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978-1-107-02581-3 - Democratic Theory and Causal Methodology in Comparative Politics

Mark I. Lichbach

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Democratic Theory and Causal Methodology in Comparative Politics

Barrington Moore bequeathed to comparativists a problem: how to reconcile his causal claim of “no bourgeoisie, no democracy” with his normative “dream of a free and rational society.” In this book, Mark I. Lichbach harmonizes causal methodology and normative democratic theory, suggesting that the Moore Curve – the more external the causal methodology, the thinner the democratic theory – governs democratization studies. Using a dialogue among four specific texts, Lichbach advances five constructive themes. First, comparativists should study the causal agency of individuals, groups, and democracies. Second, the three types of collective agency should be paired with an exploration of three corresponding moral dilemmas: ought/is, freedom/power, and democracy/causality. Third, at the center of inquiry comparativists should place big-P Paradigms and big-M Methodology. Fourth, as they play with research schools, creatively combining prescriptive and descriptive approaches to democratization, they should encourage a mixed-theory and mixed-method field. Finally, comparativists should study pragmatic questions about political power and democratic performance: in building a democratic state, which democracy, under which conditions, is best, and how might it be achieved?

Mark I. Lichbach is Professor of Government and Politics at the University of Maryland. He received a BA from Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, an MA from Brown University, and a PhD in political science from Northwestern University. He is the author or editor of numerous books, including the award-winning *The Rebel's Dilemma*, and of many articles that have appeared in scholarly journals in political science, economics, and sociology. His work has been supported by the National Science Foundation and private foundations. Lichbach has served as book review editor of the *American Political Science Review*; as editor of the University of Michigan Press's series *Interests, Identities, and Institutions*; and as chair of three political science departments: the University of Maryland, the University of Colorado, and the University of California–Riverside.

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Faye Marsha Lichbach

1952–2011

“Xs and Ys don’t love you like I do.”

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Political theorists often fail to appreciate that arguments about how politics ought to be organized typically depend on relational claims involving agents, actions, legitimacy, and ends.

Ian Shapiro (2005: 152)

[W]e must develop and deploy a conception of what a democratic polity is which is appropriate to grasping its causal dynamics. This is overwhelmingly much harder to do than political scientists have yet fathomed.

John Dunn (1999: 138)

Normative and explanatory theories of democracy grow out of literatures that proceed, for the most part, on separate tracks, largely uninformed by one another.

Ian Shapiro (2003: 2)

[A] skeptical, historical approach . . . sees normative categories as inexpugnable from the understanding of political causality.

John Dunn (1999: 137–39)

[T]he history of thought is a history of issues about which we, in the end, care. I find it thrilling to ask what we have learned about these issues from our empirical knowledge of political institutions and events. I think we did learn, we are wiser, and we often see things more clearly than our intellectual forefathers. Unless, however, we bring our knowledge to bear on the big issues, it will remain sterile.

Adam Przeworski (2010: xv)

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Preface

Barrington Moore bequeathed to comparativists a problem: reconcile his causal claim of “no bourgeoisie, no democracy” with his normative “dream of a free and rational society.” Most comparativists nowadays solve the problem by assuming it away. Believing that causal methodology and democratic theory are independent ingredients in inquiry, causal methodologists discuss comparative statics, constructivism, structural capacity, and mechanisms, while democratic theorists hold a separate debate about procedural, discursive, class-coalitional, and contentious democracy. Against the idea of two compartmentalized reading lists, this book argues that theory and method hold an elective affinity. The Moore Curve – the more external the causal methodology, the thinner the democratic theory – governs democratization studies.

To make its contrarian case, the book adopts a particular style of presentation. A dialogue among four specific texts allows the authors to speak in their own voices and yet represent general paradigms of politics. The analysis opens by comparing an exemplar of rational choice theory, Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson’s *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, with an exemplar of constructivist theory, Lisa Wedeen’s *Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power, and Performance in Yemen*. Commencing from Moore’s causal claim of “no bourgeoisie, no democracy,” Acemoglu and Robinson couple

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procedural democracy with comparative statics. Their thin democracy embraces internal choice subject to external constraints. Taking off from Moore's normative "dream of a free and rational society," Wedeen pairs discursive democracy with social constructivism. Her thick democracy endorses a release from external bondage to the environment. Perhaps a free and rational society requires a fit state that navigates between a thin democracy determined exogenously and a thick democracy fashioning its own future. Atul Kohli's *State-Directed Development: Political Power and Industrialization in the Global Periphery* offers a third synthesis of norms and empirics: a thin class-coalitional democracy tied to a powerful externalist etiology. While Kohli's fit state adjusts to the environmental constraints of world history and global order, it trades Moore's "dream of a free and rational society" for economic development. Finally, Charles Tilly's *Democracy* offers a pragmatic and pluralistic synthesis of democratic theories and causal methodologies. Tilly's contentious democracy is thinner than Wedeen's discursive democracy but thicker than Acemoglu and Robinson's procedural democracy. By democratizing complex social mechanisms and contingent political processes, Tilly's fit state flourishes in the midst of its environment.

