Review Essay

THEORY-DRIVEN COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS:
DEAD ON THE GURNEY OR LOST IN THE SHUFFLE?

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The last decade saw a heated debate erupt within the comparative political science subfield between those who questioned the scientific and theoretic merit of traditional research conventions, and those who questioned the validity of these critiques and the prescriptions they advanced. At its core, the debate centered on the relative value of competing research approaches, specifically, rational choice theory or its variants (public choice, social choice, the new political economy, etc.) vs. traditional strategies like case studies, process tracing, structuralism, or culture. In lieu of the latter, the critics’ preferred approach was to seek universal explanations of political behavior by devising *a priori* assumptions of actors’ motives, and then predicting outcomes based on logically consistent, carefully constructed mathematical models.

The timing of the debate was exquisite, coinciding as it did with dramatic political and economic changes around the world—the collapse of communism in Eastern

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Europe and disintegration of the Soviet Union, the end of Cold War bipolarity, the transition to democracy in many developing nations, and the concomitant shift toward market development models. Hence, just as world events offered a rich menu of new research options, scholars increasingly reassessed their methods and sought to refine their analytic tools. Nevertheless, the debate proved remarkably divisive.

For their part, critics lamented the traditionalists’ perceived lack of analytic rigor, aversion to mathematical models, and penchant for deep description. Such “research” was hardly scientific since in stressing descriptive narrative, it posited neither cause and effect relationships nor testable hypotheses conducive to generalizable knowledge. Perhaps the most damning criticism was offered by Robert Bates (1996, 1), who as president of the Comparative Politics section of the American Political Science Association in 1996, wrote that “within the academy, the consensus has formed that area studies has failed to generate scientific knowledge.” Essentially reducing the entire comparative subfield to “area studies,” Bates charged that area specialists had defected “from the social sciences into the camp of the humanists,” and lacked a strong “commitment to theory”; he encouraged comparatists to use “rigorous methods for evaluating arguments,” and forego stressing merely the “distinctive and unique” in favor of studying the “broader regularities” of political dynamics (Bates 1996: 1, 2).

Traditionalists, of course, turned the tables on their accusers. They noted that rational choice studies often posited abstract theory that failed to explain real world politics (Green and Shapiro 1994); they disputed claims that rational choice scholarship had generated “some major and influential work on a range of subjects” in the comparative subfield (Levi 1997: 9); and they argued that the failure to produce general theories on a variety of comparative political issues (revolutions, democratization, the rise of authoritarian regimes, etc.), undercut the notion that rational choice provided unique, universal explanations of political behavior (Johnson 1997: 3; Skocpol 1995: 42). Finally, they held that scholars outside the rational choice school, not its practitioners, had “produced some of the most notable classics of contemporary political science,” and these works were decidedly theory-based because they rested on “apparent relations or underlying principles of observed phenomena that have to some extent been verified” (Johnson 1997: 4).

Although debates within political science are nothing new, scholars with much longer professional memories than mine cannot recall a more controversial or polarizing one. Unfortunately, such polarization has tended to inhibit useful intellectual exchange between both camps and invoked a distorted caricature of the comparative subfield itself (i.e., “hard core” rational choicers struggling against “hard core” atheoretical area specialists). And, in turn, this lack of a dialogue has minimized general appreciation for scholarship that cannot be classified at either extreme—studies that present theoretically-informed assessments of single countries, and/or provide systematic, cross-national, or cross-regional comparisons that are theoretically driven, though not formally modeled or quantitatively derived.

It is this last point I seek to emphasize in this essay. I begin by stressing that a
basic goal of social science is to develop knowledge relevant to real world phenomena, pursuant to which theory is essential. Theories help organize our thinking, make the collection of facts informative, elucidate complex interactions, and explain outcomes. To be useful, theory requires precision, logical consistency, empirical validity, and generalizability. Precision requires crafting clearly defined variables and identifying an argument's underlying assumptions; these properties aid analysis by limiting the range of outcomes that might correlate with theoretical predictions. Logical consistency entails relating evidence to observed outcomes in ways conducive to drawing sound causal inferences from such relationships; this property is crucial to constructing theories that can accurately explain outcomes based on prior assumptions, but preclude plausible, competing explanations of those outcomes. Empirical validity ensures credibility; the stronger the evidence supporting a study's causal claims, the higher the confidence in its findings. Generalizability, meanwhile, facilitates broader comparative analysis, helps advance theory building, and provides practical knowledge of real world political phenomena.

Any contention that a single approach holds a monopoly on these properties is suspect. Putnam (1993), for example, constructs a precise, logically consistent theory to explain Italian democracy without the aid of formal rational choice theory, and Yashar (1997) lays out a clear, consistent, and non-rational choice analytic framework to explain the rise of democracy in Costa Rica and the continued reign of authoritarianism in Guatemala; by contrast, Cohen (1994) employs a precise, logically consistent game theory framework to explain the breakdown of democracy in Brazil and Chile. Each work provides compelling supporting evidence, each boasts a framework applicable to political dynamics beyond its immediate context, and each passes the threshold of social science research outlined earlier.

