

**“NOT ON YOUR VITA:”
THE RELEVANCE OF COMPARATIVE POLITICS FOR PUBLIC LIFE**

**Terry Lynn Karl
Stanford University**

American Political Science Association-CP Newsletter Vol 14, No. 2 (Summer 2003), pp. 14-19

“Caring about what is happening in the world won’t get you tenure. We are a theoretical department. If you get involved in public life, make sure it is not on your vita.”

Advice from a senior colleague in my pre-tenure days.

The days and nights waiting for a South Florida federal jury to return a verdict in *Romagoza et al. versus García et al.*-- the trial of two former Ministers of Defense from El Salvador living in the United States -- were some of the longest I have ever spent. The June 2002 case against Generals José Guillermo García and Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova marked the first time in United States history that a jury would rule about the role of former high-level military officers, who personally appeared to defend themselves against claims that they had failed in their responsibility as commanders to prevent egregious human rights violations against their own people.¹ Much was at stake. Politically, a verdict in favor of the plaintiffs would be a clear statement of accountability for the more than 70,000 murders and countless incidences of torture and rape of civilians in El Salvador’s state repression and subsequent civil war. A favorable judgment would be a significant step towards ending the impunity of human rights abusers. Legally, it

¹ Default suits had been won against the former Bosnian leader Radovan Karadzic and former Guatemalan defense minister Hector Gramajo, among others, but these suits were won because the defendants failed to appear, and not as the result of a jury’s judgment.

would have far-reaching implications for firmly anchoring the doctrine of “command responsibility” in U.S. law and establishing a precedent that murderers and torturers could not safely retire to the United States. Morally, it would help to vindicate the thousands of Salvadorans who never had the opportunity to seek justice, and it would bring some degree of solace to Neris González, Carlos Mauricio, and Juan Romagoza, respectively the eight-months-pregnant church worker, professor and doctor, who were raped, beaten, tortured and forced to witness the torture and murder of others.

My role as expert witness in the trial was to interpret the outbreak of civil war in El Salvador and then argue several key elements of command responsibility: that the military and security forces were the main perpetrators of murder and torture; that Ministers of Defense García and Vides Casanova knew (or should have known) about the conduct of their troops and had the capacity as top commanders to curb these violations; and that these generals failed to take all reasonable measures to prevent their subordinates from committing human rights abuses or punish them if they had done so. This testimony was crucial to the outcome of the trial. While no one who had met the plaintiffs doubted that a jury would believe their stories, direct testimony alone would not be enough to return a positive verdict. Under the legal theory of command responsibility, it was imperative to connect the torture of these three ordinary Salvadorans directly through a chain of command to two of the most powerful people in the country at the time -- ruling generals who were not present during the actual violations, who had been awarded Legion of Merit medals by the U.S. Secretary of Defense, and whose attorney portrayed them as “the John Adams and Thomas Jeffersons” of their country. Because the generals

had previously been acquitted in the murder trial of four American churchwomen, they seemed very confident that the analysis and information necessary to establish command responsibility could not be known and certainly could not be proven – least of all to citizens in the United States who could not even begin to fathom the history of this tiny country.

But the generals were wrong. On July 23, 2002, as a tense silence reigned in the courtroom, the verdict was read. "Is General José García legally responsible for the torture of Juan Romagoza?" "Yes." And, as spectators, jurors, lawyers, plaintiffs, and even court officials began to cry, the bailiff continued to read: "Is General Eugenio Vides Casanova legally responsible for the torture of Juan Romagoza?" "Yes." A jury of ordinary Florida citizens showed that it had learned about this horrific period of Salvadoran history, grasped the doctrine of command responsibility, and held two generals accountable for their actions and inactions. For the first time, responsibility for El Salvador's reign of terror was laid at the feet of these generals. While this happened in Florida and not in El Salvador, where torturers have yet to be punished, the verdict is one step in ending Latin America's long history of impunity.

Which brings me to the relevance of comparative politics for public life...

Why was a comparativist scholar (granted one with an academic background in Latin America) giving expert testimony in this trial rather than, say, a knowledgeable reporter?

Would not the journalists who trekked through dangerous territory to the massacre site of El Mozote, photographed the bones, interviewed the sole survivor, and later documented the murders of almost 700 people, including 131 children under the age of twelve, be more effective on the witness stand? Why use a comparativist that the defense attorney would surely malign as an “ivory tower egghead” in order to undermine the damage of the testimony itself and enhance the arguments of former U.S. policymakers who would testify on behalf of the generals?² What does this choice of witnesses say about what our expertise has to offer the public realm?

