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TABLE OF CONTENTS

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DOING COMPARATIVE POLITICS:

Perspectives from Pathbreaking Women

By Kate Baldwin and Ellen Lust

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As scholars, we learn about doing political science not just by reading published research papers and books, which typically describe research processes briefly and dispassionately, but also by discussing our personal experiences in developing research ideas, implementing projects, and balancing the diverse demands of academia. Yet, these personal experiences are only rarely preserved in formats that can be broadly shared within the academic community. More often, they are shared informally within personal networks, limiting their dissemination across institutions, geography, gender, age and ethnicity.

In this special issue and its associated podcasts, we encourage wider circulation of these personal experiences through interviews with four emeritae professors in Comparative Politics: Valerie Bunce, Barbara Geddes, Margaret Levi and Susan Rose-Ackerman. These four path-breaking women have each made major contributions to the study of Comparative Politics through their research, mentoring and service. Their work features prominently on graduate syllabi and field exam reading lists, and they have each been prolific mentors to students and junior scholars. Our interviews shine a light on the stories behind these contributions, understanding the contexts and events that made these women into distinguished comparativists.

In conducting these interviews, we were inspired by the initiative of Gerardo Munck and Richard Snyder to record the careers of some of Comparative Politics' founding scholars in their 2007 book, *Passion, Craft and Method in Comparative Politics*. Their book included interviews with 15 scholars born between 1910 and 1950. In selecting the interviewees for this volume, Gerardo Munck and Richard Snyder prioritized ensuring a sample of prominent scholars that spanned each of the four decades and employed diverse approaches to comparative politics.[1] But pioneering women's experiences are not well represented in the sample, with Theda Skocpol the only woman interviewed. An earlier collection of interviews with political scientists was conducted as part of the APSA/Pi Sigma Alpha Oral History projects that ran between 1978 and 1994, hosted in the University of Kentucky's Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History. This archive includes

interviews with 9 women political scientists, including two early comparativists, Gwendolyn Carter (1906-1991) and Elinor Ostom (1933-2012).[2] More recently, the APSA Oral History Project's Contributions by Scholars of Color Series has collected video interviews with 8 women, including trailblazing comparativist Kathie Stromile Golden.[3]

We view our interviews as complementing these efforts. Similar to Gerardo Munck and Richard Snyder, we focus on scholars born before 1950, with each of our interviewees born in the 1940s. This allows us to capture the experiences of prominent members of the first cohort of women to enter political science in significant numbers.[4] Although our interviewees are not the very first women to do comparative politics, many were the first women to be promoted to full professor in their respective departments.

Each of these interviews was conducted by a different team of graduate students and postdoctoral associates at Yale University and Cornell University. Our approach closely followed the collaborative practices established by Gerardo Munck and Richard Snyder, working closely with each interviewee throughout the process. Each team developed a list of questions, which was then sent to the interviewee for input and suggestions. The interviews themselves were recorded in podcasting studios in April or May 2025, with the interviewee themselves joining remotely in two cases – Barbara Geddes and Margaret Levi – and joining the team in the studio in the other two instances – Valerie Bunce and Susan Rose-Ackerman.[5] Each team then generated a lightly cleaned transcript from the audio recording, which was sent to the interviewee for review, typically with some requests for clarification. Interviewees varied in the degree to which they incorporated changes from the transcript into the write-up of the full interview. We also created an abridged version of each interview of a length suitable for publication in this newsletter and a glossary of key people and terms. All of these interview outputs, including the audio recording, were subsequently sent to the interviewees for review. A link to the full interview write-up, the glossary, and the podcast recording is included in the introduction to the abridged interviews published in this newsletter.

The diversity of experiences captured in the four interviews underscores the various inspirations and divergent paths each of our interviewees took toward their successful careers in comparative politics. Margaret Levi's experiences as a progressive activist motivated her interest in power and urban politics, which in turn brought her into contact with political economists who encouraged her interest in comparative politics. Susan Rose-Ackerman's work at the Council of Economic Advisers during the Johnson and Nixon administrations inspired her interest in corruption, which motivated her turn from her field of training – economics – to comparative politics and comparative law. Barbara Geddes found herself as a methodological pathbreaker in the field, in part due to practical choices she made returning to school later in life and with young children. Valerie Bunce became a political scientist after being told by a professor during her undergraduate studies that she couldn't become a lawyer, and she subsequently developed her passion for Eastern Europe through a three-month, honeymoon backpacking trip through the region. There is little commonality in these paths, but they each provided inspiration to break new ground in comparative politics.

For the purposes of this newsletter, we limited our scope to these four distinguished women, recognizing that there are numerous other path-breaking women in this generation of comparativists. Indeed, the very different narratives described in these four interviews underscore the importance of documenting additional women's experiences in future interviews. Ultimately, we hope the four interviews published in this special issue become just a small slice of the documented history of comparative politics, alongside previous interviews and additional future oral histories with scholars who have blazed the trail in diverse ways.

Overseeing this project, we have gained new inspiration

about how to approach our own work. Each of the interviewees remind us of the importance of being open to diverse sources of inspiration outside of the academic literature, whether from personal experiences in politics or avid readership of news magazines. They also highlight the reality that there is no one route to becoming a successful scholar and the importance of staying true to our goals and passions as we forge our own paths. We are especially humbled by each woman's generosity in giving service to the profession and mentoring the next generation of comparativists. We hope the interviews in this special issue provide inspiration to many generations of scholars to come.

NOTES

[1]Gerardo L. Munck and Richard Snyder (2007), *Passion, Craft, and Method in Comparative Politics,* John Hopkins University Press, p. ix.

[2]These interviews are in two separate archives, the APSA Political Scientists' Oral History Project (https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/ark:/16417/xt7rxw47sw7m) and the APSA African American Political Scientists' Oral History Project (https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/ark:/16417/xt7sqv3c2n3p).

[3]These video interviews are linked on APSA's Oral History website and hosted on Youtube (https://connect.apsanet.org/apsaoralhistory/history-of-the-profession-apsa-oral-history-project/).

[4]This reflects the general growth of political science in the United States and the increasing prevalence of women among graduate students starting in the 1960s. Schuck (1969) shows that the percentage of political science PhDs earned by women dropped between the 1920s and the 1950s. In total, 236 women received PhDs in political science in the 48 years between 1912 and 1959, while 234 did in the 9 years between 1960 and 1968. See Victoria Schuck (1969), "Women in Political Science: Some Preliminary Observations," *P.S.* 2 (4): 642-553.

[5]We thank Dawn Langan Teele for suggesting the podcast format, Ryan McEvoy, Brian Pauze and John Hartford at the Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning at Yale University for their technological support in conducting the interviews and cleaning the audio transcripts, Therese Eleonore Kenfack Dang of Cornell University for assistance in disseminating the podcast, and Rose Shaber-Twedt at the University of Gothenburg for administrative and copyediting support.

We invite early career scholars (graduate students, post-doctoral fellows, and assistant professors) to join us in a project in conducting further interviews with pathbreaking women in comparative politics. This entails helping conduct the background research for and doing the oral-history style podcast interviews with additional scholars who have blazed the trail in comparative politics. If you are interested, please contact us at kate.baldwin@yale.edu or ellen.lust@cornell.edu. We also welcome nominations of additional pathbreakers for inclusion in this project, particularly those whose identities, institutional affiliations and/or approach to research helped break new ground, with priority given to interviewing those born in earlier generations.

MARGARET LEVI ON POWER, TRUST AND THE STATE

By Fiona Kniaz, Siu Yu Lo and Victor C. Wu

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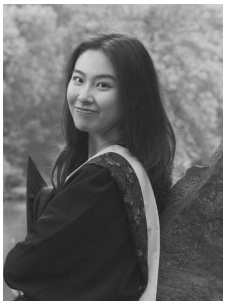

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Professor Margaret Levi is one of the most influential scholars in the field of political science. She is Professor Emerita of Political Science and Senior Fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute at Stanford University, as well as the Jere L. Bacharach Professor Emerita of International Studies at the University of Washington and the former Director of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford. For many years, she served as general editor for the Cambridge Series in Comparative Politics and the *Annual Review of Political Science*. The winner of the 2019 Johan Skytte Prize, the most prestigious award in political science, she is the author of many articles and pioneering books spanning comparative political economy, labor organization, and political trust. In 2025, the Comparative Politics Section of the American Political Science Association established the Margaret Levi Award for the Advancement of Comparative Methodology in her honor.

This is an abridged version of an interview conducted by Fiona Kniaz, Siu Yu Lo and Victor Wu by Zoom on April 3, 2025. A glossary of names and terms, a write-up of the full interview and the podcast itself can be found here: https://gld.gu.se/en/governance-uncovered-a-podcast-by-gld

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Siu Yu Lo: We would like to begin by hearing a little about what led you to become a political scientist. We understand that you began to engage in political activism when you were quite young. Can you tell us a little bit about those experiences?

Margaret Levi: Sure. Well, I think my first political experience was actually in the Civil Rights Movement when I was a child. My mother was very active in a quite liberal League of Women Voters chapter in Baltimore, Maryland, which was interracial, interreligious, and highly educated—strong-minded women. We grew up in Baltimore; it's not exactly the South, but it's right on the edge. Like all cities in the United States in the 1940s and '50s—I was born in '47—it was segregated in a whole lot of ways. The schools were segregated and so were institutions like the theaters, but we never went to the theater until they integrated, for example. My parents were very committed to integration. When I was maybe eight years old, my mother dressed my sister and me up in identical clothes—which was embarrassing to both of us—to go on a civil rights demonstration in downtown Baltimore to show that white middle-class people were in support of the Civil Rights Movement. That's my first political memory.

But as you can tell, my household was very political. My mother was getting calls from the governor and the mayor all the time, and she was very active in reforming the landlord tenant courts. My father was not as active politically. He was on the road as a sales executive, selling costume jewelry all across the South and the Midwest. But he gave me things to read that were very political.

By the time I got to high school, I was already very active in all kinds of things and joined the Students for a Democratic Society when I was still in high school and then went on to be quite active once I was in college. That was the Anti-War Movement. So I went from the Civil Rights Movement to the Anti-War Movement.

So how did I get involved in political science or how did that affect it? I was just deeply interested and engaged with politics and political science sounded like it was about politics, which I learned later it wasn't always, in fact, the kind of politics I was involved in. But I kept leaving it and coming back to it and leaving it and coming to it and finally settled on political science.

Siu Yu Lo: You took classes with Peter Bachrach in your undergraduate years at Bryn Mawr. You have said that his work on power had a significant influence on you. What was particularly distinctive about his teaching and mentorship for you?

Margaret Levi: Well, Peter was an incredible mentor. The work on power was done in part with Morton Baratz, an economist. I took the class on power that the two of them taught, I think my sophomore year, and he and I became quite friendly. He lived not too far away, and I became sort of part of his household. His mentoring involved not only teaching me about political science, or how he understood political science, but also engaging me as a real mentee, as a sort of apprentice. We were involved in some political actions together, both against the war in Vietnam, but also around trying to unionize the maids and porters, as they were called. And I was his RA. I proofread his first book, and I helped run the project that led to the second book that he did with Baratz, which was based on Baltimore, a city that I obviously knew very well. My first article was co-authored with him and Morton Baratz for that book while I was an undergraduate. So that was a very full mentoring experience.

Siu Yu Lo: Were there other formative experiences or mentors that you had as a student, either before or during graduate school at Harvard?

Margaret Levi: Yeah, there were three people at Harvard who had a huge impact on me. The first was Chester Hartman. He was in the Graduate School of Design, and I went to graduate school in the Graduate School of Design in a PhD program on regional and urban planning, initially. I then switched to political science. I kept going back and forth for a while. As part of a program Hartman ran, I became a technical assistant to a community organization fighting urban renewal in Boston called the South End Tenants Council. The South End of Boston was, at that time, basically a slum or ghetto, and the presumption was that nobody there

had any firm sense of residency or neighborhood attachment. I tracked that the kids stayed in the same school, even though people changed apartments because of the terrible rents and the rats and all kinds of things that were going on then. So this program enabled us to be technical assistants but to also be participants, to do participatory observation.

I ended up writing up my experience with the South End Tenants Council with somebody who I met who taught at MIT. I learned of him originally, Michael Lipsky, because he wrote an article about rent strikes and I was helping the South End Tenants Council run a rent strike. I read his article, and I used it sort of as our go-to manual for how to do this. He wasn't sure he was going to let me into his class, because Harvard started a week after MIT. He was very gruff on the phone. He says he's going to add something to the class, a reading, and he says, "It's by Bachrach and Baratz and someone named Levi." I said, "That's me." And he said, "I guess you're in the class." So afterwards we went for lunch. I then became part of his family, and he and I wrote up an article on the South End Tenants Council that was loosely based on the kind of argument that he'd made about rent strikes.

The third person who was incredibly important was very different: Edward Banfield. He was a conservative. I mean, I was a student radical, right? And he was a very deep conservative, and he taught the Chicago School kind of approach to political economy. He also taught a course with James Q. Wilson, who became my thesis advisor because Banfield had left to go to Pennsylvania at that point. He and Wilson taught a course on urban politics, which I took. I turned in my piece, my first draft of the South End Tenants Council piece before I worked with Lipsky on it. Banfield gave me a B minus or something. It's a terrible grade in graduate school at that time. But he said if I wanted—no comments—he was happy to talk to me about it. So I went right to his office, and he taught me how to write. He taught me how to think more logically and clearly. And it turns out he liked people who were structuralists. If you were right- or left-wing, it didn't matter to him if you thought about larger structures like class and the ways in which societies were organized. Banfield was incredibly important to me in multiple ways and turned out to really, really help me and give me a balance in terms of how I was thinking. It was a whole set of new tools that I don't think Bachrach could have given me or even Lipsky, so it was really remarkably important to have him as a teacher and a mentor.

Siu Yu Lo: We would like to turn to your career and major scholarly contributions now. You joined the University of Washington in the 1970s. How did you find your footing there, especially as a woman working in a male-dominated field?