If, in terms of "true" social science, the choice between traditional and rational choice methodologies is a false dichotomy, what has the discipline gained in exchange for all the energy expended in the debate? My argument here is straightforward: (1) though acrimonious, the debate has been good for the discipline because it has rightly called attention to deficiencies even some traditionalists concede; nonetheless (2) if done well, traditional comparative analyses can be highly rigorous; and (3) even "area studies" need not, by default, preclude theoretical merit or contributions to generalizable knowledge.

To advance this argument this essay critically reviews three non-rational choice studies from the comparative subfield whose principal focus is Mexico, employing the earlier criteria (precision, logical consistency, empirical validity, and generalizability). The books selected are among the most prominent single-author works recently published on Mexico's evolving political economy. Because Mexico exemplifies several new research themes occasioned by unfolding world events—struggles with debt and economic crisis, political liberalization, governance problems, the embrace of market policy reforms—this focus is especially useful. Understanding how some traditionalist scholars have treated the Mexican experience helps illustrate both the merits and limits of the critique of comparative politics.
Theory-Driven Cross-Regional Analysis

In *Challenging the State: Crisis and Innovation in Latin America and Africa* (1996), Merilee Grindle examines how the economic and political crises of the 1980s and 1990s affected the capacity of states on both continents to foster economic development and provide effective governance. At first blush, her fundamental proposition that crises degrade states’ governing, administrative, and development-promoting capacity, appears facile. But this simplicity is deceptive. Besides eroding old arrangements, she further posits that crises open windows of opportunity to redefine state/societal/economic relations, and that outcomes here hinge on power holders’ leadership style, political skills, and ability to forge new coalitions supporting their vision of future economic and political development (11). How national leaders respond to such crisis-constructed opportunities can shape state-society relations for decades to come.

This book exemplifies the type of comparative research that is rigorous and theoretically-driven, but not formally modeled or quantitatively derived. It draws upon a wide range of literature—from “area studies” of Mexico and Kenya, to theoretical discourses advanced in development studies and political economy—and displays an acute awareness of ongoing debates in the comparative politics and public policy literature. The volume’s initial overview of crises in eight Latin American and African countries provides the context for a deeper, much closer comparative assessment of Mexico and Kenya.

Grindle begins her task by laying out an analytic framework of cause and effect relations between crises and state capacity, a concept she disaggregates along four dimensions: (1) institutional capacity to develop effective rules for economic and political interactions, (2) political capacity to manage state-civic society relations, and maintain effective, legitimate channels for representation and conflict resolution, (3) administrative capacity to fulfill functions essential to economic development (social welfare, education, health care, transportation) and (4) technical capacity to set and manage sound macroeconomic policies. Crises, she believes, will adversely affect the first three dimensions, but favorably affect the fourth.

*Challenging the State* is methodical in its approach and careful in its analysis. Using a range of indicators, Grindle first tests (and confirms) her initial hypotheses regarding the effects that crises had on state capacity, then explains the variations in how Mexico and Kenya responded to the “new political space” the crises had opened. The outcomes are striking. In Mexico, where President Carlos Salinas assembled a top-notch technocratic team, he managed to push—and sustain—an aggressive “neoliberal” market reform project by recapturing much of the state’s diminished political capacity, and forging a pro-reform coalition composed of big business/finance, technical and professional elites, exporters, and some mass segments. In Kenya, where President Daniel Arap Moi chose not to empower technocrats with much decision-making authority, market reforms made little sustained headway, while the state’s technical, political, and administrative capacity dwindled. To retain power, the president relied increasingly on tactics like cronyism, ethnic
politics, and repression. Thus, leadership style, Grindle argues, largely explains why Kenya’s technical capacity did not respond to crisis conditions as expected; in the end, “the state’s technical capacity waxed and waned in response to presidential interest and objectives” (126).

True cross-regional research by single authors (as opposed to edited volumes) is uncommon in the comparative and political economy literature, and Grindle’s examination of the political significance of crisis and public policy on two continents is a welcome contribution to the field. She skillfully employs a wealth of data on political participation and instability, and policy issues like education, health care, and transport infrastructure to advance her arguments. She also appears to have gained unusual access to upper echelon policy makers in both countries, and is at her best when taking readers behind the scenes to expose the inner workings of the policymaking process.

Careful reflection on the volume’s overall analytic framework, however, reveals ways this very good book could have been even better. As the analysis unfolds, for example, neither the dependent nor independent variables retain complete cohesion. In terms of the dependent variable, the book does not sustain its initial distinction between “states” and “regimes,” although early on the demarcation is clear:

I understand the state to be a set of ongoing institutions for social control and authoritative decision making and implementation. The state is conceptually distinct from both economy and society...States assume empirical reality through regimes that attempt to establish political order, set terms for political interaction, allocate leadership positions and power resources, and determine the representation of interests within decision-making contexts. (Grindle 1996, 3-4)

When the analysis centers on political capacity, however, the delicate balance struck between these two concepts is lost; both states and regimes are used interchangeably (179).

