The Death of the Great International Systems Debate?

RECONCEPTUALIZING COMPARATIVE POLITICS IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA

By HOWARD J. WIARDA

Most of the present leadership in the field of comparative politics 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; United States foreign policy, through such agencies as the Peace Corps and the Agency for International Development, 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 socialization, 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.

What made comparative politics and its conceptual theories so exciting during that 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, 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. 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.

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 Britain and Portugal following free market strategies, right-of-center governments in Germany and Spain expanding welfarism, virtually everyone else also seeking to combine free market policies with strong social programs) 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
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 remained fragile and uncertain.

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 decolonization 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” or “developing” areas 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 the 1960s 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 the time, incorporating both the effort to find and study development and the effort, through such agencies as the Agency for International Development, the Alliance for Progress, the Peace Corps, and others, to bring development to less-favored (“developing” or “emerging”) countries. It was obvious that not only were the developing nations very exciting to study but also that U.S. foreign policy was also increasingly interested in them and was seeking to find a noncommunist 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 U.S. foreign policy goals, presumably incorporating the same objectives.

Meanwhile, by the mid-to-late 1960s, many of the younger scholars 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 essentially grew that it was not only “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. The critiques of the developmentalist approach and logic grew louder; at the same time, the 1965 intervention in the Dominican Republic, the escalation in
Vietnam, the assassinations of Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, and then Richard Nixon and Watergate led many scholars to become thoroughly disillusioned with both the theory of development and the practice of U.S. 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 of these alternative approaches were strongly critical of developmentalism; both arose as conscious alternatives to it. Dependency theory, mainly Marxist in origin, criticized the dominant developmentalism for ignoring domestic class factors as well as international market and power factors in development, and was particularly critical of U.S. foreign policy and multinational corporations.12 It suggested, contrary to the earlier development theory, that the development of the already-industrialized nations and that of the developing ones would not go 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 criticized developmentalism for its Euro-American ethnocentrism and indicated that there were alternative organic, corporatist, often authoritarian ways to organize 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 critiqued the developmentalist approach out of the picture.

During the later 1970s and 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 privatization. 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 the 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 only 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 of 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 Tai-
wan) had begun to show impressive economic growth but the term Newly Industrialized Countries (NICs) had not been coined as yet, and no one quite expected the Asian NICs to blossom into global models.

But during the course of the 1980s and into the 1990s, many of these earlier conflicts were resolved. More than that, after some thirty years of experimentation and experience (as distinct from the earlier theory), it became quite possible to say what works in development and what does not. 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 institutionalized. 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 compara-

the possibility of civil war. These were very exciting, large-scale, systems issues; one suspects that 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, have 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 EEC and NATO. Per capita income has risen to approximately 70 percent of the European average and a stable middle class has emerged. Ideological passions have cooled, depoliticization has taken place, and consumerism has triumphed. Socialist governments carry out neoliberal economic policies while right-of-center 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 of the great systems issues have been resolved; politics revolves around more-or-less (a little less

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while still utilizing the political controls of a command regime. Sixth, India has now been a political democracy for fifty years; recently, and looking at the example of its Asian neighbors, 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 seems clear: greater pluralism and democracy coupled with a combined statist-bureaucratic and more open market system.23

A personal anecdote may help to illustrate the point. In 1987, Soviet Union specialist Jerry Hough and I 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 to some, statistics for comparison: in 1960, Latin America was 70 percent rural (and agrarian reform was a major issue); now it is 70 percent urban. In 1960, Latin America was 70 percent illiterate; now it is 70 percent literate. In 1960, Latin America’s per capita income was in the $300–$400 range; now it is quadruple that. Second only to Asia, Latin America is currently the most dynamic area economically in the world. In 1977 (at the height of the wave of bureaucratic-authoritarianism), fourteen of the twenty 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, nineteen of the twenty countries (all except Cuba) could be said to be democratic or en route to democracy.24

Polls show that 80, 85, or even 90 percent (depending on the country) of the population supports liberal, democratic, representative rule. Almost no one (2, 3, 5 percent, depending on the country) wants Marxism-Leninism or a return to authoritarianism and corporatism. While the legitimacy of democracy is 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, and so forth—is often very low, in the range of 10, 15, or 20 percent.

While Latin America is presently strongly democratic, its democracy is not so firmly established or institutionalized as that of southern Europe.

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 of the options seemed possible. But now with democracy triumphant, most guerrilla movements sung 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, like southern Europe and Asia, is now more prosperous, more middle class, less ideological, more consumerist, and 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 institutionalized as that of southern Europe. The precise meaning of democracy (patronage in Brazil, wellfarism 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 institution-alized 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.

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, and so forth that have the potential to produce more open-ended politics. In addition, 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. 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 the four areas. To use a now almost forgotten phrase from W. W. Rostow, 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, and now we know why: they were products of the same time period and of many of the same wrenching, divisive, potentially moribund social and political forces. But now, after a long interregnum (forty years of authoritarian corporatism in Spain and Portugal, seventy years of Marxism-Leninism in the Soviet Union), those conditions have dramatically changed and so have the two kinds of countries discussed.

Let us make some preliminary distinctions, which are well worth further comparative politics research. First, because of geography, proximity, history, culture, and sociology—to say nothing of the fact their 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 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.

