where system breakdown and extremism of both Left and Right were possible. We have long known that communism and fascism were not only often bitter enemies but also exhibited numerous parallels,²⁸ and now we know another reason why: they were products of the same time period and of many of the same wrenching, divisive, potentially morbid social and political forces. But now, after a long interregnum (40 years of authoritarian corporatism in Spain and Portugal, 70 years of Marxism–Leninism in the USSR), those conditions have dramatically changed and so have the two kinds of countries discussed.²⁹

Let us make some preliminary distinctions, which are well worth further comparative politics research.³⁰ First, because of geography, proximity, history, culture and sociology—to say nothing of the fact that its Marxism–Leninism was imposed by invading and occupying Soviet armies—Eastern Europe is in general currently closer to the Western model politically (democracy) and economically (mixed market economies) than is Russia. Second, within Eastern Europe there are also major differences: Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, the Baltic states and Slovenia are closer to the West politically and economically (democracy and a free market/mixed economy) than are Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia. Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic are in the process of being admitted to NATO; negotiations with some of the other countries over NATO admission are going forward; and it seems clear that in one form or another much of Eastern (now Central) Europe will be integrated economically, mainly through German and Austrian investment, into Europe as well. Except perhaps for Bosnia, the great systems debate in Eastern Europe of recent years over which direction to pursue seems to be mainly over as well; democracy and a mixed economy are becoming triumphant here as in other areas surveyed—even though numerous structural reforms are still required in these countries.

Russia and some members of the Commonwealth of Independent States

constitute a more difficult case.³¹ On the one hand, Russia in the past eight years has made remarkable strides towards democracy and a more open market system. On the other, Russia's democracy remains weakly institutionalised, its democratic leadership is uncertain, and the economy is often run in a corrupt and patronage-based way. At the same time, nationalistic Slavophile forces are assertive and there exists at least the *possibility* of a communist return to power or, alternatively, a military coup. These system possibilities help make Russia a fascinating country to study and have lured a new generation of scholars to the area. But while these alternative systems models are still possibilities, a more likely outcome is a continuation of the status quo: an uncertain and sometimes wobbly democracy combined with a form of entrepreneurial capitalism. In this sense Russia is reminiscent of Greece, Portugal and Spain in the late 1970s: on the way to democracy and freer markets but with the changes not yet institutionalised or consolidated.

With regard to the Commonwealth of Independent States, some further distinctions need to be made. Because of geography, culture, level of development and proximity to Europe, it seems likely that the Baltic states, Georgia, the Ukraine, and (less certainly) Belorussia—to say nothing of Russia itself—will follow, in one form or another, the European polity (democracy) and economy (open markets, mixed economy) model. On the other hand, such areas as Chechnya, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tadzhikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan may come closer to the earlier East Asian model of a form of authoritarianism politically and a more statist model economically. In these areas of the former Soviet Union, the systems debate of the past would seem to be still lively.³²

The two other areas of the world where the question of system is, for the most part, still intensely debated and often fought over, are sub-Saharan Africa and the Islamic world. While some countries of sub-Saharan Africa are stabilising and demonstrating economic and political progress, other countries remain unstable, torn apart by conflict, revolution, civil war, or *coup d'état*.³³ While Marxism has in many countries been discredited, authoritarianism—often disguised by the rhetoric and appearance of democratic elections—is still prevalent. In addition, the idea of an indigenous, home-grown model of development—whatever that might mean and with all its problems of implementation³⁴—is still attractive in the context of sub-Saharan Africa. Although progress towards democracy and free markets seems often glacial, change is occurring in the form of greater decentralisation and privatisation that may lead to systems change and improvements in the future. The recent changes in Africa as well as the systems options still open have attracted both renewed policy attention and scholarly interest to the area.

