Issues in Qualitative Research

Michael Bernhard and Daniel O'Neill

The Presidential Address

One of the honors that the Association bestows on *Perspectives* is to publish the annual Presidential Address. This year's address is by Kathleen Thelen, the Ford Professor of Political Science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Kathleen Thelen's works centers on political and economic institutions in highly developed democracies. She has made extensive contributions to comparative politics, particularly in the areas of political economy and the development of institutions. Her work is both rigorous and highly historical and she is one of the foundational thinkers in the approach to understanding political change known as historical institutionalism. In our previous issue, 16(4), we published some of Thelen's most recent work on how the emergence of the gig economy has changed the dynamics of how the state can manage the economy.[1]

In her Presidential Address Thelen focuses on the issue of "The American Precariat: US Capitalism in Comparative Perspective." She turns her skills as a comparative political economist who has studied the development of European capitalism to a consideration of her own country, the United States. She again thinks about what is novel about the gig economy, but rather than focusing on the regulatory state, she explores its impact on those whose livelihoods depend on this new sector. Their work is not steady, their compensation is moderate or meager, and their benefits are nonexistent. Those who manage to subsist relying on this segment of the labor market have been labelled a "precariat"—a proletariat that lives precariously at the margins of material life, teetering on the edge of subsistence.

The address concerns the ramifications of the emergence of the precariat as a problem both at the individual level and the national level. Those with low skills who rely on gig-work as their primary source of income in the absence of standard benefits like health care, insurance, and retirement, face a life of chronic underemployment, where it is difficult to make plans for the future, invest in new skills, or even effectively manage the care of their children. Such arrangements promote the paradoxical, yet all too common, situation of working extremely hard while being consigned to a life of poverty. Thelen concludes by considering how this state of affairs diminishes our democracy and puts it at risk. She reminds us that democracy is not just a system of rules, but needs to be judged on the substantive outcomes it provides. She points out that precarity undermines the capacity of a large number of American citizens to meaningfully participate in politics, and that this in turn undermines our vision of what democracy should be—and needs to be—if it is to live up to its promise.

Issues in Qualitative Research

The origins of *Perspectives on Politics* go back to our discipline's "methods wars" in the 1980s and 1990s. A recent symposium organized by the previous editor-in-chief, Jeffrey C. Isaac, revisited the origins of the journal as one of the responses of the American Political Science Association to the Perestroika movement that challenged the predominance of a natural science model to the study of politics.[2] Another important consequence of the methods wars was to motivate qualitative researchers to think seriously and explicitly about how they made inferences, to justify those inferential strategies, and to think about ways of improving them. While many of those efforts came in response to voices in the discipline that sought to impose universal standards derived from quantitative methodology and thereby, either intentionally or unintentionally, to delegitimize qualitative research, the end result has been positive.[3] Qualitative researchers are now more explicitly conscious of the ways they make inferences and have shared those insights in an expansive literature, enriching qualitative work in general and generating a wealth of materials that assist in the training of graduate students interested in qualitative or mixed methods research.[4]

At *Perspectives* we are committed to being a leading outlet for work that addresses questions of qualitative methods. In this issue, our special section includes two articles and a reflection that bear on important issues in qualitative research. In the first article, "The Structure of Description: Evaluating Historical Description and Its Role in Theorizing," Marcus Kreuzer interrogates the importance of description as the source material on which both theorization and explanation are based. He argues against the widespread notion that description is inherently subjective and seeks to illustrate the ways in which its veracity can be evaluated. He propounds a theory of

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description that identifies discrete stages in the process, each of which entails important inferential challenges. The extent to which description can address these challenges gives us a basis on which to evaluate it. His article illustrates this process using the controversy between the historians Goldhagen and Browning over why German policemen were willing to participate in mobile killing operations during the Holocaust. [5] In this debate the two authors drew radically different conclusions from the same sources making it an excellent place to think about how to evaluate description.

Eleanor Knott discusses the kinds of moral pitfalls that can arise for researchers when conditions on the ground change after they have finished their fieldwork. In "Beyond the Field: Ethics after Fieldwork in Politically Dynamic Contexts," Knott reminds us that our ethical obligations to the subjects of our research do not end after we have completed our observations. This thorny problem is made all the trickier when conditions on the ground in the areas that we study change drastically once we leave the field. Our research ethics must be dynamic in order to protect the subjects of our research under changing conditions. She illustrates this with a discussion of her own fieldwork in the Crimea.