Margaret Levi: Well, there were some other women when I joined the department. One of them left within a year. Another one got tenure a little before me. She was the first woman to get tenure, but she retired before she even got considered for full professor and never really finished. I was the first woman to become a full professor in the department. For more than 10 years, I was the only woman to be full professor in that department.

There were things that happened then that would not happen now. At the University of Washington, I got engaged with rational choice theory and that became part of what defined my research increasingly. A number of the other senior comparativists and others got very angry at me and thought that this was a terrible move on my part. They had no reluctance at screaming at me, literally, in the halls of the department. Today, we would call that harassment, and they would be reprimanded. But then, they felt no guilt about yelling at me. Banfield had yelled at me in the halls of Littauer. So this was an experience that I continually had because I stood up for myself and I didn't always do what they told me to do, and because I was a woman and a relatively youngish one. I didn't hear them yelling at the young men; they only seemed to yell at me. That was part of being a woman at that time in that period. But others had started to open the

doors—Elinor Ostrom and Fran Piven. The doors had been opened a little bit, and then I pushed it a little more.

Siu Yu Lo: You mentioned your early interest in urban politics. Your first book, *Bureaucratic Insurgency*, which was published in 1977, focused on police unions in the US. Your next book, *Of Rule and Revenue*, however, had a much broader comparative historical scope. What prompted that shift in focus?

Margaret Levi: Doug North, to a large extent. Michael Hechter, to a lesser extent. I was part of a group at the University of Washington that was having discussions. It was the beginning of the development of transaction costs theory, which Ronald Coase won the Nobel Prize for in economics, right about then. And Doug North, along with some economists at the University of Washington, was part of that movement. Michael Hechter from sociology, and to some extent, Karen Cook in sociology were also part of this group. Doug and I took to each other, and his wife and I became very close. And we decided we would teach together.

Doug had come to me; initially he was chair of the economics department and I was a first-year assistant professor at the University of Washington. He wrote me a note or called me and said that Sam Bowles, a very eminent left-wing economist, had told him he should check me out because Doug said he wanted to relearn the Marxism he'd learned a long time ago when he was an undergraduate at Berkeley because of some research that he was doing. And he understood I was a young Marxist, which I was at the time. So, I became a rational choice Marxist. I became part of that movement like Adam Przeworski, John Roemer, and Jon Elster.

Doug and I decided to teach together and create a program in political economy, an undergraduate program, in which students had to take some courses that we laid out. One of them was Marxian political economy that I taught. At the end, they took a seminar with me and Doug. Out of that course came *Structure and Change in Economic History* by Doug, which arguably won him the Nobel Prize, followed by some other books. And I wrote, ultimately, *Of Rule and Revenue* based on that class. So that whole experience broadened my interest. I subsequently became friends with Bob Bates; North introduced us. We got very interested in each other's work, so I got broader and broader in my understanding and moved from urban politics to comparative politics.

Victor Wu: *Of Rule and Revenue*—one of the earliest major works of rational choice theory in comparative politics—has become a classic since its publication in 1988. Has anything about its longevity or impact surprised you?

Margaret Levi: Everything! I had some optimism that it might have some impact, in part because people were telling me that it was likely to, and in part because I was pretty excited in a different way than I'd been with *Bureaucratic Insurgency* about what I was discovering as I wrote it. The reason why I thought it might have some significance was that, even though I was learning all about economic transaction costs and thought that the argument of the book would be why variation in taxes occurred over time really had to do with economic transaction costs, it turns out much more important were political transaction costs. So it brought me right back to my subject, and that's what I was teaching North. It wasn't so much about Marxism, though that was in there, but really about the role of politics and power. I certainly got invited lots of places, but I also noted that it never won an award. Other books won awards. It never did. So I thought, oh, okay, either it's not a very good book or people aren't getting it yet.

I discovered, as I've discovered with many of my works—this is going to sound a little braggadocio—that it takes a while for the profession to catch up, but they ultimately do. The same thing happened with *Consent, Dissent, and Patriotism*. The same happened with *In the Interest of Others*. Even the trust stuff, I think, took a little while for people to get it. But then they do, and at least some of them seem to have a lasting impact. So that's

pretty exciting.

Victor Wu: Another one of your books, *Analytic Narratives*, was co-authored with four other prominent social scientists. What motivated you all to write this book? And what do you think about the prospects for analytic narratives, roughly defined as the combination of formal theory and historical analysis, as a methodology in the social sciences today?

Margaret Levi: A group of us, four of the five, had decided to apply to the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences as a special project. We would all have to be accepted as fellows. Robert Bates had already been a fellow at the Center, and at that point the Center sort of anointed you to be a fellow. It wasn't really a selection. It wasn't an application process so much, except for these special projects. It was me, Bates, Barry Weingast, and Avner Greif. All of us were thinking about processes of political development. What we actually proposed was an understanding of why French development might be a better model than British development. Jean-Laurent Rosenthal was a fellow at the Center independently, and he joined our group as an economic historian. Within about a week or two of our starting to talk about the project, we realized that the more interesting question was how we all went about doing our research, and so we came up with *Analytic Narratives*. It took us several years to complete. There were a lot of arguments back and forth. We were refining each other's chapters and fighting about those. It was an incredible learning experience.

One of the reasons why it's called *Analytic Narratives* is this was a period when people were talking about meta-narratives and macro-narratives and mini-narratives and all kinds of narratives. So, we decided that we would appropriate the term "narrative" and add the term "analytic" and think about the ways all of us used formal theory, some quite explicitly like Greif or Weingast or Bates and some like me, implicitly. One of the fears we had for the book—which was realized—was that people would start using the term but wouldn't be rigorous. There are lots of people who claim to be doing an analytic narrative but aren't particularly rigorous about it.

How do I feel about the combination of formal theory and historical work now? I still think it's a very good approach. I think, however, it needs to use even more of the kind of contextual knowledge that transforms what you're looking for as evidence. But the idea that you can look at a very complex situation and find a model that tells you what you really need to look for in that complexity of information to find out if you're right or wrong in your argument, I think is a terrific contribution. I would like to see it refined and improved because nothing's ever perfect. I think that's been going on to some extent.

Victor Wu: You've said recently that you no longer identify explicitly as a rational choice theorist. We'd like to hear more about why. Has your approach to studying power and politics changed over time, either substantively or methodologically?

Margaret Levi: Well, all of these things have their cycles, and people use labels to describe themselves. Part of it is not so much that my work has fundamentally changed—I still think in lots of rational choice ways. But those labels don't mean anything anymore. They were part of an argument of an earlier era. I'm still informed by the Marxism I learned earlier on, but I don't call myself a Marxist anymore. These labels change, or the fights around what the labels represent change.

I think of myself as, I hope, a good social scientist who uses the available tools that we have at the moment because the tools get better. Some need to be shaken out. Some need to be rejected for certain purposes, in the enthusiasm of the day around a particular set of tools—they're often extreme variants—that then need to be let go and need a little bit of retraction. And sometimes they're paths that need to pushed even further. Right now, the experimental age is upon us in randomized control trials. I think it's a great tool, but I don't think it is *the* tool. Just as rational choice at one point claimed to be *the* tool. It's not *the* tool, it's *a* tool.

So all of these things, I think, have their time. That's probably an important part of the process because it brings a lot of people into thinking about how to use that tool, how to perfect that tool, and just where that tool belongs in the tool case—what it can be used for and what it can't.

Has my view on power fundamentally changed? Not really. I'm still concerned about the multiple ways in which power is expressed. I still think about the three or so faces of power in a variety of ways, so I still struggle with that. I'm writing a book right now with Pablo Beramendi and Tim Besley on political equality, or political inequality, depending on how you view both sides of that. One of the things I brought back into that is the three faces of power plus the structural face that Przeworski and Immanuel Wallerstein introduced, and we now have tools to study some of those things that we weren't able to do until quite recently. So I think my attitude towards what power is, is pretty much the same, but how you study it has probably evolved.

Fiona Kniaz: Transitioning now to your more recent work: How did your earlier work on police unions, power and political trust inform your more recent scholarship, such as *In the Interest of Others*, which explores the dynamics of labor unions and organizational leadership more broadly, and *A Moral Political Economy*, where you call for a new framework for thinking about political economy?

Margaret Levi: *Bureaucratic Insurgency* is really only important to me for a couple of reasons. I mean, it got me my PhD and a job. That was good. It also was a comparative piece of work, though it was urban comparative. I looked at three different cities, so it taught me certain comparative tools. It's important in that regard. But, for the purpose of your question, where it's important is that because I studied labor unions at one point in my life, I was considered a candidate for the Harry Bridges Chair at the University of Washington and running the Center for Labor Studies. I was always interested in labor. My interest in *studying* labor, perhaps, had waned. So when I became—Harry Bridges was a very famous and very radical leader of the West Coast longshoremen—the Harry Bridges Chair in Labor Studies, which was supported by the union, I got to know the history of that union much more closely.

The union was incredibly interesting because it was willing to take very big risks for its members, and its members were willing to pay very high costs to engage in actions that were in the interest of others, that weren't really about the union or that wouldn't really serve the membership in any kind of direct way. So, I was very curious about how that evolved. *Bureaucratic Insurgency* got me into this position and then I started thinking about the book that would become *In the Interest of Others*. John Ahlquist became my research assistant and ultimately my co-author of the book as it evolved. The work on power was clearly important because it made me think about the hierarchical and power relationships between the leadership and the members, both in this kind of union and in the other kinds of unions we studied comparatively to understand what was possibly causal in people to act against what would be thought of as their narrow self-interest, i.e., the rational choice piece of this. In a lot of the work that I did, even in *Of Rule and Revenue*, it was often using a rational choice framework to think about what self-interest should be and what you would predict people would do, and then trying to understand why they act differently than that. Rational choice wasn't always explaining it. Sometimes it was, depending on the problem. But sometimes it was the counterpoint.

John and I had real arguments. I love co-authoring because I love arguing. I learned from that. If it's a productive, constructive, nice argument, it can be intense, but it's in the interests of making things better.

The trust work also became very important in this because if you're building a community and solidarity among workers and between workers and their leaders, that's a trust relationship. How does the

leadership make itself trustworthy? That includes some mechanisms of accountability that are written into the system. So that led us into thinking about the governance arrangements of the unions that encouraged acting in the interest of others. It also led to thinking about how trust is built among the individuals who might disagree with each other about a particular action but ultimately came to act. Whatever the decision was, they were willing to act on it as long as it was done in a way that didn't violate their trust with each other. All of those things came into play with *In the Interest of Others*.

When I became the director of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, I was looking for special projects that we could do there. One of the things, an old standing interest dating from my days as a Harvard graduate student and even before that, was thinking about alternatives—Marxism played in here—to the current political economy. If you look at the history of capitalism, it transforms itself periodically. So the capitalism of Adam Smith is not the capitalism of John Maynard Keynes is not the capitalism of Milton Friedman. There are various forms that it can take, and it transforms as technology changes—this is back to North—as people change, as education changes, as societies change, as international relations change. It seemed to me we were due for a new political economy. I thought all capitalist political economies, dating back to the time of Adam Smith, have intrinsic in them and embody certain kinds of values. Sometimes they're explicit, and sometimes they're implicit. Calling it a "moral political economy" was to make those values explicit.

Fiona Kniaz: Lastly, we'd like to hear your thoughts on the future of political science.

Victor Wu: You've long been interested in political theory. Tell us more about how political theory has shaped your empirical work. What can empirical scholars of democracy learn from democratic theory and vice versa?

Margaret Levi: Peter Bachrach was a democratic theorist, so I was trained in democratic theory from the get-go. As you can tell, I'm a political being. I've always been committed to democracy and to its evolution, to how to make a better democracy and how to make a democracy that thinks as well about the political economic structure on which it is sitting. I'm interested in how you take these ideas and turn them into analytic tools and how you think about how we study the world and how we then measure the extent to which they realize the kinds of goals—or fail to realize, and why—that a democratic theorist might lay out. The book on political equality that I'm currently writing is exactly that combination. All three of us are interested in certain normative issues about political equality and how to achieve it and what it means, not just as a distributive issue but as an issue of process and practice and equity. What are the trade-offs, and how do you know how much of it there is? And what are the costs of having it, or what are the benefits of having it?

Fiona Kniaz: What theories or methodological approaches do you think should be emphasized or strengthened within the discipline? Where would you like to see political science go from here?

Margaret Levi: I think that, as I said, we have a history in political science of something coming to the fore and being explored and then finding its place in the toolbox. In my view, the exciting cutting-edge work has almost always been something that does several things at once. One, it is a tool that actually allows for an empirical advance: a statistical tool, an experimental tool, a formal tool that in itself is just a methodology, not necessarily attached to substance. But the really exciting work is also attached to substance, that is tools thought about in relationship to two other important sets of questions. One is what issues are we trying to resolve with this? What can we use these tools for? What questions do they answer? What issues do they help resolve that are important politically? And the other thing is that they take seriously the people in the context of the question, so that they aren't just abstracted. They're really coping with what real people do

and think and the world in which they live, the structural constraints that happen to affect how they're acting. So it's finding tools and methods that are able to combine the actual tool with a substantive question so that the tool doesn't become the driver, the substantive question becomes the driver for the tool. In answering that substantive question, it not only uses the tool, but thinks really hard about the context in which the people who the question is being asked about are being affected and are being constrained and facilitated.

Fiona Kniaz: You've also been quite active in public advocacy related to your areas of study. Could you tell us more about what you think the ideal relationship between scholarship and advocacy should be?

Margaret Levi: I'm not sure there is an ideal relationship because different people have different balances within themselves. I just hope there's always room within political science for people like me who try to be both an advocate and a serious social scientist. I don't think there's an ideal position. I just think we want to be open to a variety of positions. Someone who's only a political advocate—that's not political science. They have to do the political science if they want to be a political scientist, but then they can use it as the base for their advocacy. If somebody only wants to be a political scientist, that's legitimate. They don't have to be an advocate.

Fiona Kniaz: And finally, what advice would you like to share with future generations of students and scholars?

