Comparative Politics Preliminary Examination, Spring 2008

Introduction: Preliminary examinations should stress breadth; dissertations delve deeply into specialized knowledge. Good answers on this examination can illustrate critical points with examples emphasizing a single country or many world regions. But keep in mind that single-country material principally serves to buttress general theoretical literature. You should be (1) well-versed in the key comparative politics literature; and (2) able to knowledgeably summarize and support the theories in this literature by using the cases employed in the literature and/or a case or cases of your own choosing.

Section I. Theory/methods (answer one of the following two questions)

1. Many of the most famous comparative politics scholars are those without a specific regional specialization, e.g., Gary Cox, David Laitin, and Mark Lichbach. How do the universal theories generated by these kinds of scholars fare within specific countries of the world? Why are more region-oriented scholars less well-known?

2. What are the greatest failures of comparative politics research? What things should we know that we currently do not know? Why have these failures occurred? What would you recommend to generate knowledge in these challenging fields?

Section II. Choose two of the following three topics (political economy, political institutions and social politics) and answer one question from each.

A. Political Economy

1. Identify three different ways that political economy as a subfield approaches the study of institutions. Discuss no fewer than two works that may be ascribed to each approach, explain what it is in each work that qualifies them for the approach ascribed, describe their contributions and their weaknesses. What are the areas for future research? What makes them fruitful?

2. How does political economy study democratization? Describe the contributions and challenges faced in each direction of study. Based on your discussion, what are the areas of future political-economy research on democratization? Explain what makes them fruitful.

B. Political institutions

1. Based on empirical evidence in the literature, what type of political system would you recommend for a country undergoing a transition to democracy that has had significant, and at times violent, divisions along ethnic lines? Please discuss the strengths and weaknesses of presidential, parliamentary, semi-presidential, consensus, and majoritarian systems.

2. Most political scientists would agree with the statement that “institutions matter.” However, the real issue is how and why they matter. Discuss at least two works from the past 20 years and address the authors' contributions, strengths and weaknesses.

C. Social Politics

1. In her discussion of her research on the Nicaraguan revolution, Stivers (1993) argues that individual experiences are critical for understanding the meaning of
the revolution:

(I)f large-scale phenomena like the revolution are fundamentally intersubjective, as postpostivism permits one to theorize, then building a broad picture of such events by evoking the stories of participants...is justifiable on the grounds that the ultimate (though not sole) source of the revolution’s meaning is the experiential knowledge of those involved (412).

Is Stivers correct? What other sources of knowledge about revolutions should be considered? How should these different sources of knowledge be integrated?

2. Young sociologists lament the fact that “there is no social movement theory.” Indeed, the old theories are discredited. What would you recommend to a beginning scholar who needs some mobilization theory? What are the choices? What would you recommend?