Something analogous also transpires with the independent variable, crisis. In the first three chapters Grindle portrays a balanced duality of economic and political crisis whose corrosive effects weakened state capacity throughout Latin America and Africa, and in Mexico and Kenya specifically. Later, however, she concedes the duality concept ill-fits the reality of her principal case studies: “In Mexico, the crisis of the economy was much deeper and initially more pressing than the political crisis. In Kenya, on the other hand, the political crisis was preeminent, at least until 1993” (126).

Undoubtedly, there was considerable synergy between economic and political processes, as Grindle posits in her initial hypotheses regarding crises and state capacity. In terms of institutional capacity, for example, she hypothesizes “that economic crisis combined with increased political challenges...weakened the legitimacy and coercive capacity of state institutions [and the] systems for regulating property rights, enforcing contracts, controlling official corruption, setting boundaries on the use of coercion, and other basic institutional functions” (9). Administrative capacity, she posits, “declined due to austerity budgets, declining civil service performance, and heightened political conflict”; and as for political capacity, “the
confluence of economic and political crisis diminished the capacity of state leaders to command adherence to traditional norms of civic behavior or to purchase allegiance through beneficial policies or clientelistic distribution of public resources” (10).

But simply recognizing the synergy between economic and political crises is not equivalent to measuring the precise causal weight accorded each factor. As a consequence, some findings remain open to question. For example, in explaining why Kenya retained dysfunctional economic policies rather than embrace technocratic reforms like Mexico, Grindle suggests this outcome demonstrates “how the persistence or change of rules relating the state to the market is profoundly affected by the goals of leaders ...” (107). Some might argue, however, the “real” explanation lies more in the nature of the crisis confronting these governments, than with distinct presidential leadership styles. If instead of a political crisis, Kenya had faced an economic one on the order of Mexico’s, the result could well have been different, since presumably Moi would then have had greater incentives to empower technocrats, who in turn would have pursued reform. Indeed, Grindle herself hints at this alternative: “It may well be that when crisis is defined primarily by economic conditions, technocrats are more likely to be empowered ...” (126).

Such ambiguity underscores the challenge of executing a project as ambitious as that which Grindle undertakes, and the importance that precision and logical consistency hold in such endeavors. Still, such wrinkles do not diminish the book’s overall value. Indeed, it boasts many virtues. To begin, it provides a useful corrective to prior studies which deemed states virtually incapable of promoting rational, effective economic development (Bhagwati 1978; Krueger 1974; Colander 1984; Lal 1984; Srinivasan 1985). Here, Grindle reminds us that even policies which “shrink” the state apparatus (i.e., privatization and deregulation) still require “capable” states, and that political leaders can play critical roles in creating them. Moreover, by framing issues in terms of how states respond to crises, Grindle suggests an alternative to prior studies that explained cross-country policy outcomes via a society-centric, coalitional approach (Gourevitch 1986; Frieden 1985).

Finally, Challenging the State speaks beyond the context of Mexico and Kenya and presents generalizable findings of broader theoretical significance. Much of the scholarship on issues of state capacity, Grindle rightly contends, has centered on the normative, that is, on “what states ought to do to manage dynamic and sustained economic development and what political characteristics ought to define good government” (8). By contrast, her interest in state capacity is decidedly theoretical. By identifying broader regularities among countries struggling to promote economic development and maintain governability, her work sheds light on “how more capable states emerge or change over time” (8), and global crises (as in the 1930s and 1980s) provide a context well-suited to this endeavor. “Just as the crises of earlier periods are important in explaining the economic and political relationships that emerged and characterized the next several decades, so responses to this new era of crisis are the basis on which state-economy and state-society relations in many countries will be constructed for the next several decades” (3). Given the host of countries beset by crises over the last two decades and the uncertain political future.
they face, Grindle’s book suggests a framework scholars can build upon, refine, and adapt profitably to contexts far beyond those she explores.

**Theory-Driven Area Studies**

In contrast to Grindle’s cross-regional comparative study, Miguel Angel Centeno’s *Democracy Within Reason: Technocratic Revolution in Mexico* (1994) offers a close, systematic assessment of Mexican politics during the era of market reforms under Carlos Salinas de Gortari. It is the type of “area study” that carries some of the markings of classic works from that tradition—a theory-driven project based on real world politics that seeks to elucidate new or undervalued political properties of a given region or country—and whose findings lend themselves to insightful comparisons elsewhere. As Centeno explains, his main goal is to understand how the Salinas government managed to revolutionize Mexico’s economy, strengthen the position of private capital vis-à-vis labor, integrate Mexico into the global market, and advance reforms that imposed enormous social costs on some, yet avoid the type of implosion that befell Mikhail Gorbachev’s Soviet Union.

Believing that “successful implementation of economic reforms” requires not just concentrated power inside the state, but within a small cadre and related agencies too (36), Centeno employs a state-centric, institutional framework designed to open the “black box” of the state up to inspection. His framework stresses three trends which rested within the organization of the state, and ultimately proved crucial to Mexico’s technocratic revolution: (1) the centralization of power within technocratic agencies which controlled critical resources, (2) the rise to dominance of a relatively small, but highly skilled technocratic elite, and (3) the acquisition of hegemony by a “single, exclusive policy paradigm based on the theoretically optimal use of resources and the preservation of system stability” (39–40). Absent the autonomy, centralization, and ideological homogeneity these trends produced, Centeno argues, “*Salinastroida* would have been impossible” (75).