Margaret Levi: I'll give you the advice that Doug North gave me. He said, "Create a network of friends and colleagues that you're learning from, that you feel good about, that you are engaging with, and then do *really good* work." And they will help you advocate for it and help you support your career going forward. But it really involves being part of a collaborative network.

SUSAN ROSE-ACKERMAN ON CORRUPTION, EXECUTIVE POWER, AND POLICYMAKING

By Nyché Andrew, Melissa Pavlik and Manasi Rao

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This is an abridged form of the interview conducted by Nyché Andrew and Manasi Rao, with support from

Melissa Pavlik, graduate students in the Department of Political Science at Yale University, in New Haven, CT on April 3, 2025. A glossary of names and terms, a write-up of the full interview, and the podcast itself can be found here: https://gld.gu.se/en/governance-uncovered-a-podcast-by-gld

Manasi Rao: We'd like to begin by hearing a little bit about the experiences that led you to pursue a career in the social sciences. You began your graduate studies in economics at Yale on a National Science Foundation fellowship in the 1960s. What motivated you to pursue a PhD in economics?

Susan Rose-Ackerman: I majored in economics in college, but I came to college thinking I would major either in English or math. But, after my freshman year, I decided that neither of those fields was exactly what I wanted. And then I took economics. Actually, my father was an accountant, and he said, "Everyone should take economics." I thought, "Okay. Then, I'll take economics." For me, it combined the analytic rigor of mathematics with a connection to human society and behavior.

And I had some very good teachers, especially Marshall Goldman, a professor of economics at Wellesley who was a specialist in Russia (that is, the Soviet Union in the sixties). So, I got interested in the field, did well in the major, and began to think about what I wanted to do next. Graduate school seemed like an interesting next step, and it was a time when there were only a few women with doctorates. In fact, when I applied, a couple of schools, such as Princeton, were only just beginning to admit women into their economics graduate program. I applied to many places but decided to come to Yale.

Manasi Rao: During and immediately after your graduate studies at Yale, were there particular mentors or experiences that importantly influenced your career choices?

Susan Rose-Ackerman: When I was at Yale, one professor who encouraged broad-based, cross-disciplinary thinking was Ed, Charles Edward Lindblom, who was appointed jointly between the Economics and Political science Departments. The director of graduate studies, Joe [Merton Joseph] Peck—who worked in industrial organization and microeconomics, was a very fine mentor during my time in the Economics Department. My thesis was on the demand for used cars—not a very exciting topic. I got really tired of it by the end, but there was plenty of data on the prices of used cars. So, I developed an empirical project based on that under the supervision of a supportive committee, chaired by Professor William Brainard in the Economics Department. So those were the faculty who mattered the most to me. They weren't exactly mentors relative to what I'm doing now, but they encouraged me as I went through the graduate program.

Nyché Andrew: We'd like to turn to your research, beginning with your well-known contributions to the study of corruption. Your prize-winning book, *Corruption and Government,* has had a major impact on scholarship and has generated an entire wave of, research into corruption, its causes and consequences. What led you to first study corruption?

Susan Rose-Ackerman: I've always been interested in public policy and the relationship between economics and policy. When I was still finishing my dissertation, I spent a year as a junior staff economist at the Council of Economic Advisers at the end of the Johnson administration and the beginning of the Nixon administration. And one of the things I worked on was housing policy. My first teaching job was in the Finance Department at the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, where I taught a basic course in applied microeconomics. Then I took over a course in urban economics and continued teaching that course after I got to Yale. That's how I got interested in corruption, because, at that time, corruption was uncovered in some federal housing programs. I looked at the underlying causes, and I thought that if somebody with a little economics had been consulted when they were writing the law,

they might have noticed the incentives for corruption that were built into the program. And so, then I started thinking about corruption more generally and about how corrupt incentives can be built into the way a public program is designed, giving incentives for people both to demand and pay bribes.

Nyché Andrew: *Corruption and Government* has had a major impact on scholarship across disciplines and countries, and has been translated into many different languages, likely because it tackles a universal issue that is extremely broad in scope. What is gained and lost from comparativists focusing on big, broad questions, such as the ones you tackle in the book, which require drawing on evidence from a variety of cases, as opposed to more precise questions with a narrowly defined evidentiary scope? How do you adjudicate the trade-off between depth and breadth in both asking a research question and answering it?

Susan Rose-Ackerman: Well, that's a big, broad question itself! I guess there are two things to say here. One is, I came into this topic from my background in economics, so I was thinking about it in terms of an agency-principal relationship, and how those occupying some particular role, say within government, are the agents of something bigger, and there can be a tension between looking out for their own interests in a narrow sense and reflecting the values of the institution that they're part of. That's a universal problem that shows up in many different forms. My own focus has been on the way the institutional structures in which people operate affect their incentives to accept or pay bribes. But of course, I'm completely sympathetic to research that draws much more on sociology, anthropology, history, or psychology to study the broader connections to the way society operates. I welcome that research; it's just that it's not where my own particular background and talents lie. I think it's important for people both to consider my perspective and to ask how it relates to the broader concerns of other scholars. Some criticize the economically oriented research on corruption by saying that it doesn't take culture into account and that in some cultures everybody gives gifts to everybody all the time.

Even so, one still can analyze whether the problems that arise when behavior that occurs at the level of the family or small community is extended to the way governments or bureaucracies work. It's that tension or that overlap that is interesting to me.

Nyché Andrew: One lesson from *Corruption and Government* is that corruption is inherently inefficient. Others argued at the time and since, in general and in specific contexts, that corruption, as you define it, actually serves important governance functions, such as reducing delays, enhancing productivity, empowering individuals and their relationship with the state. How would you respond to those holding these views? Has your response or opinion changed over the course of your career?

Susan Rose-Ackerman: I don't deny that there can be cases in which the government is so dysfunctional that the only way people can function is by paying somebody off, but such bribery is evidence of that dysfunction and reflects problems with government performance that should be targets for reform. However, if citizens generally applaud these kinds of personal relationships in dealings with the public sector, then the law ought to reflect that attitude. In other words, it's a choice that countries can make about what fits into the illegal category, and what exemplifies ordinary interpersonal dealings that don't break the law. And that's a major choice that any legal-social system makes. I've focused on thinking about that border, that is, what should be illegal and what should be acceptable. And if someone argues that a close personal relationship between those in the public and private sectors is actually functional, they need to defend that claim. For example, one would need to argue that there aren't many people left out. The problem with close personal relationships with officials is that often many others

don't have them. Thus, they're not eligible to obtain various benefits or avoid certain costs. If you think that's acceptable, then you have to defend your claim. Using prices, corrupt prices, to allocate public benefits does treat all those with enough money and a lack of moral scruples the same in their efforts to obtain the public benefit, whatever their background is.

Thus, one needs to consider the consequences of allocating public services in that way and to ask if there is a public-policy argument against such a system of public-service delivery. For example, in a corrupt system, the benefits of public housing would go to people who have no scruples about breaking the rules and sufficient money. So, if public housing is supposed to go to poor people, that's not going to happen in a corrupt system. This tension or trade-off must be confronted by the defenders of payoffs.

Nyché Andrew: What's one takeaway from your experience working on corruption that you feel is often missed or underemphasized in scholars' interpretation of your work?

Susan Rose-Ackerman: I am labeled as the principal-agent person by some who write about corruption. I get very tired of reading things that say, "Susan Rose-Ackerman… she has developed the principal agent model of corruption, and we all know that's the old-fashioned model." I still want to defend it, but also to say, look, I've never said that it was the only thing that needed to be thought about. And I also think my own work has developed over time from my first article about it, which was published in 1976, and my book a couple of years later. So, I'm annoyed by those who seek to put me in this little box.

Manasi Rao: Your research has spanned multiple topics and geographic areas over your career, in particular moving from the study of corruption to the process of policymaking and policy execution, both in established democracies and in Eastern European states in transition. What prompted shifts in your area of focus over time? What motivated your development of expertise in Eastern European countries, and was it due to topical events, unexpected findings, or something else?

Susan Rose-Ackerman: I didn't start out in comparative politics. I started out in economics, but even after I moved into the fields of political science and public law, I didn't do comparative work. And so how did my interest in comparative work begin? My husband Bruce Ackerman, who is also a professor, had a chance to go to Germany for a year to be a fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin, an institute for advanced study. And I sought support from Yale and also applied for Fulbright and Guggenheim fellowships. But in applying for these fellowships, I couldn't say "I want to go because my husband's going." He could do research on anything he chose, but I had to have a reason to go to Germany. So, I thought, "Wouldn't it be interesting to study German environmental law and policy." That topic is not directly related to corruption, but it's a policy area that has long interested me.

My first book, *The Uncertain Search for Environmental Quality*, co-authored with Bruce and two other people, was a case study of environmental policymaking process in the Delaware River estuary. Thus, I decided to study the relationship between policymaking in Germany and the United States. Thus, the year before we went to Berlin, I took the Yale freshman German course – every morning at 8:30 – and I took a second summer course. I learned German to the level where I certainly was not fluent, but could read German, and I could interview somebody who spoke German and some English. I would speak English, and they spoke German, and we could consult a dictionary, if needed. So, my research on comparative environmental law and policy was a new direction.

There were two parts to this. One was the opportunity of going to Europe and of not being scared about changing direction, that is, about doing something completely different, but still anchored in my interests in applied public policy

and political economy. Second, it was a lot of fun — really very interesting, to try to get my head around the way in which the German political and economic system dealt with environmental regulations. I did many interviews when I was there, as well as reading much material in German, and I ended up writing a book comparing German and U.S. environmental policymaking, *Controlling Environmental Policy.* That launched me into comparative politics. One message to other scholars is that if you didn't start out in comparative politics, you can switch, or you can bring a comparative dimension to whatever else you're studying. For me, it was very fruitful to try to understand what was going on in Germany compared to the U. S. to get some insights on broader questions of how policy is made, and particularly for me, on the public accountability of the policy making process.

Manasi Rao: Your most recent book, *Democracy and Executive Power*, which was released in 2021, takes a deep dive into how the executive branch shapes policymaking and accountability in the U.S., the U.K., France, and Germany. Why the focus on the executive branch, and why these cases? Was the book a natural extension of your earlier work, or did something push you to focus more on the executive?

Susan Rose-Ackerman: Most of my comparative work has focused on policymaking in the executive, broadly conceived—in other words, not just the cabinet structure of government but regulatory agencies, some of which have a certain amount of independence from the cabinet. And, as you mentioned, my Eastern European book, *From Elections to Democracy*, argues that it wasn't enough to have elections in the transition from socialism. Also important was the way the regulatory activities of the executive branch were reformed and recreated during the transition in Hungary and Poland. In addition, with two co-authors and former students, I studied the *Due Process of Lawmaking in the US, Germany and South Africa,* in an effort to link the legislative and administrative policymaking processes in three states.

My most recent book, *Democracy and Executive Power*, as you note, focuses on advanced democracies with a fairly long period of regulating the economy, and providing social welfare benefits to people through large bureaucracies. In that book, I deepened and updated my previous work on Germany and the U.S.. I was also interested in France, and I had the chance to spend a semester at Sciences Po in 2011. There, I studied the French case with a wonderful graduate student, Thomas Perroud, who then became my coauthor and is now a professor in France. I added the U.K. later, because it has had such an important global influence on public policymaking processes worldwide, but also because I did not have to learn a new language.

One year, Bruce and I spent a couple of months first in South Africa and then in London. One of my motivations for studying these particular countries was the hope that their strengths and weaknesses could provide lessons for middle income countries with a potential for reform, especially countries in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Asia, where both positive lessons and cautionary tales would be helpful. In other words, I am interested in middle-income countries where domestic reformers might benefit from understanding how governments work in other places and maybe get some ideas and learn some cautionary tales. So, my idea in this book was to study cases that are not just different in terms of their administrative systems but also in terms of their underlying constitutional structures – that is to study the relationship between a country's constitution, especially whether it's some variant of a presidential or a parliamentary system, and the way in which the executive implements statutes and constitutional mandates.

Manasi Rao: Your research in comparative administrative law talks about how different legal and institutional frameworks shape governance, what works and what doesn't work in different contexts. You were also a member of the FACTI Panel, a high-level panel convened by the General Assembly

of the UN and the Economic and Social Council. Its report, issued in 2021, emphasizes strengthening coordination and global governance and financial integrity. From your experience, what role can comparative case studies, such as your own, play in helping policymakers design stronger global accountability frameworks? What are the biggest obstacles in translating lessons across different legal and political systems?

Susan Rose-Ackerman: We do not have a world government. We have some global institutions, such as the U. N. and the World Bank. By the way, I spent a year as a visiting scholar at the World Bank in 1995-1996, during Jim [James] Wolfensohn's first year, when the Bank began to be willing to mention the word corruption in their discussions about policy. Thus, I have given some thought to their role and to the lessons international institutions can learn from the experiences of other countries. International bodies need to understand the constraints of operating within individual political systems if they're going to suggest or recommend more cooperation at the international level. But I also think there are inevitable limitations to global governance, which we're certainly seeing play out in real time right now. Other than understanding those differences, I don't have a blueprint for how to produce viable reform via international bodies. I think it's valuable that they exist. I'm glad that we have both the World Bank and the United Nations, as well as international civil society organizations like Transparency International and some of the other foundations that work internationally. I haven't really focused on the international architecture itself, partly because I have always had a problem understanding what international law is. It is an important field, but it's not so clear to me exactly how to articulate the framework within which it works.

Nyché Andrew: Finally, you've taught and mentored students across law, economics and political science, fields that approach corruption, democracy, and accountability in distinct ways. How do these distinctions shape your approach to teaching and mentoring students across different fields, which might seek answers to different types of questions or favor different types of approaches? How do these experiences of teaching and mentoring shape your work?

