

KEYNOTE LECTURE

political science between vision and reality: lessons in times of crises

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Abstract

Political science with its rich history, but varying national traditions and contexts, deals with a multi-dimensional and ever-changing subject matter of which we are, inevitably, a part. This poses specific epistemological problems, but also offers the opportunity to contribute to the shaping of political reality by insights and actions. This lecture gives a brief outline of this problematique and then presents, by way of illustration, the findings of a major international research project on the political effects of the Great Depression in Europe in the interwar period. Based on this experience, some (tentative and personal) lessons will be drawn for the state of political science and its potential contributions facing the present world economic crisis.

Keywords epistemological foundations; democracy; crises; Great Depression

INTRODUCTION

The title of this lecture refers to an influential book by Sheldon Wolin *Politics and Vision* (1960) which not only shows the rich history but also varying national traditions, contexts and approaches of political science combining high levels of scholarship with political commitment and compassion.¹ This reflects the multi-dimensional, ever-changing subject matter of our discipline of which we also are a part. Under such conditions political science (and political scientists)

are not only confronted with specific epistemological problems but also the opportunity to shape political reality by insights and actions. In the following, I will briefly outline this problematique and then illustrate the potential strength of political science by the example of a research project on the Great Depression in interwar Europe. On this basis I will draw some (tentative and personal) conclusions for the state of political science and its potential contributions in face of the present world economic crisis.

THE DISCIPLINE OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

Political science has always attracted great minds to deal with the problems of their times: Plato and Aristotle and the crisis of the Greek polis; Hobbes and Machiavelli facing civil war and the crisis of the Renaissance; Montesquieu and Tocqueville confronted with the decline of the *ancien regime* and the prospects of democracy; and Karl Marx and Max Weber analysing the crises of capitalism and modernity. However, as an independent and respected academic discipline political science is a latecomer, and has depended on political contexts, varying academic traditions and relationships with neighbouring disciplines such as history, philosophy, public law, economics and sociology. The most important thing today for political science to thrive is the freedom of information, expression and research. For this reason, it is also the science of and for democracy!

In German universities, for example, political science was established only after World War II as part of the 're-education' measures of the Allies. After the latest 'wave' of democracy there have been renewed chances in Latin America, Eastern Europe, Africa and elsewhere. This requires conceptual and methodological strengths in a multi-faceted and pluralist manner. In this respect, the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) has shown that a strong discipline can be built with its own traditions and emphases deviating in part from the American 'mainstream'.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS AND CONTROVERSIES

In my view, there are four major features which distinguish the social sciences from the 'natural' sciences and help to locate

some of the major epistemological positions and approaches. The first refers to the multi-dimensionality of our subject matter. Broadly speaking, we can distinguish three major dimensions: 'object-', 'subject-' and 'normative'. As in nature, there are certain hard 'objects', such as political institutions, social structures and so on, which can be identified and which are 'tangible' and observable in certain ways. In addition, however, there is a 'subjective' dimension in which such objects are perceived by individuals and groups and translated into concrete actions. Such perceptions themselves are shaped by a number of psychological, social factors and so on. This distinction is commonly accepted and runs through the history of philosophy from antiquity to the present day and concerns all sciences of man, including medicine. Similarly, the fact that there are possible interactions between these dimensions is well-accepted. The third dimension, the 'normative' one which concerns ethical judgements of 'good' or 'bad' actions and behaviour is more problematic and is based on meta-theoretical religious, ideological or political-philosophical positions. A graphical representation of these dimensions can be rendered in the following figure (where the dotted line represents a 'holistic' position as, for example, in Confucianism). (Figure 1)

I find it useful to locate the major emphases of the current meta-theoretical positions in political science with the help of such distinctions. Historical-materialist (Marxist) approaches take the 'object-'

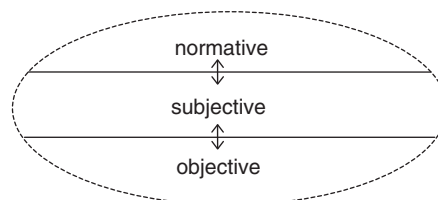


Figure 1 Dimensions of human existence.

dimension as their starting point, 'behaviouralists' emphasise 'subjective' perceptions and behaviour, as well as 'normative-ontological' (e.g., 'Straussian') approaches are founded on the upper dimension, whereas the arrows indicate possible interactions (in several ways).