In a careful, yet succinct manner, Centeno traces the development of Mexico’s ruling party, the PRI, and its subordination to the bureaucracy, the expansion of the state bureaucracy, the balance of power struggles waged within it (particularly between the ministries of Finance and Government, and later, Finance and Budget and Planning), and the growing concentration of power inside the executive. In the tradition of Roderic Camp (1987), he also details the rise of Mexico’s increasingly homogenous, technocratic policy elite and explains how, by colonizing key institutions like the ministries of Finance and Budget and Planning, they gained control over crucial resources (revenues, fiscal policy, planning, information, etc.), and eventually used this position to consolidate power and bring institutional competitors to heel (106). While credentials and meritocracy influenced the technocrats’ rise to power, Centeno demonstrates that traditional political alliances, or *camarillas*,\(^5\) remained equally important and permitted rising stars like Carlos Salinas to place highly skilled technocrats in strategic positions within the government.

While *Democracy Within Reason* offers a sweeping and compelling account of the early Salinas years, Centeno sometimes blurs the line between two distinct
aspects of reform—policy formulation and implementation—which leaves the basic
story line of Mexico’s reform record incomplete. Formulation, of course, occurs
inside the state and culminates in policy adoption; implementation, meanwhile,
typically involves interaction between state and nonstate actors. Here we see the
opportunity costs of Centeno’s state-centric approach, in that the stress placed on
transformations inside the state and policy elite limits the capacity to assess imple-
mentation dynamics. Consequently, Centeno addresses the “how” of successful im-
plementation mostly with reference to Salinas’s signature domestic policy initiative,
the National Solidarity Program, PRONASOL—a giant pork barrel project that
helped assuage social tensions the reforms unleashed and shore up political support,
by funneling billions of dollars to grassroots projects in regions where the ruling
party faced stiff partisan opposition.

Also, while Centeno strives to balance his portrayal of the Salinas government’s
technocratic and political attributes, at times the former tends to outweigh the latter,
leaving the impression that under Salinas technocratic practices completely dis-
placed political criteria as the basis for state action. To illustrate: in reference to
administration plans to build firm economic foundations for growth, prosperity and
eventually, increased social welfare, Centeno argues that “these foundations would
be built no matter the social or political costs” (205). In a similar vein he suggests
Mexico’s technocratic revolutionaries were committed to imposing “a single, exclu-
sive policy paradigm” based on rational techniques where “administrative and pro-
ductive efficiency were paramount” and theoretical economic models “dominated”
political calculation (4).

Of course, the stress placed on these factors is understandable since explaining
Mexico’s technocratic revolution is Centeno’s chief goal. Still, the impression left
can be misleading. While many governments boast well-trained technocratic policy
makers, what distinguished Salinas’s was its surprising blend of the political and
technocratic. Indeed, the Salinas government was, if anything, perhaps the most
politically adept administration in modern Mexican history, and managed to ad-
vance economic reforms successfully precisely on this basis—co-opting (or repress-
ing) political opponents, legitimizing the president’s revolution by redefining
Mexico’s historic revolutionary political symbols, distributing PRONASOL moneys
according to a “political logic” (66), and in fact, politicizing PRONASOL “with a
mastery that would have made the most jaded político proud” (128).

Any misimpressions regarding the government’s technocratic vs. political proper-
ties stem not from the author’s ignorance of the latter (of which he is quite aware),
but from a failure to clearly distinguish “generic” from “democratic” politics, and
thus clarify an important, but implicit dependent variable. Centeno is plainly sympa-
thetic to democracy and rightly critiques Salinas’s arms-length relation to it: the
administration’s “partial commitment to democracy,” he writes, “was always con-
strained by the more important needs of development” (41); in short, under the
“Mexican model” the Salinas government privileged economic reform over democ-
ratization. However, that Salinas chose to embrace “democracy within reason” (mean-
ing only so far as it neither jeopardized stability, the PRI’s preeminence, nor the
president’s economic agenda) was clearly a political calculation, not evidence of a purely apolitical technocratic regime.

At different points Centeno also titillates the reader with prospects of exploring larger theoretical puzzles that ultimately go unfulfilled. For example, early on he lays out broad theoretical issues regarding democracy and market reforms.

What is the relationship between marketization of the economy and the democratization of political life? How could states manage the “cruel choices” assumed to be inherent in such a relationship? How could they manage an equilibrium between the rights of citizenship and those of property, between economic growth and political liberty? (Centeno 1994, 27)

Later, he poses a second set of intriguing theoretical issues.