Susan Rose-Ackerman: I adjust my teaching and advising to the students' backgrounds and interests, but I always at least try to be very open-minded in mentoring students, recognizing that they arrive with very different backgrounds. I always try to help them develop their own ideas. And part of that effort is helping people think for themselves, because sometimes you find that a student comes in, and says, "Oh, I've read everything, Here's my literature review." Well, you do need to read broadly and deeply, but if you spend too much time doing a literature review, you get too scared and intimidated and don't dare to say anything original. I hope that I am good at mentoring people, and at helping them to think about how to make a distinctive contribution. Not so much the techniques needed, but rather the mindset that lets you make a contribution. Thus, the mentoring role is meant to help students recognize the importance of thinking for themselves. And I hope I can help them do that. I do not operate by saying "Oh, that's wonderful. I'm so glad you did that." Rather, I try to have a critical perspective on what they're trying but to do so in a way that's helpful, friendly and open. I also help students to find other scholars with more specialized knowledge, especially when they're doing comparative politics. Of course, there are plenty of countries I know very little about. And, even for the ones I know about, I don't necessarily know what happened last year or in many key sectors. Also, I think the type of advice that I try to give is "don't get stuck in one little rut. It's kind of boring." I know some people who only wrote on one narrow topic over their whole career. But it seems to me not very interesting to spend, say, 40 years doing just one thing.

BARBARA GEDDES ON MARRYING THEORY AND EVIDENCE IN THE STUDY OF POLITICAL REGIMES

By Jonathan Elkobi and Saumyaa Gupta

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Professor Barbara Geddes has fundamentally reshaped how political scientists understand authoritarian regimes, state capacity and institutional development. She is currently a professor emerita of political science at UCLA. Born in 1944, she went back to school in her 30s, earning her BA (1978) and then PhD (1986) in political science from the University of California, Berkeley. Widely recognized for her path-breaking theoretical contributions to our understanding of authoritarianism and democratization, she has also influenced our thinking about research design in comparative politics. Over the course of her career, she has chaired more than 50 dissertations and served as a committee member for more than 50 additional advisees. In 2025, the Comparative Politics Section of the American Political Science Association established the Barbara Geddes Award for Life-time Achievement in Research, Teaching, and Graduate Mentoring in her honor.

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This is an abridged form of an interview conducted by Jonathan Elkobi and Saumyaa Gupta, graduate students in the Department of Political Science at Yale University, with the support of Ellen Lust, Director of the Governance and Local Development Institute at Cornell University and the University of

Gothenburg, via Zoom, on April 17, 2025. A glossary of names and terms, a write-up of the full interview, and the podcast itself can be found here: https://gld.gu.se/en/governance-uncovered-a-podcast-by-gld

Jonathan Elkobi: We'd like to begin this interview by hearing a little about the early experiences and influences that shaped your career. After spending time outside of academia, you returned to school to pursue your studies. How did that shape your experience of graduate school, your perspective as a scholar, and your approach to research and teaching?

Barbara Geddes: I started graduate school with three children and, at that time, that was extremely unusual. The other women who were in graduate school at that time, not that there were very many, but those that I met, were persuaded that you couldn't be successful as an academic if you had children. So I was very defensive about having children and very worried about whether I would be taken seriously. And as a result, I kept my children secret from most people in the department for a number of years. So that's, looking back on it, pretty crazy. It wasn't necessary. But anyway, I thought it was at the time. It was very important to me to do well in graduate school because I felt guilty about putting my children in childcare. This is not logical, but it is the way I felt. I felt that unless I got feedback telling me that I was going to be able to get a job at the end of it, that I really couldn't justify putting my children in childcare.

Jonathan Elkobi: Who were the most influential mentors and advisors during your academic training, and how did they shape your approach to studying politics, particularly your focus on authoritarian regimes and state capacity?

Barbara Geddes: My advisor was Kenneth Jowitt, who is a Romania specialist who was not well-known but was very important at Berkeley at that time. He taught the main undergraduate and the core graduate class in comparative politics. He is extremely smart, and he did really affect the way I think about the world. He shaped my basic ideas about how societies make the transition from agricultural and poor to more modern. His understanding of how top-down change happens was very important to building my world view, my understanding of how the world works.

I think at that time especially, and still, political science tends to study ordinary people through surveys and experiments and so on because they're easier to study. And yet, I think a lot of what we're interested in finding out about isn't primarily caused by ordinary people. A lot of things are caused by governments and by elites. We don't have the tools for studying them that we have for studying individuals. So it's harder. Jowitt was very important in influencing my general understanding and making me aware that elites shape a lot of public opinion and a lot of mass action. He was also very important in providing some recognition. You know, graduate school is hard on people. You have these hurdles you have to get over and you are constantly criticized, because that's what it means to hand the paper in.

The other person who was really important to me was Chris Achen, who is a political methodologist. He was teaching the methods sequence at that time. I didn't expect to take methods, because at that time people in comparative did not take methods. Nobody did. I was the only one doing it, but I was very attracted to it as soon as I was exposed to it.

Chris also ran a lunch book reading group. It was my first exposure to rational choice and game theory through reading some Mancur Olson and Russell Hardin. The comparative field at that time at Berkeley was very hostile to rational choice…including my advisor, who hated it and used to tell me "You cause me great dissonance," because I just immediately, as soon as I read those things, it was just like my mind had new tools that were just constantly in action. They made me feel that my imagination could do more than it had been able to do before. I think Jowitt was more important for personal reasons, but

Achen probably had more influence on the kind of scholar I've turned into.

Jonathan Elkobi: We understand that you were initially interested in Eastern European politics, particularly the dynamics of communist regimes. So what led you to develop an interest in Latin America in your dissertation work?

Barbara Geddes: My children, basically. I realized that I wouldn't be able to do fieldwork in a Communist country. At that time, the way people usually did fieldwork in Communist countries – remember, this is before the end of the Cold War – was that you had to go to the country and pretty much live in a student dormitory, and that was the only way people found to do substantial fieldwork. And I couldn't do it. It wasn't possible.

My most central substantive interest was in how countries go from being poor to being better off. And so I just decided I would have to study it someplace else. Latin America seemed easier for a person with children to manage. I thought initially that I would be able to take my children for fieldwork. It didn't turn out that that was possible. But it was true that it was much easier to do fieldwork there. And of course, the language was easier for me. And, you know, it worked out well as a choice. But it was just a practical choice. You couldn't be a serious comparativist at that time without spending a substantial time at fieldwork.

Saumyaa Gupta: You joined the political science department at UCLA in 1984. Looking back at your early career at UCLA, what were some of the most important lessons you learned throughout your journey?

Barbara Geddes: I'd like to say something about the atmosphere at UCLA, because I think it did make a big difference to me over my lifetime. When I arrived at UCLA, there was only one woman in the department, and she was in a totally different field and not very interested in me or socializing. But there was a very intellectually rigorous political economy lunch group that I was invited to join. That group included all of the younger and mid-career more prominent people in comparative and IR, so it included Ron Rogowski, Jeff Frieden, David Lake, Mike Wallerstein, Art Stein. It was a very high-powered group. There were a few economists who came, and I learned a tremendous amount about political economy. It was basically a crash course in political economy, which had not really been taught at Berkeley except in a kind of superficial way. So I never took those classes at Berkeley.

The Political Economy group was really important to finishing up stuff that I probably should have learned in graduate school. But it also made me feel very included in the department. I think it's hard for women when there are not other women – and for other minorities, immigrants, and so on, when they're the only one of who they are – to feel that they're completely included in this department. I feel that I owe a longtime debt of gratitude to the men in the department who made me feel, from the very beginning, included and respected. Because I know that has not been the experience of many women when they get their first jobs, even 20 and 30 years later. So I think that being the only woman in my part of the department could have been hard, but it wasn't.

Saumyaa Gupta: Your first book, *Politician's Dilemma*, uses a rational choice framework to explain the conditions under which self-interested politicians choose to invest in a professional civil service over clientelism. How did you develop the theory in *Politician's Dilemma?* Did it emerge deductively from rational choice models, or was it inductively developed through your study of cases like Brazil?

Barbara Geddes: It was an iteration between the two. I was interested in state capacity because I had gotten the idea that that was part of the answer to why some developing countries seemed to be making so much more progress toward reducing poverty than others. And, at that time, Brazil seemed to be a country that had been doing very well most of the time economically. So I thought I

would see why it was doing so much better than other Latin American countries.

I thought it had something to do with state capacity, but I was very fed up with the kind of stuff that had been written before. There was a lot of literature that talked about corruption in the bureaucracy and patron-client relationships as just a consequence of it being the cultural norm, culturally accepted. That was the dominant view. And yet, when I was in Brazil, I never spoke to anyone who seemed to feel that way. They would agree that corruption was very common and patron-clientelism was very common, but they didn't like it. They really were very eager to see it cleaned up.

I was dealing with Brazil when it was democratic, before the military took power, in my dissertation. Most of the population wanted to have corruption cleaned up, and yet, those democratic legislators wouldn't do it.

So who's benefiting from this? I think the actual thing that I said that was different from what other people had said was that politicians are benefiting from it, rather than talking about what class groups might be benefiting from it. It just seemed to me obvious that the main beneficiaries were politicians, not anybody in the society. Then, as I thought about that and tried to think about putting some structure on it so that it would be a more clear argument, it just seemed a natural for a simple game.

So, I don't think it came directly from reading. It was a question that didn't seem to have a good answer in what other people had written. And it was obviously some kind of strategic interaction because you have politicians and voters interacting. Game theory is just a natural tool for studying that. And then, once I put the game on it, and figured out exactly what kind of a game would work for what I was trying to say, then an implication of the game was that you would find reforms when the two largest parties were equal.

I never had read that. I had no personal intuition about it. I didn't think it was even likely to be true. But once it was an implication of my game, then I had to try to test it. So, I had to collect some kind of information or data about other Latin American countries, at a minimum, in order to test it. And that's what I ended up doing.

Saumyaa Gupta: How did you first become interested in the institutional differences between autocratic regimes? Do you see a line of connection between this work and the *Politician's Dilemma?*

Barbara Geddes: Not really. What it's connected to is my book on research design, which I wrote in between those two things. The beginning of my work on authoritarianism arose when I was trying to work out an example, initially for my graduate class on research design, and then to use in the book, where I was trying to get across the idea of breaking up a very complicated outcome into multiple processes. I had the idea that we would make more progress intellectually if we really understood the processes rather than continually trying to get a list of variables that contribute to an outcome.

The top thing people were interested in at that time was democratization, and so I just took that topic. I felt very frustrated by that literature. At the time, it was dominated by a lot of descriptive studies of one or a few countries and also a few kinds of mechanical quantitative studies.

I didn't like any of that, and some of it had been done by some very smart people. I think when you see a situation where people who you know are smart are working on a problem and not making much progress, then you should ask yourself, is there something basic about the way they're trying to do this that doesn't work very well?

I thought that you could explain some of the components of democratization with more rigor and more theoretical coherence than you could the whole democratization.

I mean, there is a contingency about

democratization. You have to have a number of different, partially independent things happen at the same time in order for a regime breakdown to end up being democratization at the end.

Because I had studied both Latin America and communist countries, I was very aware that the things we call authoritarianism are quite different from each other, that it's kind of a catch-all category. I felt that I couldn't say anything interesting that would be true for all the different kinds of authoritarianism that I actually knew something about. I decided to put them in categories and see if that would help. If you get into a situation where you can't say anything that's true of all the cases you're looking at or what you're saying is, "Yeah, it's a little of this, a little of that. And sometimes it's this way and sometimes it's that way," you should stand back and say "I'm looking at this the wrong way. It needs to have some different kind of structure put on the way I'm thinking about it." The thing that I thought of to do was to divide the authoritarian regimes into categories and look at the breakdown process separately in each category.

There was nothing original about the categories that I chose. I think they were the categories that most people who wrote about authoritarianism were already using in a more descriptive way. People who worked on Latin America studied military governments; people who worked on Eastern Europe studied communist governments. But there were a lot of single party or dominant party governments in Africa at the same time and in Asia and, even some in Latin America at that time, though we never studied them.

Because I had studied both areas Eastern Europe and Latin America, the differences among autocracies were more noticeable to me. Once I had divided the regimes into categories, I developed a little bit of theory about why those different kinds of regimes would behave differently, and what kinds of crises they would have. That's actually the contribution, not the typology per se.

Saumyaa Gupta: Your theoretical and empirical work distinguishing between personalist, military and one-party authoritarian regimes has been enormously influential in the field. Are there any aspects of this typology and data that you feel have been missed or underemphasized in its application by other scholars?

Barbara Geddes: I think the typology has been used uncritically because it works well when you put it in big datasets and, to me, anyway, it looks like it's used more in IR rather than in comparative. I think it's kind of funny, actually, that people in IR have used it so much. I think that people in comparative were more sophisticated about its use, and at least some of them complained about it as endogenous. I don't think you should see all authoritarian regimes as similar, but that doesn't mean that the typology itself is something that you should take too seriously. You know, it's the first cut. It's the first way of understanding things better. And then, you know, in your generation you're going to go beyond it in one way or another.

Ellen Lust: In your book *Paradigms and Sand Castles,* you advocate for breaking down big questions into smaller, more manageable processes to make rigorous causal inferences. Looking at subsequent trends in political science, how well have scholars heeded this advice? In particular, some people have criticized the field as recently overemphasizing smaller questions that can be answered using causal identification. What is your opinion on these debates?

Barbara Geddes: I don't see experiments as being an instance of breaking down big questions into smaller questions. I don't think people who do experiments are usually attempting to ask big questions. I mean, I don't think they're trying to contribute to answering big questions usually when they do experiments. Mostly, they're trying to answer questions about individual people's attitudes toward ethnicity and small-group interactions. If you're interested in those kinds of questions, then I

think experiments are great, but you can't explore many of the things that comparative politics has traditionally been interested in, that I'm still interested in. I mean, you can't usually think of an experiment that you can do that involves elites. It's very rare for us to be able to do things like that.

I think experiments are the natural conclusion from my work on selection bias, which is also in the book. Selection bias is incredibly hard to deal with when you're trying to answer some of the traditional questions in comparative politics. Almost anything you can think of to do gets messed up by the fact that authoritarianism is chosen by some group of people as the state that their country is going to be in. So it's very hard to study any of the big questions because of selection bias issues.