A second major feature is the 'plastic matter' of political science. In Karl Popper's view the degree of determination of theories can be located on a continuum between, at the extremes, 'clocks' and 'clouds', in between is a more malleable 'plastic' substance matter where Almond and Genco (1977) place the social sciences (see Figure 2).

Naturalist and 'realist' theories are located more to the left of this continuum and 'constructivist' theories are more to the right (Moses and Knutsen, 2007). The realm in between is the area of 'medium range' theories in Merton's sense, bounded in time and space. Hempel's 'covering laws' at best refer to the 'clocks' on the left. Statistical methods (and restrictions) apply to the 'probabilistic'

realm, still more to the left, with possibilities, based on large numbers and random sampling, of statistical inference. In political science with a 'small N' at the macro-level often only various 'conditions of occurrence', more in the middle, can be established. Further to the right, 'qualitative' studies of even fewer cases can be found, these can be 'deeper' and more complex, but even less generalisable.

A third aspect concerns the problem of linking different levels of analysis. These links between the 'macro-', 'meso-', and 'micro-' levels of the social sciences can be illustrated with Coleman's 'bathtub' (see Figure 3).

Here, 'macro-' (e.g., historical-materialist) theories can be located at the upper left-hand corner drawing direct conclusions as to the 'explanandum' on the upper right-hand side. By contrast, 'methodological individualists' start at the micro-level, often based on very strong assumptions as to the 'rational' behaviour of actors. 'Bounded rationality' (H. Simon) at least takes into account some restrictions on the 'macro-' level, the 'opportunity set' (J. Elster) or cultural 'framing'. The 'meso-' level on the right-hand side poses specific problems of aggregation, for example for 'collective actions' (M. Olson). The whole pattern can, of course, also be 'sequenced' showing dynamic interactions, but sometimes also a certain 'path dependency' over time.

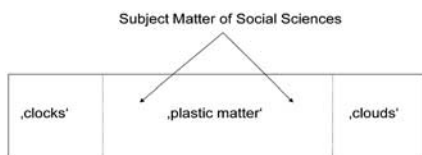


Figure 2 Degree of determination of theories.

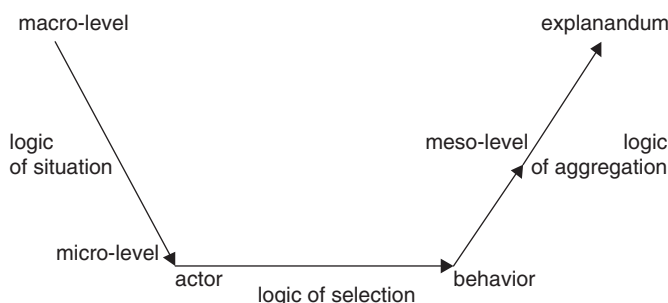


Figure 3 Linking levels of analysis.
 Source: Adapted from Coleman (1990) and Esser (1993).

All these aspects are further complicated by the fact that we ourselves are part of this substance matter. This poses specific problems of perception or 'objectivity' and creates interactions with the objects we study, as for example 'self-fulfilling' or 'self-defeating' prophecies in electoral studies or in the stock market. But it also opens up specific possibilities of understanding and empathy ('*Verstehen*' in Weber's sense) and more sensitive interpretations of others and the world we live in. 'Constructivist' approaches can dig deeper into this subjectivity and the possible plurality of meanings in Foucault's sense.