What lessons did the Mexican model offer to those facing similar situations? What do the origins and foundations of this model imply for the success of similar projects outside of Mexico? (Centeno 1994, 231)

At their heart, the issues Centeno outlines raise two critical questions of broader significance: How can states create autonomous bureaucracies that prevent policy derailment by political forces, without creating situations where citizens lack effective voice in the regimes they live under? And how can governments reap the benefits of market reforms but not fall prey to political instability? Unfortunately, these issues are not pursued in a substantive, systematic manner. Centeno aptly captures the Mexican experience, detailing both Salinas’s pursuit of market reform at the expense of democratization, and explaining this accomplishment via centralized power, autonomous bureaucracy, cohesive technocracy, and the reclamation of political legitimacy. However, he makes only minimal stabs at generalizing his findings with brief discussions of Gorbachev’s ill-fated reform project and nominal references to counterparts of Mexico’s PRI in the so-called “Asian Dragons,” Taiwan and Singapore (233–234). This is a pity, particularly since even “shadow” case studies of other countries could yield valuable insights into the general trade-offs between market reforms and democracy, and the applicability of what he terms the “Mexican model.” Consequently, while Democracy Within Reason contains the crucial elements of a compelling comparative analysis with generalizable findings, the analysis itself remains underdeveloped. Moreover, the outcome the book actually explains (the triumph of technocratic revolution in Mexico, rather than trade-offs between market reforms and democracy) is more modest than readers are led to believe. Such slippage between dependent variables speaks again to the value of retaining consistency and precision in social science research.

This work also exhibits several other serious methodological problems. To begin, although Centeno stresses the need “to avoid a mechanistic determinism in explaining the success of Salinastroika” (26), at times his argument appears to do just that. Thus, the revolution would have been “impossible” without the centralization of power, autonomy, and ideological conformity of Mexico’s elite policy makers, etc. That these factors mattered seems incontrovertible. However, because Centeno dem-
onstrates more a correlation than direct causality between these factors and observed outcomes, his account exhibits determinist tendencies.

Centeno’s basic framework implies that (a) centralized power within the state coupled with (b) bureaucratic autonomy from the military, ruling party and society, enabled (c) an ideologically homogenous elite to orchestrate Mexico’s technocratic revolution. As presented, however, this formulation is not entirely convincing. One problem is the key variable, “autonomy,” which he defines mainly in reference to the bureaucracy’s capacity to act outside the orbit of the military, PRI, and societal pressures. He believes that by virtue of this autonomy, technocratic policy makers who came to dominate the autonomous bureaucracy managed to impose their preferred policy project: “The shared social, educational and professional backgrounds of the elite fostered a common vision that, combined with the centralization of bureaucratic power and its insulation from external pressures, allowed the imposition of the revolution” (144).

But to accept this proposition we must assume the preexisting autonomy which the technocrats inherited was sufficient to achieve reform across multiple policy realms, and that policy elites required no additional autonomy from countervailing pressures within the state itself. If either assumption fails the outcome predicted cannot be traced back logically (or persuasively) to initial premises. These underlying assumptions, however, go untested. Save for PRONASOL, Centeno never examines the nitty-gritty of any particular policy that comprised Mexico’s technocratic revolution, and absent this, cannot demonstrate the accuracy of the assumptions.

It is important to recall that much of Salinas’s agenda consisted of privatizing public enterprises (PEs) and deregulating the domestic economy. As Centeno notes (90–91), the Ministry of Energy, Mines, and Parastatals held jurisdiction over many PEs (and many of the largest, politically important ones, too); other ministries controlled other state firms and exercised regulatory jurisdiction in various sectors. Salinista technocrats, however, were enshrouded mainly in Mexico’s economic agencies (Finance, Budget and Planning, Commerce), not those whose ox would be gored by market reforms. Why these apparent losers “turned” to embrace reform or how they were “persuaded” to do so is not addressed. Centeno’s framework cannot determine whether opposition to reform emerged from these quarters (which it did), the extent to which “bureaucratic politics” (Allison 1971) pit reformers against status quo defenders, or how reformers ultimately prevailed; nor does it clarify exactly how technocratic control over one set of ministries translated into policy outcomes in others.

This is no small matter. Where Centeno concludes the revolution occurred because Mexico’s policy elite “were lucky enough to inherit a system that had already established mechanisms through which to impose their policies” (232), closer scrutiny indicates otherwise. As both Grindle and Teichman note, even after the technocrats consolidated power within Mexico’s financial agencies they faced stiff opposition from powerful bureaucratic actors. Ultimately, they prevailed not by virtue of any preexisting autonomy from the party, military, or societal pressures, but rather, via deliberate changes in institutional procedures and structures they
orchestrated that helped tip the balance of power inside the state to their favor.\textsuperscript{6} In short, while the book demonstrates a clear correlation between its independent variables (centralized power, autonomy, and elite ideological cohesion) and its dependent one (technocratic revolution), it falls short of proving direct causality.

Another methodological drawback is the absence of variation in the dependent variable (the successful implementation of Mexico’s technocratic revolution). “No-variation” scenarios are a common challenge confronting single-country analyses, and single-N studies can be problematic because they lack the multiple observations required to yield high-confidence causal arguments. As King, Keohane and Verba note (1994, 129), it is virtually impossible to learn anything “about a causal effect from a study which selects observations so that the dependent variable does not vary.” At least two possible remedies exist, however: increasing the number of cases examined, as in Grindle’s two-country model, or disaggregating Mexico’s overall neoliberal project into its discrete segments (e.g., privatization, trade liberalization, deregulation), and assessing the causal factors behind their varying degrees of success. The latter approach, in particular, would have strengthened the book’s general comparative aspects, bolstered confidence in its findings, and most likely, prompted the author to consider other variables (like the institutional restructuring noted earlier) whose omission tends to magnify the effects of those stressed in the text. Unfortunately, by not pursuing the Soviet or East Asian shadow case studies in greater depth, or examining the specifics of Salinas’s market project, this work forfeits both options.