Personally, I hope that we can continue to be clever about finding natural experiments. I think you have to be really careful about it, but that there is a lot more possibility for explaining big questions using natural experiments. Especially in places where you can discover that some new policy has been started or some new system has been started in an as-if random way. It's hard to use them carefully because sometimes the natural experiment naturally comes bundled with some other issue that you don't want, that‘s really entangled and you can't disentangle it. So you have to keep your eye out. But that's a place where I think we have a lot of progress to make.

Ellen Lust: Next, we would like to ask you about your mentorship of your students and your advice to younger scholars. You have collaborated with lots of your former students on many works, and you've won the Bingham Powell Graduate Mentor award and the first mentorship award in the UCLA Department of Political Science. What do you believe are the key factors to your success in teaching and advising?

Barbara Geddes: I don't actually think I've had great success in teaching, if you want to know. I'm an okay teacher, but I don't think I'm super. I don't think I have an exciting enough personality to be one of those really charismatic teachers. On mentoring roles, I do have opinions about it, and I think it really does help if you like students. I always have. I don't know what accounts for differences in that.

There are two things that I would like to say here. The first is that I believe that the most important thing that a mentor can do for students is actually to read their work carefully and give them careful comments. I know that's not what people usually think of, but that is really the way you help people to learn and to become better.

People are not born knowing how to write. It's really important to read with logic in mind, helping people to notice when they haven't completely filled in their thought, where they haven't really made clear what they mean. I think that people improve their writing by iteration, just by doing it, repeating, by rewriting after feedback. You can improve yourself by rewriting just on your own. Everybody does that. But you can improve even more if you have somebody to read it for you. So I think that's the most important thing and the most long-lasting thing.

Writing and thinking more clearly are really intertwined. I've noticed forever for myself that I think that I have clear thoughts, and when I start writing them, I realize that they weren't clear, that I have to think things through in order to be able to put them down on paper. So that's the first thing.

The second thing has to do with the way you personally interact with students. Maybe I should start this by saying that my first act as a beginning assistant professor was to make a male graduate student cry when I criticized his dissertation. I was appalled. I had no idea that that would happen. I was just talking to him the way I would have talked to my fellow graduate students at Berkeley. (I had not filed my own dissertation at that point.)

I just had no idea. But it was a terrifically good lesson because it reminded me of something that, of course, I knew, which is that this is a

hierarchy. No matter how unimportant you as a faculty member think that hierarchy is, students always think it's important. They take the things you say much more seriously than you often intend. Those are my two things. Don't forget that you're in a hierarchy so you need to be careful about what you say, and help with the writing.

Ellen Lust: Let's move on from teaching to research. What advice would you give to current graduate students and junior scholars in political science who hope to produce the type of impactful research that has defined your career?

Barbara Geddes: Well, there's no substitute for thinking. That's really the only way. As far as things that you can take as more actionable, I would say don't pay too much attention to the literature. A lot of what's written in political science is not going to be very long lasting.

We shouldn't be trying to do the next little article in a very well-established field. I don't think that's the way you make an impact. If you are aiming higher, I'd advise you to read as widely as you possibly can, about other parts of the world that are not where you're focusing, and in history, to read about facts to the extent that you can, not people's theories about what's going on. Theories can be very distorting and can bias what you understand about the world.

I would really encourage you to read *The Economist* every week if you possibly can. And whatever your taste leads you to for other things. But maybe if it were me, I would say *The Economist* and *The New York Review of Books*. You don't have to read the reviews of fiction if you don't want to, but the rest of it is very informative. It helps you to be able to notice when other people are talking nonsense, which they do frequently in graduate seminars.

When you're reading political science articles, don't skim just to get the argument. I know that other people will give you advice to do exactly that. It's a good way to prepare for qualifying exams if you have them, which are basically literature reviews, but it's not the way to actually be better at your own work. Instead, you should read with engagement. That is, you're involved, you care, and that means you notice when you disagree with something, you notice when you think something is wrong. And you also read the empirical work that claims to support the argument and make up your own mind about whether it really does support the argument. A lot of good research topics also come out of reading things that you have a response to of "I don't believe that, it couldn't be true," or just a response of annoyance.

So as the last thing I would say, work on topics that interest you, because usually anything that you do, you end up working on much longer than you thought you were going to, and you get really bored if you weren't really interested in it. But at the same time that I say that, I would also say, especially when you're in graduate school, don't just stick to what you already know you're interested in, because you have no idea what you might be interested in by the end of graduate school or later in your career. I had no idea that I would end up working on authoritarianism when I was in my first years as a faculty member, and certainly not in graduate school. There are all kinds of things that you'll discover are interesting once you find out more about them. You shouldn't cut yourself off from those things. Some people do that as a kind of a strategy for managing the time problem. I do totally get it, that you have a time problem. I mean, we all do. I have never in my life done anything as well as it could have been done, because I've always had to turn it in before I could really make it as good as it could have been. But that's just life.

I don't think the strategy of not doing anything except what you know best is good. I mean, it might be a good strategy for surviving. I think it probably is. If all you want to do is survive graduate school, that strategy will work. But if you want to do more than that and build the basis for a career that has more of an impact on the profession, then you can't cut yourself off from other areas of research. You really have to have broad knowledge in order to do something novel. You won't

VALERIE BUNCE ON TAKING CHANCES AND LIVING CHANGE

By Frances Cayton and Prisca Jöst

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Professor Valerie Bunce is one of the most influential voices in comparative politics and international relations. Professor Bunce is the Aaron Binenkorb Professor of International Studies Emerita and Professor of Government at Cornell University, where she previously served as Director of the Institute for European Studies. A member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences since 2010 and an author of several pivotal books, including *Subversive Institutions: The Design and the Collapse of Socialism and the State*, her research has significantly shaped our understanding of democratization, authoritarianism, and post communist transitions.

This is an abridged version of an interview conducted by Frances Cayton, a PhD student in the Government Department, and Prisca Jöst, a post-doctoral fellow in the Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy, at Cornell University on May 23, 2025.

A glossary of names and terms, a write-up of the full interview, and the podcast itself can be found here: https://gld.gu.se/en/governance-uncovered-a-podcast-by-gld

Valerie Bunce

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Prisca Jöst: We would like to begin by hearing a little bit about your experiences that led you to pursue political science.

Valerie Bunce: There are a number of factors. One was that I grew up in a very

political environment at home. My parents were very, very political. More towards the left. I witnessed how they were influenced by all the changes that took place in the 1950s and 1960s in the United States. They grew up in Indiana, which was a very racist place. They moved for financial reasons to the Detroit area to work in the auto industry, and they really, especially my mother, had to rethink their entire understanding of race in the United States, because of the racial diversity of both Pontiac and the assembly line, together with what was going on with respect to Brown versus the Board of Education, and the Civil Rights movement. So, we talked about politics constantly at the dinner table. I was surprised and very much affected by how both of my parents re-thought their own values and attitudes.

My father was a member of the United Auto Workers. That was a very political union, and we lived in an auto neighborhood. Our house was built by GM, for example. We went to auto picnics. We did all that stuff. So we were wrapped up in a kind of American Union life and Social Democratic life. And then, when I went to the University of Michigan as an undergraduate, I fell in love with the politics courses pretty quickly. I knew right away that that's what I wanted to do.

I also thought at the time that I would become a lawyer, which was at that point unthinkable, given my gender and my limited economic resources. When I went to see the prelaw professor, he essentially told me to leave his office because I couldn't become a lawyer. It was unthinkable for him, and that harsh reception sent me towards political science and the academy. It was less of a political minefield. Later, I realized the parallels between my situation and decisions by so many younger people in the Soviet Union to work in the sciences. It was safer, more free.

Frances Cayton: You mentioned attending University of Michigan for your degrees. Could you tell us more about the intellectual environment there?

Valerie Bunce: It was a great time to be there, and I'm always a little bit sad to think that other people didn't grow up at the same time as I did. Because it was a time of ferment, obviously the Vietnam War and the anti-war movement. It was the time, as I mentioned already, of the civil rights movement, which morphed into other kinds of movements.

People went to college then not to get certified — not to ride an escalator to the top; they went there to get educated. There was no discussion of enhancing your resume. It wasn't the world at that time. It was just, you know, what do you think about Kent State or some other important political development, and how did that relate to more intellectual issues. It was a time and a place (the University of Michigan was a key site for anti-war activity in the U.S.) that blurred the boundaries between the real world and the Academy because so much was happening of so much import. So, it was intense, and it was fun. It was a lot of meetings, a lot of demonstrations, a lot of all-night discussions.

I remember vividly working for George McGovern. I remember vividly the Ann Arbor City Council at that time, which was Republican. But not like those Republicans we have now. They had not allocated enough voting booths for the massive turnout for the 1972 presidential election. It was pouring rain. We kept those voters in line for hours. And of course, the voting set-up was such that you couldn't wait inside. That was another little game that was played then, but we kept them in line for three hours. They stayed in line to vote even when they heard that McGovern lost.

It was a very special time. Jane Fonda regularly visited with the Indochina Peace Campaign, and politics informed political science.

Prisca Jöst: We understand that you grew up in a working-class family in Detroit in Michigan, right? So, going back a few steps, how do you think this has shaped your perspective as a scholar?

Valerie Bunce: I grew up in a classic Sociology 101, union, ethnically and religiously diverse neighborhood with many immigrants. One of those

immigrant families I became very close to was Armenian, and it really affected me because among other things, they talked about the genocide. So my neighborhood prepared me for thinking about identity politics, inequality and socialism. All those things wrapped into one, although consciously, I didn't think about it that way.

But the other thing that influenced my work is that I saw the decline of the auto industry. And I also saw, of course, the massive Detroit riots which ruined that city. But, that decline, which most people don't understand, really started in the '60s. We just didn't know it was a long-term trend. That decline just absolutely broke my heart because it actually unraveled everything that had defined how I had lived. There's a great Czech economist whose name I have never been able to trace down, who talked about communism as a museum of the Industrial Revolution. And I just love that phrase. It has stuck with me for decades because I lived that phrase twice. The Detroit area and later the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe were museums of the industrial revolution.

Frances Cayton: You began your career studying Eastern Europe at the height of the Cold War. Could please tell us a bit more about what initially drew you to the region and how this motivated your career?

Valerie Bunce: Well, let me go back a bit if you don't mind. I started by being interested in the Soviet Union, and that was entirely accidental. It had to do with a fantastic, brand-new course by young, fiery assistant professors who had developed an interdisciplinary course on the Soviet Union, quite innovative at the time. That's when I was an undergraduate, and that really was my epiphany moment.

Now, Eastern Europe happened for a very odd reason, which was that I got married after I graduated. I met my husband at that time in my first year of graduate school, and we decided to take our honeymoon in Eastern Europe because it was cheap and visa requirements were easier. It was very hard to get into the Soviet Union then. Very hard.

So that's how I ended up going to Eastern Europe. We backpacked through Eastern Europe for three months. That was a great, great, great experience. But it was, you know, 1972, during the Cold War. But that's what I decided to do, Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

So political scientists had a lot of trouble getting visas to go to the Soviet Union. I just couldn't crack it. I ended up going as a tourist and went for short trips. It is hard for people today to understand that those places were closed societies. Some were a bit more open than others then like Eastern Europe.

Language fellowships supported my graduate study. I had to come up with a language after I had exhausted my funding for Russian. So I flipped a coin. One side was Polish, and one was Serbo-Croatian, and it landed on Serbo-Croatian. So that was that. I was going into the Yugoslavia area of study.

The theme of this might be— just expect and enjoy accidents. That's my little piece of advice to the young.

Prisca Jöst: So, speaking about your time at Northwestern, you stayed there for almost 14 years, from 1977 to 1991. This was also a time when women were still significantly underrepresented in political science. How did being a woman affect your early career?

Valerie Bunce: They hired two women the year that I was hired at Northwestern. We didn't really have very much in common. We were very different people, and years later we laughed about that, that we both when we met each other said "Ohh." But there was enormous pressure on us to like each other and to hang out together and to bond and all this. So that was a funny part.

I was always more sensitive to class than gender as a cleavage, and yet I have to say that, you know, I've kept running into weird things that were associated with gender. One that I remember quite vividly is that I, along with some other women at Northwestern, formed an organization of women faculty,

which the administration tried to stop. Among other things, this organization tried to collect data on salaries. Northwestern is private, and that makes it a little harder to get hold of salary data. We had many struggles with the administration over this.

The other thing I learned at the time is that the usual gender-based, upsetting things happened. When I first went on the job market, there was a guy at Arizona State who did not behave the correct way. And when I came in to meet with people individually, he closed the door. Everything about him was suggesting that this was a situation I needed to get out of quickly.

Prisca Jöst: Can I ask you what you did in this situation?

Valerie Bunce: Yeah. Well, I was caught by surprise. Actually, I had not had much experience with harassment. What I did is that I kept my distance as well as I could. Rather than sit directly across from his desk, I moved the chair to the other side and sat down. Then he got up and started prancing around, adjusting his belt buckle on his pants. I knew that I had half an hour. I kept coming up with subjects to change the subject. I was pretty freaked out. Somehow the time went by and someone knocked on the door. I said I don't want to be late. I raced out.

This is also telling: I didn't mention this to anybody. I've hardly talked about it since it happened. Just to show how much women didn't talk about these things – a similar incident happened many years later at an awards ceremony of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies—its name during the Cold War. I was sitting in front with a bunch of female friends and a guy came forward who was receiving a distinguished scholar award. We looked at each other. We had no idea that all of us had bad experiences with him. We're all going, "Oh my God. Who knew?"

Prisca Jöst: Thank you so much for sharing these experiences. I think it's really important.

Switching the topic a little bit, we know that both you and your husband pursued very successful political science careers here at Cornell. So how did you navigate the challenge of a dual academic career?

Valerie Bunce: I just lucked out. I know as a former department chair what a struggle it is to get these dual career things organized. You know that are we supposed to call up Syracuse and say, "hire this person?" I mean, give me a break. But we just simply lucked out. Cornell was a really good fit for us, and so there were reasons to hire both of us. We had, shall we say, independent bases of support, and that just was lucky in terms of both being very different kinds of scholars.