Tasha Fairfield and Andrew Charman contribute a reflection entitled "The Bayesian Foundations of Iterative Research in Qualitative Social Science: A Dialogue with the Data." Relying on a Bayesian probability framework, they argue that the distinction between the exploratory and confirmatory stages of analysis suggested in recent discussions on research transparency are unnecessary for qualitative research when it is guided by logical Bayesianism. They argue that under its principles there is no distinction between old and new evidence and that the latter enjoys no special status in the logic of confirmation. Further they argue that logical Bayesianism allows researchers to move fluidly back and forth between theory and evidence and avoids the potential pitfalls of the formulation of ad-hoc hypothesizing and confirmation bias. They illustrate its workings with a range of examples from the literature on state-making.

Other Articles

Katherine Levine Einstein, Maxwell Palmer, and David M. Glick examine which sorts of citizens are more likely to get involved in and affect the governance of their community in "Who Participates in Local Government? Evidence from Meeting Minutes." Ideally, participation should work to mitigate inequalities between citizens if all make use of their right to do so. However, the authors show how participation may bias policy outcomes when proceedings are dominated by an unrepresentative sample of citizens. They show that when a group of older, wealthier, homeowners with a history of voting came to dominate participation in local government zoning and planning boards in Massachusetts, they were able to block the construction of new housing, and that such participatory inequalities contributed to rising housing costs (as well as the appreciation of the homeowners' property values).

In "Non-Party Government: Bipartisan Lawmaking and Party Power in Congress," James M. Curry and Francis Lee consider the impact of the changing face of American political parties on congressional behavior. Looking at the period from 1985 to 2016 when both the Republican and Democratic Parties became more ideologically homogenous as well as organizationally centralized, and politics generally became more polarized, they consider whether the passage of legislation became more partisan. In earlier eras where both parties were riven by factionalism, bipartisan coalitions were necessary to realize legislative agendas. In contrast to what we might expect, given recent changes, they find that landmark legislation and laws in general continue to be passed with bipartisan support, often including the support of the leadership of the minority party in at least one legislative chamber. Thus despite changes to the party system, dominant single-party platforms pushed by majorities have not come to displace cooperation with the minority party.

This issue also includes another contribution from the Varieties of Democracy Project, "Beyond Democracy-Dictatorship Measures: A New Framework Capturing Executive Bases of Power, 1789—2016." Jan Teorell and Staffan Lindberg propose a general framework to characterize executive power across both democratic and authoritarian regimes. In order to demonstrate the utility of the framework they conduct a series of tests to show how the five dimensions of executive appointment and dismissal they use to characterize executives can predict a range of important outcomes including repression, corruption, and executive survival, while controlling for regime type. It also outperforms existing measures, which leads the authors to raise important questions about the conclusions reached by a number of influential established theories of executive power.

In "From Within to Between Nations: Subnational Comparison Across Borders," Jefferey M. Sellers explores how subnational comparison—a technique used extensively in American politics and increasingly in comparative politics—can be productively used transnationally. Though transnational comparison is quite tricky to pull off, Sellers argues that it allows us to elucidate important variations among countries. Sellers catalogues a number of exemplary studies of this type, and explores their logic. He uses this as a basis to outline a typology of transnational comparative strategies. He also makes important recommendations regarding which sorts of strategies are more amenable to successfully answering different kinds of questions.

We end the articles in this issue with one that explores the development of authoritarian rule in China—"Performing Authoritarian Citizenship: Public Transcripts in China," by

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Greg Distelhorst and Diana Fu. In this piece they explore a transcript of how Chinese citizens interact publically with political authority. Specifically, they look at the roles that citizens strategically choose to play to elicit help from local elites by analyzing the records of 8000 appeals to government. They detect three different scripts of subjecthood—as subalterns appealing to benevolent authorities, as legal subjects to whom the state owes certain legal obligations, and finally as socialist citizens to whom authorities are obliged to provide collective welfare. Distelhorst and Fu argue that the diversity of the roles that citizens play provides evidence of complex notions of citizenship under China's authoritarian system of rule and helps us to understand that some forms of performed citizenship transcend simple regime classification.

Trumpdate

We hope many of you saw the journal's recent "October Surprise," where we put six items from our forthcoming special issue on "Trump: Causes and Consequences" on FirstView just prior to the midterm elections.[6] The response to the call for papers was overwhelming. We had more than a hundred submissions, many of which were of very high quality. As a result, we will not only devote our next issue, 17(2), to consideration of the Trump phenomenon, but at least a substantial part of issue 17(3) as well.

Notes

1 Thelen 2018.
2 See Gunnell 2015 and the symposium responses that follow in *Perspectives on Politics* 13(2), available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/perspectives-on-politics/issue/B621E267D1868887B89F8-B30A6E54A0D.
3 King, Keohane, and Verba 1994.
4 Among the earliest responses were Rueschemeyer and Mahoney 2003, Collier and Brady 2004, Yanow and Schwartz-Shea. 2006.
5 Goldhagen 1996, Browning 1992.
6 Available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/perspectives-on-politics/information/trump-causes-and-consequences.

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