To summarize, Democracy Within Reason is an engaging and highly informative book that showcases Centeno’s mastery of some of the critical dynamics behind Mexico’s policy transformations. Nevertheless, it is also a work whose comparative dimensions remain underdeveloped, and whose theoretical execution is marked by logical inconsistencies, imprecision, and thus problems of empirical validity. Ultimately, despite its potential, these factors limit the volume’s contributions to more generalizable knowledge.

Theory-Neutral Area Studies

In Privatization and Political Change in Mexico (1995), Judith A. Teichman examines the growth of Mexico’s public enterprise sector, its relationships to the state and organized labor, and the dramatic sell-off of public enterprises engineered by presidents Miguel de la Madrid and Carlos Salinas de Gortari. The author’s basic goal is to present “a study of the origins, development, implementation, and political impact of Mexico’s privatization program” (4). The book situates Mexico’s divestment project against the backdrop of global economic transformations—the drive for competitiveness, the 1973 energy crisis, the 1982 debt crisis, and external pressures to change policies stemming from international financial institutions. (5–10). It views the depth and speed of divestment as products of “the interaction between a domestic economic crisis, existent political arrangements, and external circumstances” (10); it finds little to support the presumed affinity between eco-
onomic liberalization and political democratization, and conversely, concludes that in Mexico, "privatization has been linked to important changes in the coalitional base of the state and in the mechanisms of authoritarian political control . . ." (194).

Teichman’s book is the type of “area study” which exhibits many properties critics of such research typically lament. These problems begin early on: the introduction presents no central research question to which the author turns her mind, no explicit “puzzle” she seeks to unravel (i.e., no dependent variable), and no analytic framework by which to isolate causal variables, measure political dynamics, or judge the reliability of her findings. This sets the stage for a work that is highly detailed, largely descriptive, and lacking analytic rigor.

In lieu of elaborating a tightly focused analytic framework, Privatization and Political Change treads some familiar paths: the development of public enterprises and expansion of Mexico’s public sector; the obligatory review of Mexican labor’s incorporation into (and co-optation by) the ruling party; the impact the 1982 debt crisis had on the course of Mexico’s economic policies; and efforts to restructure public enterprises in response to economic crisis. Of course, in light of Mexico’s unique political characteristics and experience, some background on these issues is required; however, the book devotes its first 100 pages to these themes—an exercise which adds some new details, but little if any theoretical insights into the politics (or process) of privatizing public enterprises. Unfortunately, notwithstanding the volume’s title, readers will not encounter a sustained treatment of privatization until page 129, and when they do, will discover a largely descriptive account.

Chapters six and seven aptly explain the various phases of divestiture under de la Madrid and Salinas, the mechanics of the divestiture process, the power struggles between the bureaucratic proponents and opponents of privatization, and the conflict divestment engendered between the state and organized labor. In summary fashion Teichman chronicles the march of divestiture across a range of economic sectors—from steel, aviation, and banking, to fertilizers, mining, and telecommunications. She explains the evolution in divestment procedures and institutional structures that centralized decision-making inside a Finance Ministry sub-unit. She also provides a trove of detail on who “won” or “lost” as a result of privatization (large conglomerates and technocrats comprise the former group, while organized labor and “statist” bureaucrats, the latter). Finally, she notes that as a result of the tension between market reforms and Mexico’s traditional corporatist arrangements, capitalists ultimately replaced organized labor as a principal pillar of regime support.

These chapters tell us a great deal about what happened in Mexico over the course of the reform period. But from a theoretical perspective they tell us much less about why some things happened the way they did, and almost nothing about how Mexico’s experience might sharpen our understanding on the politics of divestment in other contexts.

For example, one of the striking peculiarities about Mexico’s privatization program was the government’s selective use of force to implement policy change. To divest the national airlines (Aeroméxico) and giant copper company (Cananea) the state expended enormous political capital to bankrupt these firms, break their unions,
and impose the costs of policy change via coercion; however, to divest the equally unionized public steel conglomerate (SIDERMEX) and telephone monopoly (TELMEX), it did not. Undoubtedly, various factors influenced this patchwork implementation pattern; but its observed regularity (or perhaps better, "inconsistent regularity") invites closer scrutiny: since the capacity to coerce (presidential power) remained "constant" over time, what then explains the variation? Teichman notes both coercive and noncoercive implementation patterns, but provides no cogent theoretical account for them. While disappointing, this is not surprising since without an analytic framework it is difficult to isolate similarities or distinctions across cases or explain them in a theoretically satisfying manner. But it is exactly this type of inattention to theory and rigor with which the critics of traditional practitioners take issue.