Frances Cayton: We'll use this opportunity to shift to discussing some of your scholarship. Thinking about your first book, *Do New Leaders Make a Difference*, which is one of the earliest studies to systematically compare leadership transitions and policy change across both capitalist and socialist regimes, what inspired you to pursue this comparison?

Valerie Bunce: As part of my minor at Michigan, in American Political Behavior, I took a course with Donald Stokes. At that time, he was a very well-known analyst of public opinion and voting behavior, and quite a character. We had to write a proposal in the course, and the course was a quantitative course as a lot of courses were at Michigan. I was struggling. But I finally hit on an idea that I have used throughout my career—reversing the independent and dependent variables. Almost all the work up to that point had to do with explaining election outcomes. And I thought, why not have election outcomes as the independent variable? Why not have that be the cause rather than the effect? And that's really how it came up.

The other thing is that I guess, at some level, I've always been attracted to different system's designs. Because I think when you find something similar in a different systems design, it's kind of amazing because it gets to the heart and guts of politics. The U.S. and the Soviet Union had to choose leaders. So,

the question is: what were the consequences of how they did it? I was interested in U.S. politics, and I was interested in Soviet politics, and I knew that I was going to do both of those. I also like counterintuitive arguments a lot. I'm attracted to them. Maybe I go a little too far to make them work, but I'm attracted to them.

Frances Cayton: Absolutely. Well, I guess on this topic of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, your 1985 *International Organization* article, "The Empire Strikes Back: The evolution of the Eastern Bloc from a Soviet Asset to Soviet Liability," is now viewed as one of the first pieces diagnosing early signs of the Soviet Bloc's instability. But at the time, we know that the scholarship was met with some pushback.

Valerie Bunce: If you spent time in the Soviet Union those days, or Eastern Europe, you could see that things were falling apart. The Soviet Union looked like a basket case. I mean, just look at the buildings, look at the streets, look at the corruption. Oh, my God. You couldn't get anything done without money and especially bribing people with scarce items. What I thought was that the Soviet Union, the Soviet bloc, was going down the tubes and part of the reason the Soviet Union was going down the tubes was because of Eastern Europe.

I submitted the manuscript first to *International Organization* (IO), probably about 1982 and received very controversial reviews. *IO* was housed at Cornell then, and the guy who was the associate editor got back to me and wanted me to get rid of the final two sentences in the article. The last two sentences said something to the effect that if the Soviet Union wants to survive, it needs to get rid of Eastern Europe. And I took it out. I thought, "Oh well. You know, who knows?" I kind of regret that.

But, you know, it was very controversial, and my Eastern European friends got really angry at me. Most of my friends were in the opposition, although I knew some members of the party in various places. They were really ticked off because what I was saying is that this horrible Soviet yoke was somehow advantaging them and the Soviet Union wasn't getting its due in the relationship. Oh boy, I was persona non grata for quite a while.

So, when I interviewed at Cornell, it was an interesting experience because of this. I interviewed after Poland and Hungary were clearly pulling away, but it was before the pivotal case of East Germany. Once East Germany went, that was it. The blocks that made up the bloc were all falling. But the interview took place before that was evident.

So, I came to Cornell, and I said the Soviet bloc is falling, communism is falling, and there's a transition to democracy underway. And I said it would be the whole bloc. The implication of "The Empire Strikes Back" is that the fates of all these countries were tied to each other. The Soviet bloc was a perfect antechamber for the diffusion of change. And so, if something happens in one country, it's going to affect every country within the bloc. Everyone said that my arguments about the end of communism and the rise of democracy were unthinkable. These things could never happen. They said, "really? Ohh, come on." I mean, it was the Cold War, right? So why not assume that it would be forever? I always think of Alexei Yurchak's wonderful book about the last Soviet generation, where he captured that moment in history and that interview in the title of his book: *Everything Was Forever until It Was No More.*

Prisca Jöst: This brings us to your book, *Subversive Institutions*, which offers a structural explanation for the collapse of socialism and state institutions in Eastern Europe, using a comparative study of Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia, three multi-ethnic countries that dissolved at the end of Communism. What inspired this project, and how did you navigate its methodological and empirical scope?

Valerie Bunce: It grew out of "The Empire Strikes Back" because it was a structural argument. Federalism

was set up to succeed until it super failed. Basically, when the center had a political and economic monopoly and the center weakens, you can only expect the sub-units, very well defined with their own institutions, to take advantage of the situation and mobilize. But I think that I was late to see this. This sounds a little funny given my background. I was a little late to figure out the importance of ethno-politics. Suddenly I realized there were some people writing some things that really influenced me. I thought, “oh, my God, yeah, yeah.” And then the whole idea of ethno-federalism captured me. I began to see structural fault lines within the federal states and within the Soviet bloc.

I was also more attuned to regime change and state change. I was very involved and very upset about the breakup of Yugoslavia and the war, and I spent a bit of time in Yugoslavia — not in the war zones, but close to them. And then the issue became why are the Soviet Czechoslovak stories so different from the Yugoslav one?

Yes, all three states broke up along republican lines, but what about the violence? All these questions and a desire to push an institutional argument as far as it could go kept percolating. I sat down one summer and just wrote the damn thing. I've never done that with a book before or since. I just wrote it. Three months. That's it. I did the work before in my head.

Frances Cayton: Shifting to thinking about the discipline more broadly, you served in leadership roles as the Vice President of the American Political Science Association, President of what is now the Association of Slavic East European and Eurasian Studies, and Chair of the Cornell Government Department. What have you taken away from your time serving the broader scholarly community?

Valerie Bunce: In my generation, not all but a lot of people have very strong identities wrapped up in the institutions where they were. There's a pleasure in that you're part of a larger project. It's a good thing. And when you don't do service, when you're protected from service, when you don't go to meetings, you are not part of a larger community.

You also learn a lot from service. If you think politics is only about the political arena and not in how organizations operate, you're wrong. So it is always a laboratory for politics. I didn't always enjoy being chair. As a matter of fact, it drove me nuts a lot. But in retrospect, I was happy I did it.

Prisca Jöst: You've also mentored generations of scholars at Cornell and beyond. So what has mentorship meant to you, and what qualities do you think are essential in fostering the next generation of young political scientists?

Valerie Bunce: I want to mention I've mentored a lot of staff people too, and when you live in a place like Ithaca in the middle of a rural poverty belt, that's an incredibly rewarding experience. So that's a side of mentoring that is less obvious, but that has been very extremely meaningful to me.

For graduate students, I always had the attitude that I should help them be who they want to be rather than put my “individual stamp” on them like they're little ducklings or something. Not my style. But a strength I have is my ability to step back and see the bigger social science picture. And usually when people come back from fieldwork, that is not the view they have. They are deep in the weeds, deep in the weeds, very hard to step back. So I think that was the thing I really contributed to my graduate students and undergraduates. I also saw them as colleagues and, especially after their doctorates, friends as well.

Prisca Jöst: Lastly, we would like to hear more about your reflections on current developments in the field and beyond. So we know some critics argue that the discipline has shifted too far toward identifying narrow causal effects at the expense of answering big, substantive questions.

You've long combined qualitative fieldwork with comparative cross-regional analysis. What are your

thoughts on the future of methodological pluralism in comparative politics?

Valerie Bunce: Well, I think I say I'll get back to my old friend Liz Perry's comment: "We're only political scientists." There's a strong tendency for what I call the "Jurassic Park problem," which is that the animals all run in one direction, then the animals all run in the other direction. Reacting to some new method or event and all reacting in the same way is a problem.

I think that we should have a large role for eccentricity, deviance, non-conformity, diversity in all respects because why not? Can someone honestly say "I know how to do it"? It's ridiculous, and the methods have to match the question. They just have to. You think of the question first, then you have to figure out the methods, and that's why I believe very strongly in a strong methods background.

Departments are turned into service departments that teach the same courses over and over again. And there's no room for creativity. There's no room for change. It falls into that understanding of education as a preparation for the next stage. It's an escalator approach as opposed to, you know opening people's eyes to different things.

Frances Cayton: In this vein, what trends or debates in political science do you find the most compelling or need the most rethinking currently? And are there particular methodological or regional or topical directions that you'd like to see the field move more towards?

Valerie Bunce: I think the American politics people have what you might call professional dysphoria. I know the problem. The problem is that you know about one regime, and it's becoming another. I've been there, done that. You know, I lost communism for God's sake. I lost the Cold War. I lost all the stuff that had anchored the way I had looked at the world, and they have to face that. They have to say that institutions could be subversive. Not just weak, also subversive. And they have to also question rule of law.

So one of the things I've been struck by is a lot of Americanists have been listening and talking to comparativists, but I'm not sure how much they're getting from that because it seems like they turn around and then go back in American history to look for clues. I see this all the time and I'm going, "No, that's not the only place to look." It is this bizarre attachment to American exceptionalism that says "no, there are real limits to what you can learn elsewhere."

I think IR really needs more people looking at foreign policy, frankly, rather than these other issues. A greater attention to the real world of politics as a source of your research questions and the types of courses that you teach. You know, the real world of politics gave me all my questions, and I'd hope that it would do the same for IR people, as well as for Americanists.

Frances Cayton: In this vein, one last question from me: what is one thing that you're optimistic about in the discipline of political science today? And then one thing that you'd like to see changed?

Valerie Bunce: I'm optimistic because, as I said, Americanists are rediscovering there are some other countries in the world and some other experiences, and I'm also optimistic because of the move towards trying to ground political science more in the real world of politics. The movement towards opportunities to have different audiences and to pitch what you know in different ways, in more accessible ways, that is absolutely great.

I'm not positive about the loss of intellectualism. We used to have richer discussions because people thought we were part of an intellectual project. And we could be. I remember one of my most amazing experiences at Cornell was with Benedict Anderson, who was a world-famous guy because of the book he wrote on nationalism. I gave a copy of my *Subversive Institutions* book to him. He wrote comments on it the next day to me. He had gone home and read the

book that very night. I mean, that's unheard of now, and it was pretty damn weird. I was so impressed with him. I just thought, “my God, you know, wow.” Talk about someone who's a real academic. And what was fun about him, especially as he came from an old, very left, rather eccentric, British intellectual family, he looked at that book as a dyed in the wool, serious lefty, and gave me the most interesting comments.

Let me also say people are planning things too much. Be in life, don't plan it so much. When I used to work with undergraduates, they wanted to talk about what was in their courses. As the years went by, they wanted to set up their plans for their life for the next 40 years. There was a sort of the opposite of mindfulness, right? The kind of intellectualism of the academic enterprise, the openness of it, the non-planned quality of it is really missing now, which I think is quite unfortunate.

Comparative Politics Section 2025 Awards

The APSA Comparative Politics Section congratulates our section award winners for 2025. The pools were incredibly competitive this year, and we thank our committees and everyone who took the time to apply. Congratulations!

2025 Lijphart/Przeworski/ Verba Best Dataset Award

Winner

Nick Carnes, Miriam Golden, Noam Lupu, and Eugenia Nazrullaeva. 2024. "Global Legislator Database." https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/U1ZNVT

The committee has unanimously decided to award the 2025 Lijphart/Przeworski/Verba Dataset Award to Nick Carnes, Miriam Golden, Noam Lupu, and Eugenia Nazrullaeva. (2025) for their "Global Legislator Dataset (GLD)." The dataset provides legislator-level information on nearly 20,000 national parliamentarians in virtually every electoral democracy worldwide. The data was convincingly validated in a separate journal article published in the *British Journal of Political Science.* The committee was deeply impressed by the depth and breadth of the dataset and acknowledged the tremendous contribution it makes to the field of comparative politics. While basic descriptive data on legislator characteristics has been available for a handful of, mostly Western, democracies, the GLD dataset excels in its truly global coverage and its inclusion of hard-to-find information related to the social background of legislators.

The dataset is sure to become a standard reference in comparative politics. The authors have produced an invaluable common good to the benefit of the comparative politics community. The committee is excited about the range of new comparative representation research the dataset enables.

Honorable Mentions (Not Ranked)

Jessica Gottlieb, Hannah Baron, Robert A. Blair, Laura Paler, and Julie Anne Weaver. 2025 "Democratic Erosion Event Dataset, v7." Democratic Erosion Consoritum: A Cross-University Collaboration. https://democratic-erosion.org/event-dataset/

Adrián del Río, Carl H Knutsen, and Philipp Lutscher. 2024. "Education, Policies and Systems across Modern History Dataset." https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/MNM5Q5

Gregory Luebbert Prize for Best Book in Comparative Politics

Winner

Soledad Artix Prillaman. 2023. *The Patriarchal Political Order: The Making and Unraveling of the Gendered Participation Gap in India.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009355797

The committee has selected Soledad Artiz Prillaman's *The Patriarchal Political Order* for the 2025 Luebbert Best Book Award. The committee was impressed by the book's rigorous fieldwork, meticulous use of data, and

provocative new theory about how households shape women's participation choices. The book's novel interpretation of the political economy of gender starts from a sociologically grounded understanding of the Indian household to advance scholarship beyond examining women's educational and financial resources as drivers of political behavior. Prillaman shows how patriarchy within the household produces gaps between electoral and non-electoral participation, with implications for how programs targeting women can undermine the political effects of patriarchy. The book is empirically rich, drawing on pluralistic approaches to original data collection, and is a model of careful statistical inference. *The Patriarchal Political Order* contributes a productive framework through which others working in comparative politics can think about not only patriarchy and its unraveling, but also inequality and political participation in other parts of the world.

Honorable Mention

Alexander Lee, and Jack Paine. 2024. *Colonial Origins of Democracy and Dictatorship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009423526

The committee awards *The Colonial Origins of Democracy and Dictatorship* by Alexander Lee and Jack Paine an honorable mention. The book is the most comprehensive treatment of the colonial politics of incorporation to date. It reconceptualizes the actors whose choices shaped colonial electoral institutions; in doing so, it reveals why and when colonialism affects long-term political development around the world.