From all these '*differentiae specifica*' of the social sciences also follows, in my view, a high level of social and political responsibility and the (practical-political) relevance of what we are doing: the 'visions' and the reality. We are all well aware of pressing world problems: hunger, poverty, diseases, the possibility of a nuclear holocaust and environmental catastrophes. In the words of Sheldon Wolin (1960, cover flap): 'The urgency of these tasks is obvious, ... it is the *political order* that is making fateful decisions about man's survival in an age haunted by the possibility of unlimited destruction'.

AN ANALYSIS OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION

I now turn to a concrete example of how political science can at least help to analyse and to better understand major world crises. This is based on a major international research project on the survival or breakdown of democracy in inter-war Europe, analysing 18 cases and involving more than 20 colleagues from almost as many countries, and which originated in some early ECPR Research Sessions. It follows a systematic 'quasi-experimental' research design with clear limits in time and space and a common

'... we ourselves are part of this substance matter'.

major external 'stimulus', the 'Great Depression'. An overview of major conditioning factors is presented in the 'Analytic Map of Inter-War Europe' (see Figure 4).

At the bottom of this map 1,418 cases are listed at the beginning of this period (roughly Note At the bottom of this map all cases are listed at the beginning of this period (roughly 1919/1920)). All countries initially were democracies, at least in some formal sense holding regular elections and so on. Some of these already had existed before the war, others were newly created states after the dissolution of the Habsburg, Ottoman and Tsarist Empires (like Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Estonia, Finland and so on), and yet others had only become democracies after the war (like Weimar Germany and Austria). At the top of the map the situation towards the end of the period (late 1930s) is shown: the surviving democracies on the left, the breakdown cases on the right. On the left-hand side, eight major historical, structural and cultural factors are listed which contributed to this outcome either in a favourable or an unfavourable sense. These factors were derived from a comprehensive empirical analysis, the details of which cannot be presented here, but which all correspond to some major works and authors in empirical democratic theory.

As can be seen, these background and structural conditions determine the clear-cut survivor (Netherlands, Sweden, Belgium, United Kingdom (UK)), and breakdown (Portugal, Poland, Spain, Romania) cases. The mixed cases in the middle (Czechoslovakia, Ireland and Finland as survivors, and Estonia, Germany and Austria as breakdowns) cannot be explained by these conditions alone. There, in addition, the impact of

the crisis played a major role (see Table 1 'Crisis Indicators').

Here it can be seen that the impact of the Great Depression in terms of the decline of the gross domestic product (GDP), industrial production and exports and the rise in unemployment has been very strong in cases like Austria and Germany for example, but cases like Czechoslovakia or Ireland, where the new democracies survived, were similarly affected by some of these changes. Thus it was less the economic impact of the crisis, but the social and *political reactions* to the crisis which became decisive. Some of these are presented in Table 2.

It is evident from these figures that the increase of anti-democratic forces (both from the extreme right and left) was by far the strongest in Germany, reaching more than 60 per cent altogether. Weimar Germany thus had become a 'democracy without (or, at least, without enough) democrats'. But also in Estonia, Spain and Greece the polarisation of anti-democratic

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forces was very strong. A further factor was the specific economic policies and 'moves' by major actors which came into play.

Fiscal and monetary policies in a Keynesian sense were applied to a certain extent; their timing also played an important role. Britain, for example, devalued early, France very late. Public debts were low in Germany, but some deficit spending and a strong depreciation occurred, but to no avail. Greece even then had high deficits, but this seems to be more a habit (up to the present day!) than a policy. (Figure 5)

Background and structural conditions (as presented in the 'Analytical Map')