Also, despite the fact that Mexico became Latin America’s leading privatizer in the early 1990s, the book explains policy outcomes with only passing nods to some of the basic theoretical propositions advanced in the literature on market reforms. Illustrative of this is the role technocratic policy makers and decision-making structures are presumed to play in the reform process. In assessing reform records across Africa, Latin America, and Asia, Joan Nelson (1993, 436) has written that: “In almost all cases of vigorous and sustained reform, political leaders concentrated authority for economic management in ‘change teams’ and protected those teams from political pressures both from outside and from within the government itself.” In a similar vein, Mary Shirley has argued that creating policy units with the technical capacity to privatize effectively is a “problem common to all privatizing countries” (1994, 1319).

These comments reflect the general consensus that in large part, the fate of reform projects turns on a president’s capacity to assemble a committed, cohesive, and highly skilled technocratic “change team,” insulate it from countervailing pressures, and delegate to its members the authority to craft sound policies and execute tough policy choices (Haggard and Kaufman 1995; Nelson 1990; Sachs 1994; Rodrik 1996). Yet, despite this consensus, as Haggard and Webb (1993, 162) note, “surprisingly little systematic work has been undertaken on how the organization of decision making is likely to affect the success of adjustment efforts.”

Teichman’s case selection seems uniquely suited to this task, especially given the prominence she correctly accords Mexico’s policy technocrats, and the changes in procedures and institutions that accompanied its privatization program. In the end, however, the book does not capitalize on this opportunity. While informative, its discussion of Mexico’s technocrats is more descriptive than probative, and its treatment of why policy procedures and institutional arrangements were changed remains largely narrative: state actors, we are told, “came to believe that important organizational changes were necessary” for large scale privatizations to proceed (147).

Besides impeding systematic analysis of Mexico’s divestment experience, the book’s theoretical void limits the capacity to refine our knowledge on the privatization process writ large. Granted, there is a semblance of theory regarding why the Mexi-
can government—and presumably others similarly situated—embraced privatization, although the argument about domestic crisis and external pressures is hardly new. But there is no cohesive, parsimonious theory regarding how the government managed to achieve its divestment goals, or what relevance its experience holds for reform attempts elsewhere. This, in turn, renders the findings presented largely context-bound.

The book’s conclusion does engage in some modest cross-country comparisons. It notes, for example, some fairly evident commonalities privatization exhibited in Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil—i.e., reform attempts staged against the backdrop of “heavy foreign indebtedness and structural adjustment” (207). It also speculates briefly on why Mexico’s divestment drive outpaced its counterparts’, but unfortunately, does not subject these very plausible propositions to anything approaching the kind of “rigorous evaluation” critics like Bates call for (1996: 2). Ultimately, this renders Teichman’s conclusions as tentative as the language in which they are pitched: “the greater relative strength of Mexico’s technocratic elite . . . may help explain” its more robust divestment record, we are told; and the notion of an insulated policy team “may be useful” in explaining why Mexican reformers managed to withstand anti-reform pressures emanating from society (emphasis added, 210, 211).

From the critics’ perspective, perhaps the biggest disappointment of Privatization and Political Change, is that despite the wealth of facts and details it marshals, it never aims for some of the more basic goals of theory-driven social science research: it offers no real theory of policy reform in Mexico, no testable hypotheses, no counterfactual analysis, nor even an examination of competing explanations for the political outcomes it presents. Consequently, one comes away from reading this book having learned a bit more about Mexico; but those seeking greater knowledge about the challenges of privatizing public enterprises or a deeper theoretical understanding of successful divestment campaigns (in Mexico and beyond) will not find their discernment enhanced much.

Conclusion

Several conclusions can be gleaned from this discussion. First, even this limited sampling of studies confirms that the problems critics of comparative politics highlight are real. They include imprecision, logical inconsistency, inattention to rigor and theory, lax empirical validity, and a focus on the unique and distinctive to the exclusion of broader regularities and generalizable findings. Given that traditional studies typically rely heavily upon primary research data, problems of empirical validity are likely to stem more from imprecise research designs than insufficient evidence. Of course, traditional studies hold no monopoly on these problems, and analysts need not abandon traditional methods to address them; but to the extent they are addressed, comparative political science will be the stronger for it (Munck 1998).

Second, the remedy critics prescribe for these maladies—i.e., rational choice—
seems unlikely to provide a cure. To be sure, formal theory has its merits. As many concede, it can ensure tight, logically consistent arguments, help refine, qualify, or extend prior findings, and is particularly useful when theories grow too complex for precise verbal expression (Walt 1999: 9, 15; Wallerstein 2000: 2). At the same time, though, the deficiencies of many rational choice studies are well documented: marginal findings, lax empirical testing and support, difficulty explaining real world phenomena, and the recycling of existing arguments in mathematical form (Green and Shapiro 1994: 33–46; Walt 1999: 23–45). As for its claims of universality, even some rational choice theorists recognize the gulf between these aspirations and the discipline’s actual achievements (Weingast 1997: 7).

Third, the debate over comparative politics has sparked more than a great deal of heat; it also has generated some light. By exposing mutual weaknesses, the exchange between traditionalists and rational choice advocates has sensitized both to their analytic shortcomings. Accordingly, rather than abandoning their conventions, traditionalists have been encouraged to incorporate the critics’ new techniques into comparative studies, where appropriate (Wallerstein 2000: 2); and some critics, meanwhile, have conceded the need to supplement abstract theory with a greater understanding of real world situations (Bates et al. 1998: 10–14).

