

The Teacher

Introduction: Teaching Comparative Politics for the Twenty-First Century

Joseph L. Klesner, *Kenyon College*

Introductory courses in comparative politics have faced a number of challenges over time, challenges accentuated by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the cold war. Others teaching introductory comparative politics courses have told me that these courses have usually been smaller and less well received than introductions to other subfields of political science. The demands facing the course are numerous, thus setting up a context for failure: the subfield is very heterogeneous in theoretical and methodological orientations; the purposes of the course are often not well defined by departments; instructors are typically trained as area specialists but expected to cover the whole world (and in smaller departments are often expected to serve as experts in the whole world); American students tend to be poorly informed about the world and often only interested in the “hot spots” currently covered by CNN; and the available information that could be conveyed to the students is vast, making selection of countries and cases tricky but critical.

The fall of communism delivered another blow to teachers of comparative politics by rendering somewhat obsolete the principal framework used to select cases and organize courses. This “three

worlds” framework, which had divided the globe into liberal democracies, centrally planned socialist nations, and developing countries, was already deteriorating as we learned more about the heterogeneity of the so-called Third World. Hence, it was no longer a robust framework anyway. The end of communist dictatorship in much of the Second World, to be followed by we know not what, not only made our framework more clearly outmoded but also revealed the limitations of our understanding of communist societies.

To say that our paradigms for teaching introductory comparative politics are in disarray is not an exaggeration. However, this disarray has a positive side. We are now forced to reconsider how we teach introductory comparative politics. This creates an opportunity for comparativists to refashion what has been a relatively unpopular course that is very difficult to teach, to make it more attractive (and perhaps relevant) to students and less onerous for their teachers.

With this opportunity in mind, I organized a roundtable at the 1992 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, strongly supported by the coordinator of the Comparative Politics Section Program, W. Phillips Shively,

to consider how to teach the introductory comparative politics course in the 1990s and beyond. Participants included faculty members in charge of teaching this course at a wide range of institutions, from the Ivy League research university and the comprehensive state university to the liberal arts college. My comments above notwithstanding, the “three worlds” approach has not been the only way to teach comparative politics to first- and second-year students.

Although most textbooks have followed the “three worlds” approach or some variant of it, instructors in basic comparative courses have shown considerably more variety in their strategies than is typical in introductory courses in other subfields, as the syllabi in the APSA comparative politics collection (Wilson 1991) indicate. Tapping this creativity was a central goal as I organized this panel. Besides those whose papers follow, panelists included Jennifer Widner of Harvard University and David Wilsford of the Georgia Institute of Technology. Most panelists agreed on the difficulties of teaching the introductory course outlined above. The following papers present the core suggestions made by their authors for improving our teaching of introductory comparative politics.