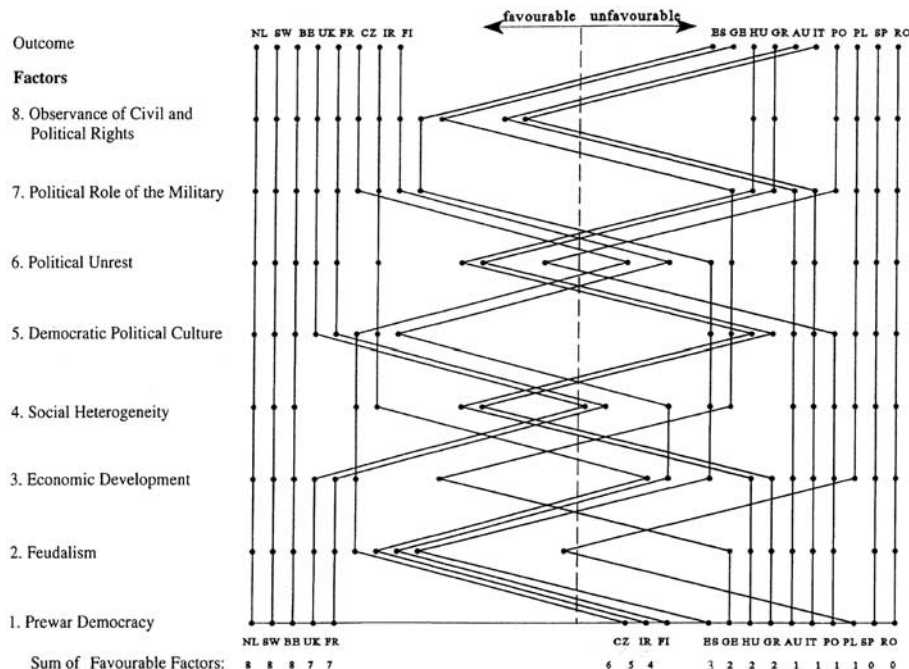


Figure 4 Analytical map of inter-war Europe.

Table 1: Crisis indicators (% change between 1928 and crisis peak)

Countries	Net Domestic Product (const. prices)	NDP/p.c (const. prices)	Trade balance	Exports	Indust. prod.	Unemployment	Absolute peak	Econ. crisis peak (NDP)	Econ. crisis peak (unemploy.)	Depression indices
S: SWE	-2.1	-3.5	-13.6	-40.0	-9.0	13.1	23.7	1932	1934	1.13
FIN	-5.9	-8.0	14.0	-29.0	-27.0	11.1	12.1	1931	1933	1.03
BEL	0.8	-2.8	-12.4	-56.0	-51.0	21.8	23.5	1934	1932	-0.42
NET	-3.6	-10.9	-14.0	-66.0	-18.0	27.1	32.7	1933	1936	-0.55
FRA	-9.5	-11.4	-40.4	-70.0	-26.0	15.0	15.5	1936	1936	-0.27
UK	3.3	3.1	-15.1	-50.0	-8.0	11.3	22.5	1929	1932	1.17
CZE	-8.7	-12.0	-12.2	-72.0	-58.0	26.2	27.7	1935	1933	-1.43
IRE	0.6	0.5	-31.3	-62.0	1.0	30.8	37.6	1929	1935	0.09
B: AUS	-23.0	-24.3	7.1	-65.0	-55.0	18.9	34.8	1934	1933	-1.25
GER	-20.8	-22.4	-12.9	-84.0	-44.0	21.7	30.1	1932	1932	-1.60
HUN	-0.6	-4.8	29.4	-60.0	-16.0	5.8	7.6	1934	1932	0.78
ROM	-24.6	-26.6	12.3	-49.0	-8.0	15.8	18.1	1930	1932	0.09
EST	—	-10.0	-1.1	-66.0	-35.0	16.5	24.5	1932	1930	-0.36
SPA	-2.8	-8.6	-6.0	-73.0	-17.0	15.0	—	1930	—	-0.10
GRE	-5.5	-8.9	-3.5	-34.0	20.0	5.0	—	—	1933	1.68

Table 2: Social and electoral reactions (%)