Moving forward, offering solutions and not only characterizing problems, the book advances five constructive themes. First, while the texts examined here have strengths and weaknesses that can serve as complements and substitutes, comparativists should begin with Tilly's contentious-politics approach. The best way to advance democratization studies is to use Tilly as the springboard and the others as sounding boards to study the causal agency of individuals, groups, and democracies. Second, the book urges comparativists to pair these three types of collective agency with an exploration of three corresponding moral dilemmas: ought/is, freedom/power, and democracy/causality. Third, the recent focus on causal analysis should not push big-P Paradigms and big-M Methodology from the center of comparative politics. Theory and method offer creative heuristics that can stimulate studies of democratization. Fourth, while normative and

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empirical ideas coming from a research school bear a family resemblance, recognizing the elective affinities of theory and method leads to its undoing. Comparativists who play with research schools can turn the connections between prescriptive and descriptive approaches to democratization into creative tensions. As comparative politics becomes a mixed-theory and mixed-method field, democratic theorists and causal methodologists become allies rather than adversaries. Finally, as comparativists develop the observable implications of different methods and theories, creative play with paradigms must be constrained by the empirics of regime fitness. Because democracies operate in the midst of environmental constraints, comparativists should study pragmatic questions about political power and democratic performance: in building a democratic state, which democracy under which conditions is best, and how might it be achieved? In returning to this core concern of the 1960s, today's comparative politics can renew its past and strengthen its future. As comparativists address Barrington Moore's ought/is dilemma of causal collective human agency in democratization, they come to understand how alternative modernities challenge liberalism; how state building occurs amid contentious world politics; and how institutions arise, persist, and change.

When I began the book, I did not know that this book was the book that I would write. Brian Barry's four-decades-old *Sociologists, Economists, and Democracy* had captured an exhilarating moment in the history of comparative politics, and I sensed a similar intellectual ferment today (Lichbach 2003, 2005, 2009, 2010; Lichbach and Kopstein 2009; Lichbach and Lebow 2007; Lichbach and Seligman 2000; Lichbach and Zuckerman 2009). Rather than again writing generally about contemporary scholarly debates, I decided to follow Barry's example and write a book about a very small number of specific books, exploring path-breaking exemplars of different approaches to comparative politics. While I quickly decided on the texts, my theme about the Moore Curve (Table 2) only emerged in the midst of things – just as the great comparativist Alexis de Tocqueville had said. With the Moore-Curve heuristic

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firmly in mind, I worked out its meaning and significance, working forward toward its observable and unobservable implications and working backward toward its causes and origins. My writing was constrained by an imaginary reader's problem situation. I had in mind a graduate student interested in the causal origins of democracy. While attracted to rational choice institutionalism, partly because of its modernist appeal and partly because of its dominance in the field, he or she is reflective enough to be skeptical about the theory and thoughtful enough to be interested in the models and foils of multitheory and multimethod research. To these inquiring minds, here is my message: before comparativists prefer socialism to capitalism, they insist on studying real existing socialisms. Before preferring social constructivism or historical institutionalism to rational choice, graduate students should study real existing constructivisms and institutionalisms. I am reminded of an old joke: a king judges an operatic contest, and after hearing the first singer he gives the prize to the second.

As I wrote and rewrote, Daron Acemoglu, Colin Elman, Jeff Kopstein, Margaret Pearson, Sid Tarrow, and Ian Ward offered important suggestions and valuable encouragement. Lisa Wedeen commented on several drafts, and her insights were particularly valuable. Lew Bateman, that masterful academic editor, was a joy to work with. He provided two very helpful reviews. I also want to thank the several generations of graduate students in my comparative politics courses. Their curiosity convinced me that the book would find a receptive audience. Finally, I want to thank my department colleagues and several deans. They allowed me to perform my administrative responsibilities as department chair while continuing to enjoy reading scholarly works and writing academic prose.

During the three years I was writing this book, my life changed forever. My first mentor in graduate school, Alan Zuckerman, passed away from pancreatic cancer. Alan taught me what comparative politics should be: substantively relevant, theoretically rich, methodologically sophisticated, and philosophically attuned. We became coauthors and friends, sharing things professional and things personal. I miss Alan very much.

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During these years my wife, Faye Lichbach, passed away from metastatic breast cancer that turned into bone cancer, liver cancer, and brain cancer. I was her principal caregiver, attending to her daily needs. Faye was a blessing to all who knew her. Our children, Sammi Jo and Yossi, and I love her very much. She lives with us forever.