The Islamic world has similarly been slow in moving toward either political or economic reform. Or, if it has moved towards democracy and elections (Algeria), it has sometimes had to cancel the democratic opening because of the threat or actuality of victory by Islamic fundamentalists. The result is that, of all the world's geographic or culture areas, the Islamic world has continued to lag depressingly behind in both the economic and political spheres.³⁵ Economically, many of the Islamic countries are still dominated by elites, oligarchies and royal families who monopolise most of the wealth for themselves; elsewhere a

bureaucratic–statist and often highly politicised or militarised model remains in place that has inhibited economic growth. Politically, much of the Islamic world is still dominated by authoritarianism and a top-down model of political control; only in a handful of countries (Jordan, Iran, Kuwait) have even the earliest and quite limited forms of political opening taken place. In addition, there are strong, ongoing efforts to fashion a distinctly Islamic model of development as an alternative to the Western one—one that, as in Africa, is beset by difficulties.³⁶ It is perhaps no coincidence that the Islamic world constitutes one of the main cases in Samuel P Huntington's recent writing on 'the clash of civilisations'.³⁷

Hence, in virtually all global areas (sub-Saharan Africa and the Islamic world are the major exceptions), we have seen in recent years a significant gravitation towards more open political and economic systems. The main alternatives of Marxism–Leninism and corporatism–authoritarianism have been uprooted and largely discredited; only democracy and free markets (usually combined with welfarism and some form of statism) now enjoy widespread legitimacy. It may be democracy or free markets with adjectives (controlled democracy, tutelary democracy, delegative democracy, limited democracy), but it is democracy nonetheless; even the adjectives seem to reinforce that it is only *democracy* that has legitimacy. The precise meanings of democracy and free markets may vary somewhat but increasingly, in grand systems terms, the politics of compromise and pragmatism has replaced the politics of ideological either/or. All of this suggests, with immense implications for comparative politics, that the great systems debates of the past are largely over. And the field is somewhat less exciting because of these transformations. After all, what is there to compare if so many goals, policies and institutions are so similar?

Future research terrains

It is the contention of this paper that, with the eclipse if not disappearance of the great systems debates of the past, comparative politics as a field has become both less innovative and less enticing. What attracted many persons to the field in the past was the sense that all options were open, all system possibilities debatable. But now democracy has overwhelmingly triumphed in the political realm and, to a somewhat lesser extent, neoliberalism (and its various modified forms) in the economic. In terms of the personal belief systems of scholars of comparative politics, this outcome may or may not be laudable; but there is no doubt that it has also served to diminish interest in the field. As more and more countries have become 'normal' countries—that is, conforming to these political and economic models as givens—they have also become more boring, in the sense of holding less interest for those who were or are attracted to the field precisely because of its attention to grand systems debate.

But to say that the large systems issues of the past have mainly been resolved at this stage in favour of democracy and open markets is not, of course, to argue that comparative politics as a field is dead. The changes outlined here away from the grand systems debates of previous decades force us to reorient the field but not to abandon it. In fact, there is a host of interesting issues for students in the field to examine; herewith a partial list.

First, let us recognise that the debate over grand political and economic systems is not yet entirely dead. In China, the Commonwealth of Independent States, much of the Islamic world, and sub-Saharan Africa, the systems debate is by no means over. Even in Russia, parts of Asia, and some countries of Eastern Europe and Latin America, the question of system may not yet be as resolved as implied here.

Second, even if the question of grand system has been resolved in many countries, it remains important to understand how and why that occurred. The literature on 'transitions to democracy' seems to me incomplete and unsatisfactory in various ways, and it leaves unanswered a variety of questions: is it social, political, economic, cultural or geostrategic (the winding down of the Cold War) factors—or some combination of them—that best explains these changes? How do the transitions from communist regimes differ from the transitions from authoritarian–corporate regimes? How do the transitions from well entrenched and institutionalised authoritarian regimes (Portugal, Spain, Mexico, Taiwan South Africa) differ from those in less-well-institutionalised military dictatorships? How much continuity as well as change is there in these transitions? How precisely do we account for the variations among countries en route to democracy, and so on?