Country	Changes Extreme left (votes)		Changes Extreme right (votes)		Changes Anti-system parties (votes)		Changes Extreme left (seats)		Changes Extreme right (seats)		Changes Anti-system seats		Fascist parties (peak votes)		Anti-system (peak votes)	
S: SWE	-3.0	2.0	2.0	-1.0	-1.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	-1.0	-1.0	0.6	0.6	2.2	2.2
FIN	1.0	8.0	8.0	1.0	2.0	7.0	7.0	2.0	7.0	2.0	2.0	2.0	8.3	8.3	7.0	7.0
BEL	4.0	15.0	15.0	19.0	3.0	15.0	15.0	3.0	15.0	15.0	18.0	18.0	18.6	18.6	22.8	22.8
NET	3.0	4.0	4.0	6.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	6.0	6.0	4.2	4.2	7.0	7.0
FRA	4.0	0.0	0.0	4.0	10.0	0.0	0.0	10.0	0.0	0.0	10.0	10.0	0.0	0.0	11.8	11.8
UK	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.2
CZE	-4.0	11.0	11.0	7.0	-4.0	11.0	11.0	-4.0	11.0	11.0	7.0	7.0	16.6	16.6	26.6	26.6
IRE	-1.0	0.0	0.0	-1.0	-1.0	0.0	0.0	-1.0	0.0	0.0	-1.0	-1.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
B: AUS	0.0	21.0	21.0	21.0	0.0	16.0	16.0	0.0	16.0	16.0	16.0	16.0	9.2	9.2	16.4	16.4
GER	6.0	26.0	26.0	32.0	6.0	25.0	25.0	6.0	25.0	25.0	31.0	31.0	37.3	37.3	60.5	60.5
HUN	0.0	15.0	15.0	15.0	0.0	15.0	15.0	0.0	15.0	15.0	15.0	15.0	15.2	15.2	15.2	15.2
ROM	0.0	24.0	24.0	24.0	0.0	27.0	27.0	0.0	27.0	27.0	27.0	27.0	15.6	15.6	27.1	27.1
EST	-2.0	22.0	22.0	20.0	-9.0	0.0	0.0	-9.0	0.0	0.0	-9.0	-9.0	21.7	21.7	27.9	27.9
SPA	4.0	29.0	29.0	30.0	4.0	29.0	29.0	4.0	29.0	29.0	30.0	30.0	0.2	0.2	32.3	32.3
GRE	4.0	16.0	16.0	20.0	5.0	18.0	18.0	5.0	18.0	18.0	23.0	23.0	0.0	0.0	27.3	27.3

were very strong, the direct effect of the Depression being relatively weak. Decisive for the breakdowns in the more fragile cases were the anti-system political reactions, which were to some extent affected by respective policies.

These interactions, including a longer-term perspective over the entire period, can also be illustrated in histograms based on the metaphor of a 'tsunami': the quake out in the sea (the 'depression') allows for a certain time to react before the flood wave hits the shore. This, however, has already been shaped by previous events like the immediate post-war crisis. Then it depends on the reactions by political forces, the height and the strength of the dykes (structural conditions), and the moves of major actors. The strength of these factors for each case, weighted by employing the canonical discriminant function coefficients of 'Discriminant Analysis', is represented in these histograms (in Figures 6 and 7).

In Belgium, for example, the impact of the world economic crisis was fairly strong (but less than in Czechoslovakia).

The immediate post-war crisis and the intermediate period preceding the Great Depression had not left greater damages. Social and political reactions to the crisis were, however, considerable. Fascistoid groups like the Rexists in Wallonia and Verdinaso in the Flemish part of the country actually threatened the survival of democracy at a critical moment. As it turned out, the 'dykes' (the initial background conditions) were strong enough to sustain this onslaught and some major actors like Prime Minister van Zeeland and Cardinal van Roey, in addition, intervened in favour of democracy. By contrast, the situation in Finland was even more shaky: even though it was less affected by the Depression, the immediate post-war crisis, the civil war, had left its marks. Anti-democratic forces, the Lapua movement, became very strong and the dyke was fairly low. Democracy then was saved due to the personal intervention of President Svinhufud who mobilised the army to put down the militant Lapua revolt at Mäntsälä. In other cases like Sweden and the United Kingdom things remained relatively calm,