Not much, some would argue. There are those who claim that when we “go public,” we merely state opinions and “opinion is not the same as knowledge.” The latter is “scientific” and “disinterested” scholarship, while the political scientist who writes, speaks or acts in public is just a citizen with an opinion – just like any other citizen (albeit likely to be a bit more educated.)³ This view is often accompanied by a preference for “scientific” approaches and methodologies: rational choice models or statistical analyses that, of course, do not lie or suffer from intrinsic biases. The flip side of this view is a prejudice, frequently articulated by these “scientists,” against much of the work of

²The suspicion that a professor would be attacked in order to play upon anti-intellectual sentiment turned out to be correct. The defense attorney focused his rebuttal and closing argument on the academic testimony, in an attempt to discredit the analysis and the knowledge upon which it was based. He claimed that evidence from the generals’ main expert witness, a former U.S. ambassador “who needed to give accurate accounts” was far superior to that of a “professor writing a thesis, needing to come up with a thesis on history” in order to promote her career. In a part of his argument that should cause great hilarity among those who understand the big power and methodological biases of American political science (or even the dynamics of my own career path), the defense attorney told the jury that producing such an analysis had led to my tenure and would make me famous. See the trial transcript of *Romagoza et al. versus García et al.* on the web at www.cja.org.

³ See, for example, the letter from Heinz Eulau putting forth this position in Political Science and Politics, Vol. XXXV, No. 4, December 2002.

comparativists, exemplified by the claim that there is little difference between an area specialist and an investigative journalist (a charge I have too often seen as part of tenure reviews). The conceptual framework, operational design, case studies, and thick description resulting from difficult and sometimes dangerous research in the field or painstaking inquiry into historical materials, which is the heart of much of the best comparative work, is reduced to “just” good investigative journalism. Hence, those who bring their area-based scholarship to the public realm are, at best, competent reporters or, at worst, opinionated descriptors.

Certainly there are cases of both, but theoretically grounded and empirically rich comparisons, at their best, provide scholars with the best means for formulating general understandings about how political and developmental processes have occurred, and allow us to explore how these same processes may have produced similar or different effects across time and space – a skill that is *not* part of the training of a journalist or accessible to the citizen observer. Comparativists postulate, discover and test for the existence of *types and patterns* in the realm of politics, for example, in transitions to democracy, civil-military relations, authoritarian regimes, state- and nation-building processes, impacts of public policies, and instances of violent conflict. This, in turn, permits us to assess the experiences of particular countries, not only with regard to their uniqueness, but also in terms of the common outcomes that they share with other countries of a similar pattern or type. This sensitivity to what is common or unique across political time and space is what we bring to our engagement in public life, and it is what sets us apart from other experts.

Return for a moment to the trial of the Salvadoran generals. The jury's determination hinged, in no small part, on their interpretation of whether El Salvador in 1979-1983 (the period of worst state repression) was undergoing a transition to democracy or an attempted reversion to hard-line military rule based on state terror. Buffered by the rhetoric of the U.S. government at the time, the defense claimed that the generals were leading a transition to democracy, that they were being assaulted by authoritarian and uncontrollable forces from both the right and left, and that they were just following the orders of a civilian president anyway. Thus how could they be held responsible for the military's murder and torture, even if they were, respectively, Minister of Defense and head of the National Guard? But this did not prove convincing to a jury presented with specific *indicators* showing the power and control of the military led by the High Command, *types* of authoritarian rule that included civil-military juntas, *comparative data* on repression showing that El Salvador far outdistanced even Pinochet's Chile and Argentina during the "dirty war," empirical evidence about *patterns* of state repression and government responses, and *conceptualizations* of civilian control of the military and democratic transition that were not limited to the mere presence of elections. Moreover, the jury learned, comparatively, about *patterns* of deniability – the words and actions authoritarians use to disguise terror and confuse observers over where responsibility for state terror lies. In the end, they were convinced that the generals were not the powerless democrats they portrayed themselves to be, but rather the instigators of state repression and the protectors of torturers, and El Salvador during this early period experienced an attempt at authoritarian reversion, not a transition to democracy. In effect, the middle-

range theorizing developed by comparativists and the solid empirical research of a number of Latin Americanist specialists helped to win the day -- not the fallible opinion of a citizen.⁴

