

Ph.D.s without Borders? Drawing Subdisciplinary Boundaries in Political Science¹

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The late Harry Eckstein was the founding chair of the Department of Political Science at the University of California at Irvine (UCI) fifteen years ago.² Harry had a unique vision for how to do political science in a way that didn't divide us up into the usual separate tables by things like what country(ies) we happened to mostly study. The main component of that vision was adapted from the distinction in economics between micro-level and macro-level phenomena. The required graduate core curriculum in my department to this day consists of three courses: one in micro-politics (the comparative study of individual-level political behavior, and of the organization and behavior of interest groups and political parties), one in macro-politics (the comparative study of government organization and public policy outputs), and one in political theory (both modern social theory and the classics).³

One norm that Harry instilled was that no graduate course should ever be titled with the name of a country. In particular, in Harry's view, the notion of American politics as a distinctive subfield was the last vestige of an atheoretical area studies approach and was to be strongly resisted.⁴ Rather, there should be courses like

"Political Participation," "Political Parties," "Interest Groups," "Constitutional Design," "Electoral Systems," "Legislatures," "Law and Courts," "Representation and Redistricting," "Race and Ethnicity," "International Relations," etc. In this spirit, I tell my own students that they should pick loci of politics at different levels (at least one a country; at least one a smaller unit, e.g., Ashtabula, Ohio, and at least one a person who is not a political scientist or other academic) about which they will cultivate deep personal knowledge from which they can draw research ideas, and against which they can test the broader generalizations about politics to which they are exposed.⁵ Of course, individual faculty normally teach such courses primarily by drawing on data from the countries which they know the best, but nonetheless, every such course is expected to have at least some comparative content.⁶

Not long after Harry's arrival, David Easton also joined the UCI faculty, and he still teaches the required graduate course in political theory. In our University of Chicago days - I was an RA for Dave - I learned from him that, essentially, all political science is comparative politics. My long-time colleague, A. Wuffle, has formalized this maxim in terms of the "TNT principle": analyses should be comparative across Time, and/or across Nations and/or other entities,⁷ and/or across Types of institutions or actors (quoted in Grofman, 1999).⁸

In this context, it seems to me to make sense to view IR as a subset of comparative politics. If IR is only the study of relations between states, then what is that if not a topic for comparative analysis - albeit a somewhat narrowly delimited one? Moreover, if IR is what all kinds of actors and entities do with and to each other in ways that cross state

boundaries, then this, too, is obviously a topic for comparative analysis - albeit a much bigger topic than when we confine ourselves just to states as *the* sole (or key) agents. The distinguished sociologist, Robin Williams (2003: 37), asserts that the use of the phrase "international relations" within political science was misleading, since the field's primary focus, "at least until the 1990s, was interstate relations." And he goes on to say that "if cultural homogeneity and common ancestry are the marks of a pure nation-state, few cases exist today."

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Moreover, if IR deals only with relations among states, what exactly are we to make of the constantly evolving European Union, or devolution within the U.K.? Are these topics for comparativists or for IR specialists? Indeed, even if we take the study of war as the topic that has preeminently been a focus of IR theorizing, then what are we to make of the fact that most "wars" in the past two decades are internal to states,⁹ or that the U.S. is allegedly fighting a "war" with Al-Qaeda? On the other hand, if we broaden the net of what we mean by IR, are only those in IR allowed to study immigration and refugee flows, or resistance to the spread of McDonald's franchises, or the spread of norms of human rights, or can comparativists be allowed to join the fun? To ask these questions, in my view, is to realize how silly they are.

I start from the premise that the standard "field" divisions within political science are not very helpful from the standpoint of creating a climate in which we will be doing the best possi-

ble research.¹⁰ I think that, if you are going to slice up political science, it often makes more sense to do so by topic than by unit of analysis, rather than having states and the international sphere be somehow *sui generis*. I recognize the existence of theories that ascribe uniqueness to international politics due to the absence of an overarching (legitimate) authority, but anarchic phenomena are not found only in the international arena, on the one hand, and, on the other, it is disputable that anarchy is a good portrait of the present international system.

Alternatively, the knowledge and analytic tools you need to make sense of the political economy of cities, or of political economy at the national level, is very close to what you need to make sense of international political economy. Similarly, the same kinds of technical skills commonly used to make sense of voting processes in national parliaments also applies to voting processes in city councils or state or provincial legislatures, and carries over to voting patterns in the UN. And making sense of the structure of (domestic) interest groups, and attempting to evaluate their effects on public policy decisions, is conceptually very similar to making sense of the structure of NGOs and INGOs and attempting to evaluate their effects on international policies. Treating similar topics in similar ways would, I think, help the training of graduate students.