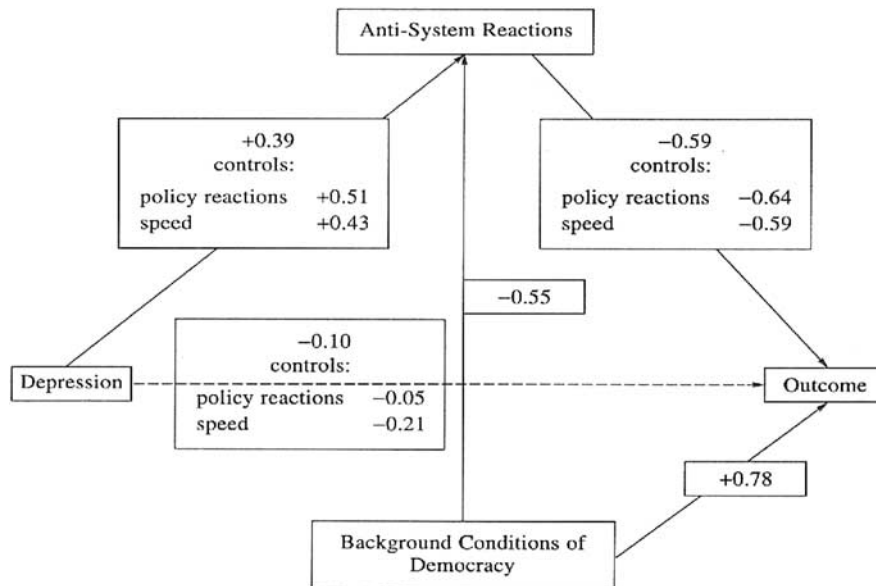


Figure 5 Factor interactions.

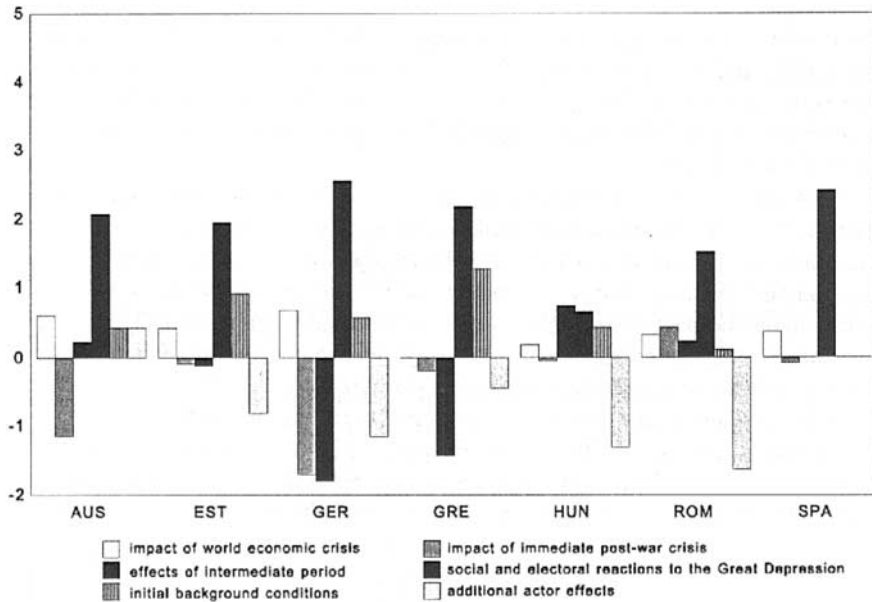


Figure 6 Crisis histograms, survival of democracies.