Comparative politics does not lack relevance for public life, as some seem to think but, rather, pervades the world of practitioners. Examples abound – even if we confine the definition of public life to mean direct influence on policymakers. What Thomas Carothers has called “the seminal work of Guillermo O’Donnell and Philippe Schmitter”⁵ has shaped the way policymakers understand transitions from authoritarian rule, not only in the United States, but all over the globe – a fact repeatedly attested to by Albanians, Bulgarians, Hungarians, Russians, Czechs, Chileans, Argentineans, Uruguayans, South Africans and others who have paid tribute to the usefulness of “the little green book” for their own transitions. Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* and *Making Democracy Work* has helped to put the issue of civil society on the agenda of U.S. policy practitioners and foundations, leading to a renewal in efforts to support non-governmental organizations. If we broaden the definition of public life to go beyond directly influencing politicians (as we certainly should), the impact is even clearer. Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink in their *Activists Beyond Borders* have taught a new generation of NGOs about the implications of different strategies for change and has helped them see the historical impact of their work. At a time when “lootable assets” such as “blood oil” and “conflict

⁴ William Stanley’s *The Protection Racket State: Elite Politics, Military Extortion, and Civil War in El Salvador* (Temple University Press, 1966) proved to be especially helpful here.

⁵ Thomas Carothers refers to the volume *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule* in “The End of the Transition Paradigm,” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 1, January 2002.

diamonds” dominate the headlines, the arguments by comparativists, including this writer, concerning the detrimental impact of petroleum and mineral wealth on the political and economic institutions of the countries that export them, once greeted as excessively “determinist” and “unscientific” by some political scientists, is now ensconced in the lexicon of practitioners ranging from Oxfam and Catholic Relief Services to the World Bank and Exxon.

That so many in the political science profession do not see the extent of this impact may be a question of measurement. For some, influence in the public realm is gauged exclusively by their ability to “whisper directly in the ear of power” or by the number and notoriety of articles published in the *New York Review of Books*, *New York Times*, or *New Republic*. However important these forums may be, real clout is often more indirect, subtle, and diffuse, and, therefore, much more difficult to measure. How can the number of journalists whose articles are shaped by the work of comparativists be counted? How does one know when policymakers understand a particular country or political process differently as the result of some scholarly work he or she has read (for example “regime change” in Iraq)? How can we assess the impact of reports produced for Oxfam, Human Rights Watch, or Catholic Relief Services that circulate widely and educate numerous people around the world? And what about the religious leaders who extend their beliefs to include new factors based on the work of comparativists like the recent statement of African Catholic bishops calling for the just use of petroleum revenues, business leaders who call for new codes of corporate responsibility based on some of our findings, or students who change their life plans because of the types of polities or patterns of policy

that comparativists have discovered and confirmed? Clearly, this impact cannot be easily measured.

The problem of relevance, in my view, lies not so much with the *production* of good work in comparative politics as with its *consumption* by policymakers. The latter much too frequently embrace this scholarship, not as warnings about what they should not do (which may be what we do best), but rather as recipes for doing what they already plan to do. Policy-makers scour academic writings for theoretical buttresses to support positions they have already taken or to use as ideological coverings to justify what they have already done. This is most evident in Washington's embrace of the work of Samuel Huntington – from *Political Order in Changing Societies* (which was used to justify U.S. support for authoritarian rule during the Cold War) to his *Foreign Affairs* argument for “forced-draft urbanization” in Vietnam (which provided a much-needed modernization rationale for the bombing of peasant communities) to *The Clash of Civilizations* (which buttresses claims that Islam poses an intrinsic threat to the West). Not surprisingly, the academic work that deeply questions dominant assumptions and policies gets no such play in the policy world, a reality that damages the process of political learning and leads to the repetition of mistakes.

This consumption problem becomes even more complicated when the interpretation by practitioners distorts the empirical findings or normative implications of the work in question. Thus, Lipset's thesis in *Political Man* concerning the relationship between

economic development and democracy was widely cited in order to rationalize the decision to support transitions to capitalism prior to transitions to democracy in Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union and Mexico – a policy stance with profound and long-term consequences for both the quality of democracy and the concentration of wealth – neither of which were intended by Lipset himself. O’Donnell and Schmitter’s *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule* has been “read” in order to justify armed intervention and foreign occupation in Iraq – a misreading of their argument and the evidence they present concerning the role of outside powers in democratic transitions.⁶

Another problem lies not with practitioners but within the discipline itself, where the pervasive self-image of American political science as a form of pure science detached from particular values and ideals biases some scholars against the search for relevance. When combined with structural problems in political science alluded to elsewhere in this forum, this creates the notion that the desire to have an impact on public life must be in tension with the goal of building an objective and unbiased social science, and it therefore is always suspect. But American political science, in the words of Ido Oren, “is a historically and nationally rooted ideology as much as an objective science,” with “an enduring undercurrent: *America*.”⁷ Thus to claim that this discipline is disengaged from the state (after all, where do much of our research monies and consultancies originate?),

⁶ See Daniel W. Drezner, “Chicago School Democracy by America,” *The New Republic*, March 12, 2003, then compare this to the evidence in the O’Donnell, Schmitter, Whitehead volumes, works by Thomas Carothers, and the recent study of Minxin Pei and Sara Kasper, “Lessons from the Past: The American Record in Nation-Building,” forthcoming.