As pointed out earlier, I am not trying to argue for contentless training; there are certainly key features of the international environment and its historical evolution that anyone who is interested in international relations *must* know and understand. But there also is training in statistical techniques, in research design and the philosophy of social science explanation, and in game theory and formal modeling

skills, that cuts across lots of substantive domains. In this respect, we also have to be careful to keep in mind the distinction between teaching particular methods as tools and teaching particular methods as answers.¹¹

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UCI has grappled with the issues of where IR fits within political science, as have many universities. While I make no claim that we have definitively resolved them, we have made some progress, and, at minimum, we have not experienced the kinds of schisms that give rise to thoughts about political science and IR going their separate ways. I would first note that, long before it was fashionable, colleagues of mine such as Etel Solingen and Wayne Sandholtz were rejecting hard and fast demarcations between IR and comparative, and demonstrating in their own work just how arbitrary the boundaries were, while others of my colleagues, like Patrick Morgan, were writing about the domestic roots of foreign policy. And this bridging effort has continued in the hiring of new "IR" and "comparative" faculty at UCI, like Bob Uriu (industrial policy, foreign policy), Alison Brysk (human rights), Cecilia Lynch (domestic roots of foreign policy, religion and politics), and Kamal Sadiq (immigration and citizenship), whose work also undermines the notion of a fence separating the topics of concern to students of IR and those of concern to students of comparative.

Second, while we do have a module of six courses in IR that graduate students with IR interests are encouraged to take, such IR courses only constitute one-third of the required graduate course load, and students with IR interests are strongly encouraged to take courses in other areas — not just in mainstream comparative topics but in areas like political psychology, methodology, etc. Also, UCI has a relatively unusual way of handling breadth requirements for graduate training. Rather than the usual multi-hour preliminary exams in some or all of the discipline's major fields, we require students to complete three papers of potentially publishable quality in at least two different subfields of the discipline (broadly conceived), with at least one of these papers a synthetic literature review. This has helped insure that students with IR interests look to political science more broadly.

Third, the School of Social Sciences at UCI has a long tradition of fostering interdisciplinary work, going back to its first Dean, James March — someone who, in his own work, bridged the disciplines of political science and sociology. At the institutional level, the present Dean of the School of Social Sciences, a cognitive scientist; her predecessor, William Schonfeld; and the Associate Dean, Caesar Sereseres, have pressed for the creation of an interdisciplinary Research Focus in International Studies that not only would include both "comparative" and "IR" faculty in political science, but also numerous faculty in other cognate disciplines.¹² In seeking to foster the growth of such a focus, for the past several years the dean's office has allocated lines for multidisciplinary faculty searches, with an initial vetting of candidates by a committee with members from several departments. The proposed final organization of that Research Focus is not set, but one idea is to pull

together the considerable concentrations of faculty strength in UCI's School of Social Sciences such as those in conflict and security studies and human rights (linked to the Institute of Global Peace and Conflict Studies), in immigration studies (linked to the Center for Research in Immigration and Public Policy), in democratization (linked to the Center for the Study of Democracy), and in cross-cultural studies, to create a multi-track program.

I think there are compelling reasons to integrate IR and comparative. I view this integration in the context of a belief that the real fault lines in political science are not based on differences among scholars in the topics under investigation. As I have written elsewhere (Grofman 1997), the real divisions within political science are not those across subfields but in terms of more fundamental differences in orientation, e.g. between those who see political science as a branch of moral philosophy, and those who see it as a search for empirical understanding/explanation; between those who wish to immerse themselves in insider's knowledge of a delimited domain and detailed description and those whose first reaction is to look for comparative analysis to shed explanatory light on particular cases; between those whose first recourse to any question posed is to go about amassing data and those whose first recourse is thinking the question through from first principles; between those who search for certain answers to relatively small and manageable questions and those who would be willing to settle for not-so-certain answers as long as the questions were big ones; between those who think that both the important questions and the important answers have already been written down by great minds of the past, and those who think that the process of knowledge gathering is

ongoing and cumulative; between those who think that political science is the study of governmental institutions and those who think that political science is the study of power and outcomes, especially in terms of "who gets what, when, and how"; and between those who wish to understand the world and those who wish to change it.

My views are that empirical political science is about making sense of the world of political behavior, interactions, and institutions; that methods are best dictated by questions; and that arguments about what conceptual approaches, explanatory variables, etc., are best cannot ever be answered in the abstract, but only with reference to comparisons of competing answers to concrete puzzles. In my own work (2001) I suggest that good social science can be a lot like uncovering clues to solve a crime,¹³ but that, in classifying types of mysteries to solve, it is helpful to distinguish between whodunits, howdunits, and whydunits. This threefold distinction allows us to recognize that there are different important questions to ask without privileging any one approach to truth.