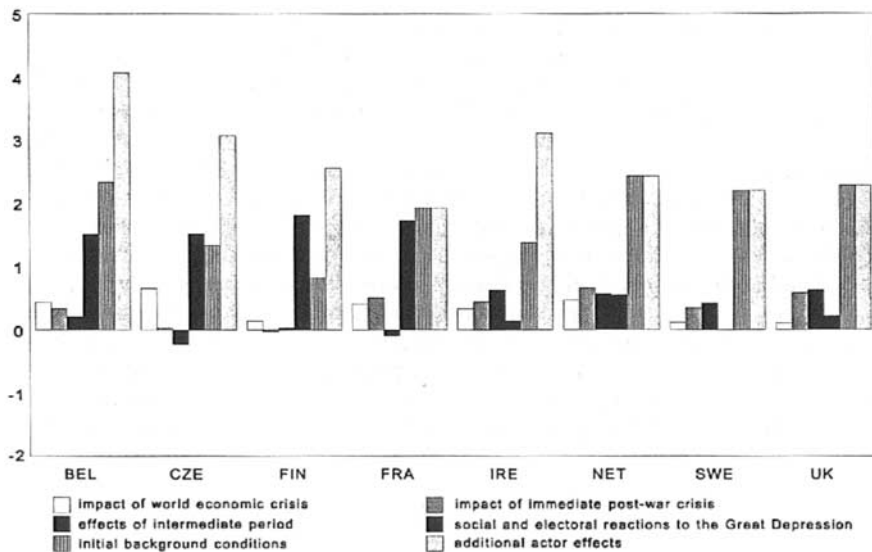


Figure 7 Crisis histograms – breakdowns.

the dykes were secure and major actors did not have to intervene.

A similar picture can be shown for the cases where democracies broke down. Here, in particular, the contrast between

Finland and Estonia, the two by far most similar cases in our analysis but with different outcomes, becomes apparent. In Estonia the strength of the depression, the unfavourable post-war situation, the

strength of anti-democratic forces (the 'Veterans' Movement'), and the weakness of the dyke were comparable to the situation in Finland. In this case, however, the incumbent President Päts did not intervene in favour of democracy but instead, in a 'coup from above', abolished parliament and established an authoritarian regime (in order to pre-empt the fascistoid 'Veterans', as he argued).

The German case was, of course, the most dramatic one with the most tragic consequences leading, in the end, to the World War II and the Holocaust. There, the long-term effects of the post-war crisis, hyperinflation, impoverishment of the middle classes and the strong political polarisation between the extreme left (the Communist Party) and the extreme right (the 'National Socialists') exacerbated the situation. The 'dyke' remained low, effects of the depression were strong, policy measures of the last democratic governments ineffective, and the coalition of conservative President Hindenburg and former German-Nationalist Chancellor von Papen with Hitler and the Nazi party rang the death knell for democracy in January 1933.

LESSONS FOR THE PRESENT WORLD ECONOMIC CRISIS

This is just a brief illustration and an example of a systematic comparative political analysis and possible insights for democratisation research and similar crisis situations.² It highlights the fact that for such a study longer-term structural conditions together with the varying impact of the crisis, specific social and political reactions and, finally, major actors and their concrete moves and policies and the speed of their reactions have to be taken into account for a more comprehensive and meaningful analysis. In the words of S.M. Lipset in the Stein Rokkan Memorial Lecture at Aarhus in

'... some conclusions can be drawn as far as similarities but also important differences between these two major crisis situations are concerned'

1982: 'Should the Western world experience a major crisis, it is likely that national politics will vary along lines that stem from the past, much as they did during the 1930s. Political scientists of the future, who seek to explain events in the last quarter of the century, will undoubtedly find important explanatory variables in earlier variations in the behaviour of the major political actors'.

In the present situation we do not have the data to conduct such an analysis, being still in the middle of the crisis. Nevertheless, some conclusions can be drawn as far as similarities but also important differences between these two major crisis situations are concerned:

1. Even though the overall *magnitude of the present crisis* is considerable, it is still less than in the 1930s, concerning the decline of GDP, industrial production and exports as well as the increase of unemployment.
2. However, the crisis is now truly '*global*'; no longer mostly confined to the 'Western' world.
3. At the same time, there are *new important centres* in the 'emerging markets' (China, India and Brazil), which are partly less affected by the crisis.
4. The *Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development countries* and, in particular, the European Union (EU) member states are today much more *intertwined*, so that 'beggar thy neighbour policies' and saving one's

skin at the expense of others are no longer feasible amongst them.

