Comparative Politics Preliminary Examination.
February, 1999

Answer one question from each section. Section I stresses methodology, bibliography, and general theory. Section II emphasizes comparison and mid-range theory. Section III consists of region-specific questions and how political events support or undermine theory. Please note that strong examinations show breadth as well as depth. We therefore advise you to choose questions that will allow you to show your knowledge across different sub-fields and areas of comparative politics. Good Luck!

Section I. Methodology, Bibliography, and General Theory. Choose One.

1. In “Unfinished Business: Reflections on the Scope of Comparative Politics” (1998), Eckstein recommends the use of historical comparative politics to develop a theory of the evolution of the development in societies so that we can explain, by locating the polities on the trajectory, where they are and where they are going (520). He also cautions us against ignoring data in order “to keep our data hard” (522). Using major works in the transitions literature, discuss the extent to which theorists have ignored the development of a theory of evolution and the effects (if applicable) of such ignorance. What potential problems do you see from a trajectory of evolutionary development that allows us to explain development by locating polities on a trajectory?

2. In “Designing Social Inquiry,” King et al. argue that “[T]he cases of extreme selection bias--where there is by design no variation on the dependent variable--are easy to deal with: avoid them!” Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why or why not?

3. What, if anything, can we learn from large cross-national studies of political behavior that we cannot learn from small-N case studies?

Section II. Comparison and Mid-range Theory. Choose One.

1. The fall of the Asian economy has led some to revisit the political economy approaches that explained the previously extraordinary performance of some of the Asian Newly Industrialized Countries. Discuss at least three different political economy approaches relevant to the study of economic development, explain if and why they failed to predict the onset of the “Asian flu,” and show if and how the approaches may be qualified to predict better in the future.

2. Ethnic conflicts within multi-ethnic states have become a major source of concern to the international community. Yet not all multi-ethnic states have descended into violent conflict. What have students of comparative politics learned about the conditions and immediate causes of ethnic conflict, and about the methods by which such conflicts can be avoided or resolved?

3. Common wisdom typically argues that mass public opinion and interest group pressures are irrelevant to the creation of domestic policy in countries that lack politically accountable regimes. Some scholars, however, have challenged this generalization, suggesting that mass opinion and political opposition groups may play an important constraining role even in “closed” political systems. Where do you come down on this debate?
Why? Your answer should discuss the relevant theoretical literature and use examples from at least two different world regions to support your analysis.

Section III. Region-specific questions. Choose One.

1. How, if at all, does the literature on transitions to democracy help us understand what is occurring at present within either the Palestinian Authority or Russia?

2. Research and theorizing in political science has usually been driven by developments in the real world. How has the collapse of the Soviet Union and its empire contributed to research and theory building in comparative politics?

3. Discuss and analyze approaches to the study of religion and politics in one region of the world. Using specific examples from the region you have chosen and with reference to specific social scientists, discuss and make an argument for the approach you find most effective. Is religion best treated as epiphenomenal? Should it be examined primarily as an institution? Or must we also pay close attention to the concerns, practices, and beliefs of the faithful?