I would also insist that one should not confuse the simple question of what level of measurement you have (qualitative versus quantitative) in a particular dependent or independent variable with the much deeper epistemological question of what we mean by a satisfactory explanation. The need to go beyond merely establishing empirical findings about correlations or time lines so as to specify a plausible mechanism capable of producing the observed linkages/correlations is an issue for every scholar, regardless of whether they are doing quantitative or qualitative work. Relatedly, claims to explanatory superiority of the form "My explanation is better than yours because my explanation had truly ele-

gant and incomprehensible (at least to you) mathematical theorems in it about Nash-Zelten perfect game-theoretic equilibria/made use of the concept of social agency/rests on my own deep, personal and nontransferable understanding of the otherwise inscrutable characteristics of Javanese politics/is based on time-series analyses with multi-skedaddled error structure corrected for page proofs," don't really get us very far.

When I judge scholarly work, my litmus tests are always "Have I learned something new and interesting? Do I have reason to believe what has been claimed is correct? And, have I been given insights that I can apply in other domains? From this perspective, worrying about what field of the discipline something fits in is much ado about nothing.

Notes

¹ I am indebted to helpful conversations about this paper with A. Wuffle, now an Associate Professor at UCI.

² Before that, political scientists operated more informally within a non-departmentalized School of Social Sciences, and trained a half-dozen or so political scientists before departmentalization, including quite distinguished ones such as Michael Cohen, Lynn Mather, and Matthew Shugart. Nevertheless, it has been only since departmentalization that UCI has had a formalized graduate curriculum.

³ However, the undergraduate political science curriculum at UCI remains much more traditionally organized.

⁴ Let me be clear: this was never taken to demean the importance of developing country-specific or area-specific knowledge, language skills, etc. Harry himself had a deep understanding of politics and history in sev-

eral countries, including his native Germany, Britain and Norway, and a grounding in philosophy, literature, and classic works in political science and sociology.

⁵ For example, in the past, in studying voting behavior in the U.S., I often practiced the *Fannie Grofman test*, i.e., I asked myself whether I thought that the theory I was being exposed to could satisfactorily explain the behavior of my mother.

⁶ I consider myself a comparativist whose primary realm of expertise is the U.S., although I have also written about electoral politics in other countries and about general topics like coalition formation and electoral engineering from a broadly comparative perspective. (Of course, on days of the week that include a y, I have also been known to work on topics in behavioral social choice, or constitutional jurisprudence, or research methodology, or political cartooning and satire.) But, as a founding member of the California Drive-in Church of the Incurably Eclectic, and as the leading (and almost only) member of the "reasonable choice modeling" school of political theory (see Wuffle, 1999 for an elucidation of the credo of this sect), such diversity is perhaps *de rigueur*.

⁷ Here I follow the common political science convention of using "nation" and "state" and "country" interchangeably, but recognize the distinction that can usefully be drawn between the two concepts (see e.g., Williams, 2003: 36-37).

⁸ My colleague Mark Petracca begins his introductory undergraduate class in political theory by proclaiming that, from the beginning (Plato and Aristotle), the study of politics was intrinsically comparative and macro-analytical in nature. As he further pointed out to me, (personal commu-

nication, November, 2004), "it is difficult to think of a 'great' political theorist through the end of the 19th century who was not a comparativist and, of course, so many of America's founding fathers were likewise students of comparative governance."

⁹ Williamson (2003: 80) notes, for example, that in 1993 "every one of the thirty-four major armed conflicts then underway were within, not between states."

¹⁰ I have already alluded to the unhelpfulness of making American politics a field within the discipline, although I will confess that the pressures of the marketplace force UCI to label some its graduate students as Americanists in order to find a fit between their interests and the positions that are being advertised.

¹¹ For example, I've previously written that "game theory is to political science as calculus is to physics," (1997), but that doesn't make every application of calculus a contribution to physics, or every application of game theory a contribution to political science.

¹² If the lines between IR and comparative are hard to demarcate, and somewhat meaningless, then so, too, often are the lines between what political scientists study and what sociologists study (see e.g., Williams 2003, a superb work on ethnic conflict by a sociologist to which political science should definitely lay claim), or between what political scientists who do political economy study and what is done by economists working in the same area.

¹³ My colleague Wuffle has advocated similar views in terms of the so-called *First Law of Epistemioincology*, namely, that truth is like a truffle: "First you have to figure out where to dig; then you have to dig around a lot,

and, then, you have to get rid of all the dirt that gets in the way."