5. There has been *greater coordination* in reactions to the crisis (within the EU, but also concerning G8 and G20 summits). Even if individual national measures which have been taken differ, these affect all of the closely linked economies. The German car wreck ('cash for clunkers') subsidy, for example, was mostly used to buy small cars produced in Italy, France, Portugal and so on, and not just German makes.
6. We now have *greater insights* in to the causes and mechanisms of the crisis ('neo-Keynesianism' has now been accepted again on a much greater international scale). Nevertheless, effective international controls to avoid similar bubbles and excesses are still lacking. The *political effects* of the present crisis have been much less noticeable at least in the longer established democracies. There have been no strong extremist social and political reactions; in these countries today the more general structural and political-cultural conditions favouring democracy clearly prevail. Reasons for political disaffection in some countries have other roots and are mostly not related to the crisis. In the modern *welfare states* there are now buffer effects, which cushion the social and political impact of the crisis, at least for a while.
7. The situation in '*latest wave democracies*' is more shaky; there, things depend more on policy and actor effects comparable to the interwar crisis. But the international situation and political 'climate' also have changed. External factors and *international assistance* (e.g., of the EU in Eastern Europe) now play a much greater role.
8. So far, there has been no sizeable '*reverse wave*' of democratisation, just a few individual cases (e.g.,

'... our theoretical approaches and empirical tools have certainly greatly improved over the last decades'.

Guinea, Honduras and Niger) which are not related to the world economic crisis.

9. The oil and mineral exporting authoritarian '*rentier states*' seemingly have remained politically stable, but their exports are also affected by lower world market prices. This has, in part, been compensated by greater demand from the 'emerging markets'.
10. Capitalist democracies may no longer be the 'only game in town' for others to follow. For some countries China may possibly serve as a *new model*, combining a controlled market economy with authoritarian rule. This also provides more leeway for other authoritarian or 'rogue' states (e.g., Angola and Sudan). Similarly, a new 'national-authoritarian' model in Russia and other Community of Independent States (CIS) and neighbouring countries may follow this route.

PERSPECTIVES

Facing such crises our theoretical approaches and empirical tools have certainly greatly improved over the last decades. International communication and cooperation have become commonplace, indeed, without the internet and e-mail many things would not be feasible. Nevertheless, there are also limitations and dangers: as pointed out at the beginning, our substance matter continues to change and our knowledge has to be regularly up-dated. In the age of 'globalisation' things also become

increasingly complex and require multi-level analyses. At the same time, political science has become increasingly differentiated and specialised. As in other disciplines like medicine or engineering we tend to know more and more about less and less. The view of the 'whole' may thus be lost.

This dilemma only can be overcome by even more international cooperation and better inter-cultural understanding. As Stein Rokkan, the most important pioneer of international cooperation in the social sciences in the last century, noted: 'International cooperation on the levels of research design, data collection, joint analysis and interpretation ... is the peak of internationalisation' (Rokkan, 1970). But, as he also found out: 'This is possibly ideal, but it is costly, sometimes

very cumbersome and, at least in some fields and some countries, very hard on the nerves of the participants.' (ibid.). In my view, a compassionate, but 'critical-rational' approach to the problems facing the world and the difficulties of interactions across cultures remains essential. Passion, Craft and Method, as expressed in the title of a remarkable book by Munck and Snyder (2007) presenting extensive interviews with leading scholars in Comparative Politics, belong in this respect inseparably together.

To quote Wolin again: 'Political theory must once again be viewed as that form of knowledge which deals with what is general and integrative to men, a life of common involvements' (op.cit.: 434). And this today applies on a worldwide scale!

Notes

1 This was originally delivered as the Stein Rokkan Lecture, ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops, Muenster, 24 March 2010.

2 The comprehensive results of this project have been published in two volumes, one giving detailed historical accounts of each case, the other comprising the cross-cutting comparative analyses (see Berg-Schlosser and Mitchell (2000) and (2002) plus a number of articles in international journals).

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