Short Listed Books

Volha **Charnysh**, *Uprooted: How Post-WWII Population Transfers Remade Europe* (Cambridge UP)

Wenkai **He**, *Public Interest and State Legitimation: Early Modern England, Japan, and China* (Cambridge UP)

Belen **Fernandez Milmanda**, *Agrarian Elites and Democracy in Latin America* (Cambridge UP)

Erica **Frantz**, Andrea **Kendall-Taylor**, and Joseph **Wright**, *The Origins of Elected Strongmen: How Personalist Parties Destroy Democracy from Within* (Oxford UP)

Erin **Lin**, *When the Bombs Stopped: The Legacy of War in Rural Cambodia* (Princeton UP)

Luis L. **Schenoni**, *Bringing War Back In: Victory, Defeat, and the State in Nineteenth-Century Latin America* (Cambridge UP)

Maria **Snegovaya**, *When Left Moves Right: The Decline of the Left and the Rise of the Populist Right in Postcommunist Europe* (Oxford UP)

Vicente **Valentim**, *The Normalization of the Radical Right: A Norms Theory of Political Supply and Demand* (Oxford UP)

2025 Gregory Luebbert Prize for Best Article in Comparative Politics

Winner

Jack Paine, Xiaoyan Qiu, and Joan Ricart-Huguet. 2024. "Endogenous Colonial Borders: Precolonial States and Geography in the Partition of Africa," *American Political Science Review, 119(1): 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055424000054.*

The committee is delighted to award the 2025 Luebbert

Prize to *"Endogenous Colonial Borders: Precolonial States and Geography in the Partition of Africa,"* by Jack Paine, Xiaoyan Qiu, and Joan Ricart-Huguet. This remarkable article challenges a long-accepted truth in comparative politics: that European colonizers drew borders in Africa arbitrarily. Through careful historical and spatial research, Paine, Qiu, and Ricart-Huguet demonstrate that this assertion is "as misguided … as it is foundational" (2025, 3). Colonial borders, they show, were established "conscientiously, rather than haphazardly" (6), informed by pre-existing natural and political boundaries and negotiations with African rulers. This finding has profound implications for the study of state formation, conflict, ethnic politics, and economic development in Africa. Indeed, "Endogenous Colonial Borders" prompts a significant reimagining of a large body of comparative politics research.

Beyond this intervention, the committee was impressed with three aspects of this remarkable article. First, "Endogenous Colonial Borders" illustrates the importance of careful, empirically rigorous descriptive research. Second, Paine, Qiu, and Ricart-Huguet show how Africans' knowledge, alliances, and power influenced the drawing of boundaries on their continent — reinserting African agency where it has long been minimized. Third, from causal process observations to an ingenious analysis of gridded cells, Paine, Qiu, and Ricart-Huguet deploy a diverse range of qualitative and quantitative methods to test their argument. They also develop a new georeferenced dataset of precolonial African states, which will be an important asset to future researchers. For multiple reasons, "Endogenous Colonial Borders" is sure to resonate widely in the discipline, and it is a fitting recipient of the 2025 Luebbert Prize for the best article in comparative politics published in the past two years.

Honorable Mention

Mariana Giusti-Rodríguez. (2024). "From Social Networks to Political Parties: Indigenous Party-Building in Bolivia," ***American Political Science Review, 118(4): 1803–23.*** ***https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055423001272.***

The honorable mention for the 2025 Luebbert Best Article Prize goes to *"From Social Networks to Political Parties: Indigenous Party-Building in Bolivia,"* by Mariana Giusti-Rodríguez. In this article, Giusti-Rodríguez tackles a classic question in comparative politics: where do political parties come from? In answering this question, Giusti-Rodríguez not only offers an in-depth analysis of the rise of MAS in Bolivia, but also makes important theoretical contributions to multiple areas of research in comparative politics. Giusti-Rodríguez argues that "party-building efforts" should be understood "through a relational lens, rather than in isolation, particularly where multiple proto-parties compete to fill the same void. Who survives or loses out in that competition may be a function of the networks where they compete" (1804). Theoretically, the article thus connects social networks, political parties, and ethnic politics in new and creative ways.

Giusti-Rodríguez uses an elegant research design to demonstrate that the successful formation of political parties depends on the organizational form of the networks from which they have emerged — specifically, their structural resilience. She builds her argument with a combination of process tracing and network analysis, demonstrating methodological dexterity and sophistication. "From Social Networks to Political Parties" also underscores the importance of fieldwork and deep case knowledge for observing and analyzing early-stage organizations and political processes, such as the initial emergence and collapse or consolidation of proto-parties. In many ways, this article exemplifies the best of contemporary research in comparative politics, and it merits an Honorable Mention for the

2025 Luebbert Best Article Prize.

2025 Sage Best Paper Award

The committee for the APSA Comparative Politics section's Sage Best Paper Award had a tough time selecting between the 49 papers that we reviewed. All the papers were extremely well done; they were sophisticated in the methods they used or the novel data collections involved, and were all highly relevant for understanding major problems facing contemporary political science. They contain important implications or lessons—some of them counterintuitive –and offer substantial contributions to their respective areas. The committee thoroughly enjoyed reading these excellent manuscripts and is encouraged by the collective findings that the innovative research represented by this selection of papers offers to help understand and address dominant political challenges. We have no doubt that all will find homes in prestigious outlets and commend the authors on their work. We look forward to seeing them all in print in the near future.

Winner

Anirvan Chowdhury. 2024. "Domesticating Politics: How Religiously Conservative Parties Mobilize Women in India."

The committee was impressed by the combination of methods that Chowdhury used to so thoroughly explore the question. Particularly noteworthy are their efforts to ground their surveys and experimental evidence in extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Rajasthan, India's largest state. Chowdhury's study of how conservative parties mobilize women is an exemplar of theoretically grounded, empirical research in comparative politics. The study is both deeply contextualized and broadly generalizable. It sheds new light on the dynamics of political inclusion in conservative settings by demonstrating how gender norms shape modern party politics. The paper's findings challenge the assumption that women's political empowerment must involve the erosion of traditional norms, showing instead how those norms can be harnessed to expand participation–albeit in ways that may reinforce, rather than disrupt, patriarchal structures. In explaining the mechanisms by which the ruling conservative BJP mobilizes women in India's patriarchal society, the paper makes a major contribution to our understanding of a vital issue in comparative politics. This remarkable study is highly relevant for explaining the role of framing in mobilizing women in conservative and right-wing movements.

Honorable Mentions (Not Ranked)

Aala Abdelgadir. 2024. "Conservative Islam and Politics in Sub-Saharan Africa: Examining the Transnational Roots of a Religious Revolution."

This paper makes a major contribution by offering a theory of religious movement transplantation that motivates activist formation and elite-led mobilization. Studying the spread of ideological and religious movements is often empirically challenging, particularly across international borders. Abdelgadir marshals novel data on Arab transnational education and the institutionalization of Islamic conservatism to inform our understanding of how conservative Islam spread across sub-Saharan Africa and shaped politics in the region. Their work sheds light on the supply-side factors driving the diffusion of conservative Islam, specifically, and religious movements more broadly. In shifting our scholarly attention from the more commonly studied 'demand' for conservative Islam in Africa to the 'supply' side of the equation, this work makes an important and highly original contribution to

the comparative politics of religion.

Priyadarshi Amar, Sumitra Badrinathan, Simon Chauchard, and Florian Sichart. 2024. "Countering Misinformation Early: Evidence from a Classroom-Based Field Experiment in India."

This paper stands out for its relevance to public policy, as it offers an example of a misinformation intervention with demonstrated causal impacts in an offline, low-resource environment. It is quite valuable for its ability to contribute to debates among both academic and non-academic audiences about the efficacy of strategies to combat misinformation. In particular, the paper offers hope for using education to combat misinformation by offering powerful evidence that sustained, classroom-based efforts can equip young citizens with the tools they need to navigate a complex informational environment. The committee was impressed by the ability of the authors to demonstrate that the effect is evident across multiple items, that the intervention's impacts are different on false versus true statements, and that there are long-term, diffusive effects from misinformation education.

Carolina Torreblanca. 2024. "Evaluating the Impact of Causes under Heterogeneous Exposure: The Case of Criminal Victimization."

The paper makes several key contributions. First, it advances causal inference by centering treatment heterogeneity as a core conceptual concern. Second, it provides a concrete and replicable method for reconciling theory and empirics when treatment is not randomly assigned. Third, it offers a significant revision to the scholarly consensus on the political effects of crime, showing that prior work may have overstated its mobilizing effects by focusing on the wrong estimand. The committee was impressed by the fact that this paper makes not one, but two substantial contributions –one to the literature on causal inference, and the other to the study of victimization and political engagement.

2025 Theda Skocpol Emerging Scholar Award

Winner

Robert Blair, Brown University

Robert Blair stood out in the field of extremely impressive nominees among emerging scholars in comparative politics. He is distinguished as a scholar whose work already advances our understanding of state-building, democratic development, and the rule of law in fragile and post-conflict states. His research is marked by a rare combination of empirical rigor, theoretical sophistication, and real-world relevance, particularly through his work in Liberia, but also more broadly in Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. This combination of well-rounded research agendas on important topics, rigorous field research, and breadth of methodological approaches impressed the committee greatly. Below are additional features of the nomination that impressed the committee.

1. ***Groundbreaking Scholarship:*** Blair's 2020 book, *Peacekeeping, Policing, and the Rule of Law after Civil War,* is a great contribution that challenges prevailing notions of institutional strength by focusing on legitimacy and trust—exploring how citizens come to see the state as both capable and just. This work offers deep insights into the symbolic and political dimensions of rebuilding state authority.

2. ***Fieldwork and Methods:*** Across multiple studies, Blair combines randomized field experiments, extensive surveys, and qualitative interviews in challenging environments like Liberia and Colombia.

His work not only advances causal inference in the field, but does so with ethical and logistical complexity that few scholars match.

3. *Original Insights into Peacekeeping and Governance:* His articles on UN peacekeeping and police reform show how mission characteristics, local engagement, and state-customary dynamics determine success or failure in democratic promotion and rule-of-law initiatives. These findings directly inform both academic debates and policy design.

4. *Theoretical Innovation:* In his co-authored *APSR* article on warlords, Blair demonstrates interdisciplinary fluency, blending political theory with empirical evidence to ask when nonstate actors may hold legitimate authority. This bold, normatively engaged scholarship pushes the boundaries of sovereignty and governance theory.

5. *Timely and Policy-Relevant Research:* Blair's forthcoming work on militarized policing in Colombia reveals how security interventions can reshape public attitudes toward authoritarianism—even when they fail to improve safety. His nuanced findings are crucial in an era of democratic backsliding and rising public support for "tough-on-crime" approaches.

In sum, Robert Blair exemplifies the spirit of the Theda Skocpol Emerging Scholar Award through his rigorous empirical work, conceptual innovation, and commitment to addressing some of the world's most pressing political challenges. His scholarship not only advances political science but speaks directly to policymakers, practitioners, and communities navigating the complexities of peace, justice, and democratic governance.

2025 Margaret Levi Award for the Advancement of Comparative Methodology

Winner

Marco Morucci, Margaret J. Foster, Kaitlyn Webster, So Jin Lee, David A. Siegel. 2025. "Measurement that Matches Theory: Theory-Driven Identification in Item Response Theory Models," *American Political Science Review, 119(2): 727-745. https://doi.org/10.1017/S000305542400039X*

This is an exciting paper with a promising and ambitious approach for measuring complex social science concepts. The authors build upon an important and widely deployed measurement model in social science — Item Response Theory. Their extension, IRT-M, requires researchers to directly and transparently encode their prior beliefs about how actual, measured quantities relate to theoretical concepts in recovering latent positions from observed data. It is a sophisticated addition to our measurement and estimation toolkit that requires contextual knowledge and careful specification of conceptual constructs. The authors provide a well-maintained R package and an accessible set of examples for applied researchers. The paper also presents important unanswered questions, namely, how can we meaningfully test a theoretical claim while also encoding theoretically derived beliefs into the measurement model? What are the pitfalls and potential failure modes here? We believe that continued testing and interrogation of this tool in a wider range of applications will provoke important advances for methodological tools that build on deep contextual knowledge and clearly articulated theory.

IN MEMORIAM

MALA HTUN

(August 23, 1969 — January 24, 2025)

Mala Htun was a Distinguished Professor of Political Science at The University of New Mexico. Born in Hawaii, educated at Stanford (BA) and Harvard (PhD), she studied gender and representation. Her most recent book, co-authored with Laurel Weldon, was *The Logics of Gender Justice: State Action on Women's Rights around the World*, winner of the Best Book Award from the 2019 International Studies Association's Human Rights Section.

RE-READING MALA

By Dawn Langan Teele, SNF Agora Associate Professor of Political Science at John Hopkins University

There are many reasons to be a political scientist and many ways in which political scientists can make a mark on the world. One such way is to write with a force and cadence that resonates with readers; to create meaning for people who read the words. Mala Htun, my friend and mentor, was this type of writer. Re-reading Mala, as I did for this essay, and as I do for nearly every class I teach, moves me: on the page she was arch; she was humane; and she was no bullshit.

Mala's scholarship was primarily concerned with the state and its affiliated institutions – the legislature, the courts, and political processes. She was interested in how the state creates and maintains gender, which she argues is best understood not as an identity, but rather as a social position and an attribute of social structures, defined by the gender division of labor, normative heterosexuality, and war and militarism.[1] Though most of her work was empirical — she sought to explain variation in rights to abortion and divorce across different political regimes,[2] for example, or developed arguments for understanding which civil society organizations would combat violence against women — she was also a sharp reader and deft translator of philosophical texts.[3]

Her work, which often engaged political theory — and especially the work of Iris Marion Young, to whom she returned many times — drove her commitment to theorizing gender. She made no secret of her ambivalence about the explosion of quantitative studies of women and politics. The problem for her was not the numbers or the counting (she could do those things quite well too); her concern was rather that a move toward cataloguing where the women were missing, or what women do once they are given access to political position, or which elements underlie individuals'

identification with masculine or feminine traits, pins gender domination and the study of gender on women.