Third, even if the triumph of democracy and open markets has largely ended the grand systems debate over these issues, students of comparative politics should continue to be fascinated by the distinct forms, theoretical bases, and institutional arrangements of democracy and neoliberal economics in distinct countries and regions. How does Asian or Latin American democracy differ from European or North American democracy? How does Asian neocorporatism differ from European neocorporatism? What are the processes involved in Latin America transitioning from an older state corporatism to a newer societal corporatism or even to (usually limited) pluralism? How do civil society, pluralism, and state–society relations differ in these distinct regions?³⁸ These issues would seem to present almost as much substance for comparative analysis as the great systems debates of the past.

Fourth, while 'on the ground' in terms of actual countries and continents there seems to have been considerable evolution towards a common agenda of democracy and freer markets, comparative politics theory has not yet quite reflected these changes. The different schools of thought include developmentalists, dependency theorists, theorists of corporatism, advocates of political culture explanations, structuralists, institutionalists, etc. Reflecting the real changes in the world, we now need our theoretical models to catch up, to focus on such topics as the relations between development, dependency and interdependency, or the relations between dependency and corporatism.³⁹ We need to build bridges between these several islands of theory to reflect the changing situation of the world and the interrelations and interdependence of the various countries in it.

A fifth area calling for further research lies in the politics of managing social and economic policy in this new era of rather constrained choices, and of the accompanying coalition formation and management. For example, Portugal, France and the UK all have socialist governments, but all three are practising the financial restraint that would seem to be associated with neoliberalism and a

more conservative political–economy agenda. At the same time, Germany and Spain have right-of-centre governments that have done little to privatise, roll back state size, or curtail social welfare. In other words, the post-cold war consensus on neoliberalism is forcing *all* governments to coalesce around a fairly agreed-upon policy of opening markets and downsizing the state but only modestly, and also reducing welfare but also only modestly. All governments of both Left and Right are following this essentially centrist agenda, pursuing the politics of ‘more or less’, and thus altering both their electoral strategies and their search for coalition allies.

Sixth, these changes also help explain the new emphasis on institutions (neo-institutionalism) in comparative politics. The implications of the argument presented here are that ideologies, party labels, and particularly extremist parties of Left and Right in this new era of relative consensus on political economy are becoming less important than in the past. Indeed, it may be that the electoral arena itself, when parties and policy are grouping around the centre and voter apathy is high, is also becoming less important, giving way to increasingly important emphasis on corporatist forms of management and administration. With parties, ideologies and perhaps even elections in decline, there is renewed emphasis on institutions of government, particularly the efficiency, proper organisation, cost-effectiveness and deliverability of services of these institutions. Hence, within comparative politics there is a new interest in and emphasis on institutions and institutionalisation that may, after a 40-year interregnum, lead us back to the quite sophisticated work on institutions of a Carl Friedrich, Herman Finer, or Karl Loewenstein in earlier decades, or Peter Merkl or Jorgen Rasmussen still today.⁴⁰ New approaches to studying institutions are, of course, needed but of the usefulness of the institutional focus itself there is little doubt.

However, if the state is changing and/or contracting, seventh, we will need to modify our views of state–society relations as well. The structure, main institutions, and practice of corporatism and neocorporatism will also need to be reviewed and our interpretations reformulated. Similarly, the politics of interest group activity, particularly the incorporation of interest groups into state decision making, will require new approaches and new ways of thinking.⁴¹ In addition, the relations between the central state, regional entities, and local government will need to be re-evaluated, particularly since decentralisation is now widely seen as a more effective way to deliver public services—back to institutional issues again.

Eighth, comparative politics is also likely to focus in the future on lower-level, more technical, narrower and more specialised topics. These will include studies of voting behaviour, public opinion, electoral strategies and coalition management. These are, of course, all interesting and worthwhile topics; it is not our purpose here to denigrate them. But these topics do not carry the same pizzazz, the excitement, or the portent of great changes to come as did the great systems topics of comparative politics in the past. And that is precisely our point in this essay.

Conclusion

Comparative politics is a quite different field from what it was 10, 20, 30 and

40 years ago. Then, big changes were in the air; the field changed to reflect the great systems debate then stirring, particularly in the Third World. All options seemed open: capitalism, socialism, mercantilism, democracy, authoritarianism, corporatism, totalitarianism, revolution, *coup d'état*, civil war, disintegration. These were exciting times, for the world and for comparative politics. New, innovative, and exciting models of change and development emerged to provide conceptual frameworks for comprehending the vast changes taking place.