This is not to suggest that some amalgam of rational choice and traditional research conventions inevitably will become the prevailing approach. Given that political scientists face the daunting task of studying human behavior, which itself is changeable, the probabilities of devising a strong, unified theory of politics are remote. Moreover, even if a single approach should become predominant this would not be inherently beneficial. Analysts need multiple tools to unravel complex real world phenomena, and would be disadvantaged without them (Shapiro 1998: 72).

Finally, because critics often reduce comparative politics to “area studies,” the ongoing debate tends to evoke a false dichotomy between “true” social scientists and “atheoretical area specialists.” Between these two poles, of course, lies the majority of comparative analysts, whose work (typified by two of the three books discussed earlier) tackles real world political phenomena in a theoretically informed manner. It bears stressing, therefore, that the comparative subfield has been (and continues to be) rightly defined more by the complex real world dynamics it investigates than by any one research approach.

Social science puts a premium on developing useful knowledge of real world phenomena, and theory remains central to successful comparative analyses. Good theoretical arguments— i.e., those that are precise, logically consistent, supported by empirical evidence, and conducive to generalizable findings— trump those that are not. Accurate understandings of political events, processes, and interactions make the human experience more intelligible and help those charged with governing make informed decisions. On this basis, some of the energy expended in the quest for a universal theory of politics (or squabbling over the possibility) might be spent more profitably generating theoretically-based knowledge of generic political problems governments face (democratization and democratic consolidation, effective, sustainable reform, governability, ethnic conflict, revolution, increasing state capac-
ity). As Alexander George observed (1997: 51), such research need not attain the mathematical (or "scientific") rigor of physics to yield high-value, real world payoffs.

There is little doubt the last two decades constitute one of the most intense, far reaching periods of political change in history—a point Mexico's experience demonstrates in microcosm. In this context, some of the principal challenges comparative analysts face are to explain these changes convincingly, and help equip policy makers and societies to make change work for the good. Theory-based research remains essential to this endeavor, and efforts to refine, extend, and improve our theories should proceed. However, to my mind, the standoff between opposing schools has reached the point of diminished returns—fueling a tendency to lose sight of quality comparative work done outside the rational choice orbit on the one hand, and provoking unproductive charges of "empire building" and "fuzzy thinking" on the other. Both camps bring important assets to bear on social science research, but to date, neither provides foolproof methodology.

In as much as theory building advances via collaboration and knowledge accumulates through the clash of ideas, scholarly debate can serve a useful role; with exceptions noted, this one has. Reflecting upon the rational choice/traditionalist debate, some have lamented that "self-conscious theoretical reflection finds almost no home" within the comparative subfield (Lichbach 1997: 14); this position, however, seems overstated. As this review has shown, theoretically tight comparative studies can be done successfully outside the rational choice framework, but only to the extent that scholars' theoretical arguments are logically consistent, their variables precisely defined, and their findings supported by persuasive evidence.

Notes

1. See for example, Bates (1996; 1997a); Johnson (1997); Shea (1997); Cohn (1999); Green and Shapiro (1994); Johnson and Keehn (1994); and the various essays in APSA-CP (1997).

2. Derived from economics, the rational choice literature is diverse, but unified through several theoretical and methodological commonalities. Typically, rational choice employs deduction and mathematical equations to analyze how various incentives and constraints affect the calculations and behavior of rational, self-interested actors seeking to maximize their utility. Early formulations include Arrow (1951); Downs (1957); and Olson (1965). For more contemporary examples, explication, and review, see Lalman, Oppenheimer and Swistak (1993); and Tsebelis (1990).


4. On the traditionalist perspective regarding the theoretical value of case studies, see Eckstein (1975).

5. Camarillas are loyalty-based, patron/client political networks that link individuals of different political status, ministries, and levels of government. They are pyramidal structures linked vertically and horizontally to one another consisting of a political benefactor and various clients who seek career advancement. They facilitate information-gathering (an important resource for political aspirants); they advance their memberships up the career ladder en masse, generally in time with the six-year cycle of presidential terms; and they work on the basis of confidence, collaboration, and loyalty. For a concise portrait of these alliance networks see Ronfeldt (1988); and Grindle (1977).
6. As I argue elsewhere (Williams forthcoming), autonomy from societal, party, and military pressures proved insufficient to effect wide spread divestiture and deregulation. Strong opposition to reform inside the state required Mexico’s technocrats to secure autonomy from various state actors, too. To advance Salinas’s policy agenda they formed powerful pro-reform coalitions and engaged in effective institutional innovation—changing the rules that governed the policymaking process, gaining greater control over the policy agenda, creating “bureaucratic veto points” to torpedo anti-reform initiatives, etc.

7. Bates now suggests that “theory must be complemented by contextual knowledge” (1997b, 168) to create what he terms game-theoretic “analytic narratives”; in this way scholars can forge “logically rigorous and empirically testable accounts of specific political situations” (1997c, 126). Despite the apparent concession to field research and deep “local” knowledge required to construct such narratives, Bates continues to see rational choice as the only “scientific” approach to comparative analysis.

References