"Many people do not recognize how obvious gender is because they think it means women: if women are not there it is not gendered. In this view, we need to 'add a gender perspective' to explain where the women are, notice their hidden activities, and denounce the injustice of their exclusion. On the contrary, I propose that it is ontologically impossible not to have a gender perspective; it is implicit in all domains of academic inquiry. The more interesting question then becomes: what research agendas and hypotheses will lead us toward a better understanding of gender?"[4]

Mala's work helped to settle some questions about gender and the state at the same time that it inspired scores of other scholars to take up similar themes. A leitmotif in her work is that vaunted institutions, like democracy, the welfare state, and even socialist political regimes, can sometimes cement rather than upset gender hierarchies and the division of labor. Studying gender quotas — a signal achievement of feminists in the over the last thirty years — Mala Htun questioned whether and how quotas for women and minorities could lead to substantive representation.[5] She concluded that, "it has been far easier to place more women in positions of leadership than to alter the gender structure of society."[6] The point is not that quotas are meaningless: along with her friend and mentor Jenny Mansbridge, she believed that they are crucial instruments of inclusion that are symbolically important, even if they do not change policies. But she claimed that quotas could distract from larger goals of dismantling the gender division of labor, normative heterosexuality, and war and militarism.

Re-reading Mala Htun I am drawn, finally, to her comparative ambitions. When I was working on my first book, Mala Htun shared an insight from conversations with one of her own advisors, Theda Skocpol. She told me that, in order to make an impact outside of one's own disciplinary corner, case knowledge has to be paired with a "modular" theoretical apparatus that can be extended to other contexts. Her book with Laurel Weldon, *The Logics of Gender Justice* (2018), is an object lesson in this approach.[7] They argue that the social bases of support for women's rights depend on the ideological and normative dimensions of the exact rights up for debate. The book then categorizes the social bases, and veto players, in order to explain the timing of women's rights reforms under different institutional configurations. The argument is simple and transportable and, more importantly, it provides a salve for the wringing hands that have been unable to explain, after more than 30 years, why women's descriptive representation does not always usher in feminist wins.

Though she is no longer with us, we must grapple with Mala Htun's insight that "Women are often affected by gender, but they are neither its cause nor its limit."[8] In this moment of backlash and backsliding, where we are witnessing first-hand how states can use family policy, national investment strategies, and rhetoric and social suasion to reinforce gender hierarchy, the state must be

foremost as the site of research and resistance.

NOTES

[1]Mala Htun (2005), "What It Means to Study Gender and the State," *Politics & Gender* 1 (1): 157–66, p.160.
[2]Mala Htun (2003), *Sex and the State: Abortion, Divorce, and the Family under Latin American Dictatorships and Democracies,* Cambridge University Press.
[3]Mala Htun and S. Laurel Weldon (2012),"The Civic Origins of Progressive Policy Change against Women in Global Perspective, 1975-2005," *American Political Science Review* 106 (03): 548-69
[4]Mala Htun (2005), "What It Means to Study Gender and the State," *Politics & Gender* 1 (1): 157–66, p.162.
[5]Mala Htun and Jennifer Piscopo (2010), "Presence Without Empowerment? Women in Politics in Latin America and the Caribbean," in *Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum*, December, 1-24.
[6]Mala Htun (2016), *Inclusion without Representation in Latin America: Gender Quotas and Ethnic Reservations*, Cambridge University Press.
[7]Mala Htun and S. Laurel Weldon (2018), *The Logics of Gender Justice: State Action on Women's Rights around the World*, Cambridge University Press.
[8]Mala Htun (2005), "What It Means to Study Gender and the State," *Politics & Gender* 1 (1): 157–66, p.161.

KNOWING MALA

By Karen Ferree, Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of California, San Diego, and Anna Grzymala-Busse, Michelle and Kevin Douglas Professor of International Studies at Stanford University

When we heard the tragic news of Mala Htun's death, her graduate student cohort immediately started emailing and texting. Mala Htun was, we all agreed, a force of nature. Irreverent and irrepressible, the beating heart of our cohort. No one was more alive. She brought us together, yet again. But she was anything but a cliché.

Mala Htun had a wicked sense of humor and an utter willingness to go there. She could arch a singular eyebrow, lip curved in amusement at some inner joke. She never took anything, or herself, too seriously. In the mid-1990s, her submission to the Government Department NCAA men's basketball tourney bracket was largely informed by political science tropes. It will surprise no one to hear that, as a result, she was the only one to predict Weber State's huge upset of No. 3 seeded Michigan State. She put the "nasty" in the Hobbesian Man group Halloween costume. Mala Htun was also an integral part of the three-headed KKV hydra in the departmental skit. As one of us remembered, "I think I remember barking, but I don't know if that is actually something that happened." Mala Htun was an experienced yoga practitioner and once attempted to initiate two of us into hot yoga. When the studio was too full and we couldn't get in, she raised that eyebrow (always

a danger sign), shrugged, and marched us right into the bar next door, where we had cocktails at 2 pm on a Sunday and laughed so hard it hurt.

From the very start of grad school (i.e., life as we then knew it), she resolved collective action dilemmas before anyone of us knew what they were. When she found a required political theory class to be too staid, she commandeered advanced graduate students to lead an alternative, much more exciting, theory seminar. It was the best graduate seminar, in theory or otherwise, that any of us took. We were not surprised, years later, to learn that Mala, unable to visit the book room at APSA because of the infant she was wearing, promptly induced APSA to change its rules.

Mala Htun was a wild card in a seminar. One classmate remembers that "nothing got past her, she bit back hard (but fair), always with a smile on her face." She read voraciously and argued with passion, yet could talk with anyone and get radically divergent people to talk with each other. We were lucky she was at the table.

These are the PG-rated anecdotes. Memories of the New Year's Eve party, the short silk dressing gown, and Mala's inventive sign language will have to fade into obscurity. Memories of Mala Htun herself never will.

JAMES SCOTT

(December 2nd, 1936 — July 19, 2024)

James Scott was a Sterling Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Yale University. Having received his BA from Williams College and then PhD from Yale University, he returned from University of Wisconsin to Yale in 1975. His ten books, from *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1976) *to In Praise of Floods* (2025), provided critical interventions on the state and resistance. His life is documented in Todd Holmes' 2023 film, In a Field All His Own.

BECOMING JAMES C. SCOTT

Nick Cheesman, Associate Professor in the Department of Political and Social Change at the Australian National University

Shortly after arriving at the Australian National University in 2008, I went to hear a talk on a forthcoming book about somewhere called Zomia. I came away thinking that I had been the sole person in the crowded theatre to have not yet read the manuscript. Political scientists, anthropologists, and historians animatedly debated its argument that the Southeast Asian massif, Zomia, was the largest anarchist upland in the world. None was the author. How does an academic writer who is not even pre-

sent, I wondered, excite such controversy over a book that is not yet published? The answer was, by being James C. Scott.

But how did James Scott — or Jim, as we knew him — become the larger-than-life presence in the room that day? Raised from age nine by a single mother and schooled in New Jersey by Quakers, Jim majored in political economy at Williams College. A Rotary fellowship carried him to Burma in 1958, between undergraduate and graduate school. The Central Intelligence Agency then footed the bill for a stint in Paris — an arrangement that Jim never adequately explained, other than to suggest that he did not object, back then, to writing some reports for them.

At Yale, Jim trained in political science because he was unwilling to do a further year of calculus that the economics department required for him to be admitted. He would likely have gone back to Burma for fieldwork if its army had not taken over in 1962 and started kicking foreigners out. Instead, he and his art historian partner, Louise, went to Malaysia, where he interviewed senior civil servants. Yale published his research the year after he graduated. Jim later conceded that *Political Ideology in Malaysia* (1968) is not a good book. He made up for it by writing many others that are.

By now, Jim was teaching cohorts of anti-war activists at Wisconsin. Students distributed rebuttals of his lectures before class. Resistance was staring him in the face, though he was not yet ready to treat it as a major subject for inquiry. He wrote and published *Comparative Political Corruption* (1972). Along with articles in the *APSR,* it broke ground for the seeds of today's flourishing literature on clientelism. Yet, at the time, it met criticism for not being adventurous enough. Jim's later books have been accused of having many defects, but this was the last one for which it could be said that he seemed reluctant to upset accepted opinion!

Yale beckoned. After moving from Madison back to New Haven in 1976, Jim negotiated to take his family to live in a Malaysian village. He wanted to see agrarian class struggle up close. Colleagues discouraged him from going. He, Louise, and kids went anyway. He didn't find what he was looking for. Instead, he found what he later dubbed, in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990), peasant "infrapolitics." In a way, these made his career. Coupled with *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1978), a comparative historical analysis of uprisings in Burma and Vietnam, his ethnographic work set the terms for the agrarian studies agenda that brought him fame. It also estranged him from much of the discipline in which he went on to hold a distinguished professorship. But that was fine by Jim, who continued to identify with comparative politics because it did not suffer from the parochialism he associated with mainstream political science.

What distinguished Jim Scott's approach to comparative politics from others? He compared by following his nose rather than adhering to established methods. He generalised by interpreting meaning, rather than producing metrics. Following Karl Polanyi, he treated peasant rebellion and resistance as cultural phenomena first, economic ones, second. Heeding Clifford Geertz, he looked to small facts with which to speak to large issues. He sometimes borrowed concepts, like Zomia and moral economy, with which to do this. Other times, he fashioned his own, like infrapolitics. Or he refashioned them from ordinary usages. Legibility, which he used to denote the processes for control of people, nature and things, is an example of the latter that today has become commonplace.

Jim's ideas became popular in part because he wrote for them to be. Later in life, he published more and more with an eye to a general audience. *Two Cheers for Anarchism* (2012) he called Scott-lite. But he still stretched himself. In *Against the Grain* (2017), he extended his Tanner Lectures into deep history and archaeology. Yet, even with dense topics, his prose remained fluid. "I've often been accused of being wrong," Jim prefaced the Zomia book, *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009), "but rarely of being obscure or incomprehensible." His writing reflects this concern for lucidity, as well as his love of poetry and literature, alongside scholarship from across the humanities, social sciences and beyond. What critics faulted as intellectual promiscuity is what made Jim's writing attractive to admirers. It is one reason why he has been translated into well over a dozen major languages.

But in the end, what counted more was that his writing contained exciting ideas that different readerships could engage with for various purposes. *Seeing Like a State* (1998) is one example. It has been read enthusiastically by libertarians on the right and anarchists on the left for altogether different reasons. Jim had honed this ability to pull in diverse readerships years before. I stumbled across *Weapons of the Weak* (1985) in the early 1990s, not on the shelf of a university library or professor's office, but in a bustling house, serving as the branch office for a small non-profit in Thailand. Its title and cover caught my eye. Its careful descriptions of what Jim called the "small-arms fire of class warfare" in the Malaysian village he named Sedaka kept me reading. I was not interested, at the time, in whether Scott got Gramsci right or wrong. I could pass through the bits on hegemony and dwell on others that evoked a pedagogy of the oppressed and nourished ideas about how to act in the world in order to change it.

Word of Jim's death on July 19, 2024, aged 87, at his farm with family, travelled speedily. It came via friends and colleagues; obituaries in the *New York Times*, *Indian Express,* and *Dissent*; a social media post by the Malaysian premier, and through professional associations, cultural magazines, and Burmese anti-state media. Former students wrote fondly of his fabled seminars and dinners,

and spoke of how Jim helped them through tough times. I was not among them, but I am grateful to have been one of his many mentees. I never ceased to be amazed by how he took the time to read drafts, explore ideas, write references and cook meals for someone to whom he owed no responsibilities. He set an example that I try in a small way to follow.

Late in life, Jim lost opportunities to travel because of the pandemic, and then his illness. But he kept conversing and writing, and accolades kept pouring in. When, in 2020 he emailed apologetically that a trip to receive an honorary doctorate had had to be put off, he mentioned playfully that the Social Science Research Council must have had its judgement affected by Covid, since it had given him the Albert O. Hirschman Award. It was classic Jim: thumbing his nose at authority while showing pleasure at being deservedly recognised.

Yale published the last book with the author James C. Scott named on its cover posthumously. Nevertheless, Jim was happy to have completed it before he died. That he managed it despite numerous disturbances is a testimony to his work ethic. Covid and his own health concerns were disruptive enough. On top of them, the storied barn where he wrote burned down. Along with all the hay went thousands of books and documents. Then Burma's army took over again. That was significant because *In Praise of Floods* (2025) has the Ayeyarwady River as its protagonist. Like every thinking and feeling person receiving news of the mass revolt that followed the 2021 coup, Jim was awed by the guts that demonstrators showed in confronting soldiers who were shooting to kill — youth in particular. He helped colleagues to house scholars who had to flee, and raised funds for strikers. He organised support so that Chiang Mai University could take in Burmese professors and students. The legacies of his work continue alongside the ongoing struggle against dictatorship.

Though Jim never came to get his honorary degree, he fondly recalled time spent with Ranajit Guha in Canberra during the 1980s. In a foreword written for its reissue, Jim likened Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in India* (1999) to a shipyard from which thousands of vessels had sailed. He added that the thing about a shipyard is that people can fashion vessels in many ways. There might even be some that have sailed from which the shipwright would want to disassociate. Nevertheless, this "is surely a better fate than being ignored."

James Scott, contrarian, prankster, shearer, political scientist, sometimes polemicist, is no longer with us. But his shipyards are everywhere. Vessels of all shapes and sizes will long hoist his pennant. His will assuredly be the better fate.

Announcements

The APSA Comparative Politics Reception will be held on **Thursday, Sept. 11, 7:30 – 11 pm** at the Brass Fish Tavern (385 Burrard St, Vancouver, BC). No registration required; we hope to see you all there!

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The Organized Section in Comparative Politics is the largest organized section in the American Political Science Association (APSA). The Section organizes panels for the APSA's annual meetings; awards annual prizes for best paper, best article, best book, and best data set; and oversees and helps finance the publication of this newsletter, APSA-CP.

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