Russia and some members of the Commonwealth of Independent States constitute a more difficult case. On one side, Russia in the past seven years has made remarkable strides toward democracy and a more open market system. On the other, Russia’s democracy remains weakly institutionalized, 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 institutionalized 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 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, Tajikistan, 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 stabilizing 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, homegrown model of development—whatever that might mean and with all its problems of implementation—is still attractive in the context of sub-Saharan Africa. Although progress toward democracy and free markets seems often glacial, change is occurring in the form of greater decentralization and privatization 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 toward 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 areas.34 Economically, many of the Islamic countries are still dominated by elites, oligarchies, and royal families who monopolize most of the wealth for themselves; or else a bureaucratic-statist and often highly politicized or militarized model remains in place that has inhibited economic growth. Politically, much of the Islamic world remains dominated by authoritarianism and a top-down model of political control; in only 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.35 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 civilizations.”36

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 toward 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 my contention 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 favor 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; the following is a partial list.

First, let us recognize 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 geostategic (the winding down of the cold war) factors—or some combination of them—that best explain 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 institutionalized authoritarian regimes (Portugal, Spain, Mexico, Taiwan, South Africa) differ from those in less-well-institutionalized 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? 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 toward a common agenda of democracy and freer markets, comparative politics theory has not quite yet reflected these changes. The different schools of thought include developmentalists, dependency theorists, theorists of corporatism, advocates of political culture explanations, structuralists, institutionalists, and so forth. 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. 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 Great Britain all have socialist governments, but all three are practicing 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-center governments that have done little to privatize,
roll back state size, or curtail social welfare. In 
other words, the post–cold war consensus on 
neoliberalism is forcing all governments to co-
alesce around a mostly agreed-upon policy of 
opening markets and downsizing the state, but 
only modestly, and 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.

These changes, sixth, also help explain the 
new emphasis on institutions (neo-institutional-
ism) in comparative politics. The implications 
of the argument presented here are that ideolo-
gies, party labels, and particularly extremist 
parties of Left and Right in this new era of 
relative consensus on political economy are be-
coming less important than in the past. Indeed, 
it may be that the electoral arena itself, when 
parties and policy are grouping around the cen-
ter and voter apathy is high, is also becoming 
less important, giving way to increasingly im-
portant emphasis on management and adminis-
tration. With parties, ideologies, and perhaps 
even elections in decline, there is renewed em-
phasis on institutions of government, particu-
larly the efficiency, proper organization, cost-
effectiveness, and deliverability of services of 
these institutions. Hence, within comparative 
politics there is a new interest in and emphasis 
on institutions and institutionalization that may, 
after a forty-year interregnum, lead us back to 
the quite sophisticated work on institutions of 
a Carl Friedrich. Herman Finer, or Karl Loewen-
stein in earlier decades, or Peter Merkl or Jor-
gen Rasmussen still today. 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 con-
tacting, seventh, then we will need to modify 
our views of state-society relations as well. The 
structure, main institutions, and practice of cor-
poratism and neocorporatism will also need to 
be reviewed and our interpretations reformulat-
ed. Similarly, the politics of interest group ac-
tivity, particularly the incorporation of interest 
groups into state decisionmaking, will require 
new approaches and new ways of thinking. In 
addition, the relations between the central state, 
regional entities, and local government will 
need to be reevaluated, particularly since de-
centralization is now widely seen as a more ef-
fective way to deliver public services—back to 
institutional issues again.

Comparative politics, eighth, is also likely to 
focus in the future on lower-level, more tech-
ical, narrower, and more specialized topics. 
These will include studies of voting behavior, 
public opinion, electoral strategies, and coalition 
management. These are, of course, all inter-
esting and worthwhile topics; it is not our 
purpose here to denigrate them. But these top-
ics do not carry the same pizzazz, the excite-
ment, or the portent of great changes to come as 
did the great systems topics of comparative pol-

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otics in the past. And that is precisely my point 
in this essay.

CONCLUSION

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than it was ten, twenty, thirty, and forty 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 op-
tions seemed open: capitalism, socialism, mer-
cantilism, democracy, authoritarianism, corpo-
ratism, totalitarianism, revolution, coup d'état, 
civil war, disintegration. These were exciting 
times, for the world and for comparative pol-
tics. 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 develop-
ment, as compared with the largely theoretical 
discussion of alternatives of thirty or forty 
years ago. Furthermore, much of the Third 
World is more affluent, urban, literate, bour-
geois, consumerist, and middle class than be-
fore; and has little use for the impassioned ide-
ological 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 con-
sensus has 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 of 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, depoliticization, greater stability and continuity, and "normalcy" in political systems and processes are not necessarily to be lamented, but we should recognize realistically that they also make the field significantly less interesting to our students.

NOTES

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


13. Frederick B. Pike and 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: M. E. Sharpe, 1997).

14. These approaches are summarized and critiqued in Wiarda, New Directions in Comparative Politics.


18. "Introduction" in New Directions in Comparative Politics.


21. The analysis in the following section is based on a review of the literature as well as my extraordinary busy travel year in 1996-97 that took me to Europe on three occasions, Russia, Asia, and Latin America on three occasions, providing a first-hand and invaluable comparative perspective.


25. This useful distinction has been made by Larry Diamond, "Is the Third Wave Over?" Journal of Democracy 7 (July 1996): 7-19.

26. The limits, qualifications, and problems of
democratization in Latin America are discussed in Howard J. Wiarda,\textit{ Democracy and Its Discontents: Development, Interdependence, and U.S. Policy in Latin America} (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995).


38. I attempted some early theoretical formulations of these themes in \textit{Democracy and Its Discontents} and \textit{Iberia and Latin America}; also American Foreign Policy toward Latin America in the 80s and 90s: Issues and Controversies from Reagan to Bush} (New York: New York University Press, 1992), Part III.


41. See Wiarda, \textit{Corporatism and Comparative Politics}.