Now much of this has changed. The Cold War is over as well as many of the superpower and proxy rivalries that went with it. In addition, we now know pretty much what works in development, as compared with the largely theoretical discussion of alternatives of 30 to 40 years ago. Furthermore, much of the Third World is more affluent, urban, literate, bourgeois, consumerist and middle class than before; it has little use for the impassioned ideological quarrels of the past. These changes in the social and economic realms have provided a more solid base for democracy than before; that and the end of the Cold War have given democracy greater legitimacy. In turn, a consensus has also emerged on the main directions and requirements of economic policy, although with ongoing differences over the details. The great 'systems debates' of past decades are dying down; the better administration and management of policy are now a main focus. All this is, or ought to be, having an impact on the field of comparative politics as well.

There is still much for students of comparative politics to do. The topics outlined here (and doubtless others as well) remain interesting and important. However, in the absence of the large, life-and-death systems issues of the past, comparative politics is not as exciting as before. As more and more countries have become 'normal countries'—and we should for the most part applaud this trend because it implies greater democracy, greater affluence, better and more streamlined government—they have also in a sense become more 'boring'. Apathy, depoliticisation, greater stability and continuity, and 'normalcy' in political systems and processes are not necessarily to be lamented, but we should recognise realistically that they also make the field significantly less interesting to our students.

Notes

¹ For the background, see Myron Weiner & Samuel P Huntington (eds), *Understanding Political Development*, Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1987; and Howard J Wiarda, *Introduction to Comparative Politics*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1993.

² For a conceptual perspective, see Merle Kling, 'Toward a theory of power and political instability in Latin America', *Western Political Quarterly*, 9, 1956, pp 21–35.

³ See, for example, Willard A Beling & George O Totten (eds), *Developing Nations: Quest for a Model*, New York: Van Nostrand, 1970.

⁴ Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988.

⁵ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: The Free Press, 1992.

⁶ Roy Macridis, *The Study of Comparative Government*, New York: Random House, 1955.

⁷ See Heinz Eulau, *The Behavioral Persuasion in Politics*, New York: Random House, 1963; and David Easton, *A Framework for Political Analysis*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1965.

⁸ Lucian Pye, 'The non-Western political process', *Journal of Politics*, 20, 1958, pp 468–486.