⁷ Ido Oren, *Our Enemies and Us: America’s Rivalries and the Making of Political Science*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003).

that our theoretical imagination and selection of topics are not linked to domestic and foreign policies (not to mention war efforts), that our most important and (allegedly) objective concepts do not reflect and even embody normative visions, that the substance of political science scholarship is not deeply rooted in the politics of the United States, or that the welfare of America is not “the master value of the discipline” is to ignore the history and development of the profession itself.

Theory without empirical research and sensitivity to the practices of politicians will always be flawed, but so will the practice of politics be flawed without the findings and insights that only systematic and sensible comparison can generate. This is not to say that combining public engagement and scholarly inquiry into politics in the same person is not fraught with perils. It is. But intellectually honest and well-trained scholars have tools to help correct this problem. If we are taught (and then teach) the notion of rival hypotheses, and if we actively seek out the information that might prove our least preferable hypotheses right, we can mitigate and confine preconceptions and prejudices. Take El Salvador once again. Virtually all observers in the 1980s believed that a figure like Roberto D’Aubuisson, the reputed founder of death squads, ruled only from terror and could not have any mass political base. But a rival hypothesis would claim that terror alone could not explain his staying power, that he could (and did) have some sort of mass following. Being open to this possibility in turn produced evidence leading to a different understanding of the peasantry (and eventually a different analysis of the nature of the civil war). Working with biases on the table in a testable fashion instead of veiled under

the rhetoric of objectivity makes it possible to engage in public life and be a social scientist at the same time.

That we are even asking the question about the relevance of comparative politics for public life is an illustration of how *American* our discipline really is. Scholarship without engagement is a luxury of very rich countries. There are few places in the world that can afford to pursue scholarship for its own sake and for its formal elegance without concern for its impact or relevance.⁸ Yet even rich and very dominant countries cannot bear the long-run costs of becoming so scholastic. It is supremely ironic that, at a time of heightened international threats and accelerated globalization with their concomitant need to know about other countries and cultures, many of the sub-fields of political science in the United States are becoming increasingly “Americanized,” that is, they are too often over-theorized, narrowly specified, non-prescriptive, preoccupied with method over substance, and rooted solely in deductive presumption to the detriment of empirical inference. In this respect, comparativists in this country, despite their marginalization within the profession, have an advantage when it comes to making an impact on the real world. Because our expertise lies outside the United States, we are literally pushed into forms of theory-building and fact-gathering that have to be specified more broadly, that take what our American colleagues regard as given and make it problematic. This tends to chip away at ethnocentrism: when one travels around the world, becomes a specialist in a particular region, learns other languages and cultures, and interacts with

⁸ Thus, it is no accident that Latin America has lately been characterized by presidents and ministers who are well-known and well-trained academic social scientists; countries that are not rich do not have the resources to support a political science that is not relevant for public affairs.

internationally diverse colleagues, it quickly becomes clear that scholarship about politics is never disinterested and the presumption of objectivity is simply hubris.

The road towards better social science and more engagement is the same: it lies in the internationalization of American political science, and not in the Americanization of comparative politics. We can learn from all methods and tools, and we can and should produce more accomplished modelers and quantifiers, but only if we also learn more languages, immerse ourselves in more cultures, do more field research, and develop stronger comparative skills. Better social science means more engagement, and engagement in the end produces better scholarship. To separate theory and practice (and disparage the latter) while insisting on the “science” of politics to the exclusion of its passions, is to set aside the hard questions of public life that do not lend themselves to parsimony and to define away the problems that do not already have a pre-existing data base. This net result is to reinforce existing hegemonies, neglect the consequences of altruistic behavior, and ultimately produce cynical students who do not believe in the power of scholarship to help make the world a better place. The alternative is to re-balance our own skewed discipline by learning from different scholarly experiences around the world that may be less “professional” but have inherited and preserved a tradition of greater intellectual engagement based on the notion that scholars have both the capacity and the duty to improve their societies. If we do so, to quote the great social scientist Albert Hirschman:

It is then possible to visualize a kind of social science that would be very different from the one most of us have been practicing: a moral

social science where moral considerations are not repressed or kept apart, but are systematically commingled with analytic argument... Such would be, in part, my dream for a “social science for our grandchildren.”⁹

⁹ Albert Hirschman, “Morality and the Social Sciences: A Durable Tension,” in *Essays in Trespassing: Economics to Politics and Beyond* (Cambridge University Press: 1981), p. 306.