- ⁹ The pioneering work was Gabriel A Almond & James S Coleman (eds), *The Politics of the Developing Areas*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960.
- ¹⁰ Irene L Gendzier, *Managing Political Change: Social Scientists and the Third World*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985; and Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995.
- ¹¹ See the Introduction by the editor in Howard J Wiarda (ed), *New Directions in Comparative Politics*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992.
- ¹² See especially Fernando Henrique Cardoso & Enzo Faletto, *Dependency and Development in Latin America*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979. But see also Theodore Moran, *Multinational Corporations and the Politics of Dependence*, Cambridge, MA: Center for International Affairs, Harvard University, 1975.
- ¹³ Frederick B Pike & Thomas Stritch (eds), *The New Corporatism*, Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1974; and Howard J Wiarda, *Corporatism and Comparative Politics: The Other Great "Ism"*, New York: ME Sharpe, 1997.
- ¹⁴ These approaches are summarised and a critique provided in Wiarda, *New Directions in Comparative Politics*.
- ¹⁵ Guillermo O'Donnell, *Modernization and Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism*, Berkeley, CA: Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1973.
- ¹⁶ Alfred Stepan, *State and Society: Peru in Comparative Perspective*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979.
- ¹⁷ AJ Somjee, *Parallels and Actuals of Political Development*, London: Macmillan, 1986; and Howard J Wiarda, *Ethnocentrism in Foreign Policy: Can We Understand the Third World?*, Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1985.
- ¹⁸ Wiarda, 'Introduction' in *New Directions in Comparative Politics*.
- ¹⁹ The reference is to Samuel P Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.
- ²⁰ Howard J Wiarda *et al*, *The Relations between Democracy, Development, and Security: Implications for Policy*, New York: Global Economic Action Institute, 1988.
- ²¹ The analysis in the following section is based on a review of the literature as well as an extraordinarily busy 18 months of travel in 1996–98 by the author that took him to Europe on four occasions, and Russia, Eastern Europe, Asia and Latin America on three occasions, providing a first-hand and invaluable comparative perspective.
- ²² For data and background, see Howard J Wiarda, *Politics in Iberia: The Political Systems of Spain and Portugal*, New York: Harper Collins, 1993; and Wiarda, *Iberia and Latin America: New Democracies, New Policies, New Models*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996.
- ²³ Thomas W Robinson (ed), *Democracy and Development in East Asia*, Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1991.
- ²⁴ Howard J Wiarda, *Latin American Politics: A New World of Possibilities*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1994.
- ²⁵ This useful distinction has been made by Larry Diamond, 'Is the Third Wave over?', *Journal of Democracy*, 7, 1996, pp 7–19.
- ²⁶ The limits, qualifications, and problems of democratisation in Latin America are discussed in Howard J Wiarda, *Democracy and Its Discontents: Development, Interdependence, and US Policy in Latin America*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995.
- ²⁷ W W Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960.
- ²⁸ Carl Friedrich & Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, New York: Praeger, 1962.
- ²⁹ See on this Howard J Wiarda, 'Political culture and the attraction of Marxism–Leninism: national inferiority complexes as an explanatory factor', *World Affairs*, 151, 1989, pp 143–150.
- ³⁰ The analysis follows that of Dale K Herspring, 'Eastern Europe: successful transitions or descent into chaos?', in Howard J Wiarda (ed), *US Foreign and Strategic Policy in the Post Cold War Era*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing, 1996, pp 85–105.
- ³¹ See Steve D Boilard, *Russia at the Twenty-First Century*, Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace, 1998.
- ³² Carol Barner-Barry & Cynthia A Hody, *The Politics of Change: The Transformation of the Former Soviet Union*, New York: St Martins, 1995.
- ³³ Marina Ottaway, 'African democratization: an update', *CSIS Africa Notes*, 171, 1995.
- ³⁴ Lana Wylie, 'Sub-Saharan African: Western influence and indigenous realities', in Howard J Wiarda (ed), *Non-Western Theories of Development: Regional Norms versus Global Trends*, Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace, 1998.
- ³⁵ An excellent recent survey is the two-part series in the *Washington Post* by John Lancaster, Part 1 (3 August, 1997) focusing on the stalled economies and Part 2 (4 August, 1997) dealing with autocratic politics.
- ³⁶ Anwar H Syed, 'The Islamic world: Western influences and Islamic fundamentalism', in Wiarda, *Non-Western Theories of Development*.
- ³⁷ Samuel P Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997.

- ³⁹ John D Martz & David J Myers, 'Understanding Latin American politics: analytic models and intellectual traditions', *Polity*, 16, 1983, pp 214–241; Howard J Wiarda, 'Toward consensus in interpreting Latin American politics: developmentalism, dependency, and "The Latin American Tradition"', *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 1999.
- ⁴⁰ The references are to Carl Friedrich, *Constitutional Government and Democracy*, Boston, MA: Ginn, 1950; Herman Finer, *The Theory and Practice of Modern Government*, New York: Holt, 1949; Karl Loewenstein, *Political Power and the Governmental Process*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1957; Jorgen S Rasmussen & Joel C Moses, *Major European Governments*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1995; and Peter H Merkl, *Modern Comparative Politics*, Hinsdale, IL: Dryden Press, 1977.
- ⁴¹ See Wiarda, *Corporatism and Comparative Politics*.

Contemporary South Asia

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The region of South Asia is home to one quarter of the earth's population and some of its poorest states. Yet South Asia also contains the world's most populous democracy and includes the sixth and seventh declared nuclear weapons states. The region has spawned the great world religions of Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism and Sikhism.

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