

Statement to the Perestroika meeting of the APSA, August 30, 2002  
Larry Diamond

In the few minutes available, I want to focus on two issues. One is the urgent need to foster and expand area studies, particularly in the post 9/11 world. Second, is the issue of what we are here for, and what this inchoate and elusive movement—if we can call it that—is about.

To me, the Perestroika movement is about defending pluralism in political science. I do not dismiss the potential value of rational choice and game-theoretic perspectives and methods in comparative politics. I have never discouraged graduate students from acquiring formal analytic skills, or from framing their research problems with the tools of game theory or the assumptions of rational choice—if they *choose* to do so. But to my mind, that is the core question for Perestroika: choice. For some time now, I have been deeply troubled by the reports from graduate students and junior faculty in our discipline. From many departments, they report growing pressure to work with these methods and to embrace these schools. They fear they will be considered second-rate, by their own faculty and by leading departments in the hiring market, if they do not “do” rat choice. Some junior faculty fear revealing their true professional convictions and analytic dispositions. That is one reason why many of the messages in Perestroika cyberspace are (to my growing frustration) anonymous.

I suspect that some of this fear is self-generated anxiety, but I know much of it has a basis in reality. To the extent that the economic approach to political science becomes not one way of testing theories and pursuing knowledge within an intellectual marketplace in which different methods and theoretical perspectives or schools compete, but rather an aspiring orthodoxy, this

situation is intolerable. One purpose of Perestroika must be to oppose such methodological hegemony, and to defend the principle that there are multiple ways of advancing understanding about political systems and behavior, multiple kinds of good political science work.

If we are open-minded, responsible, professional, and pluralistic in our own thinking and discourse, I am convinced we will win this fight, for several reasons. First, the quest to impose a methodological or theoretical orthodoxy is fundamentally anti-intellectual and counter to the true spirit of the academy. In merely exposing the realities and mechanisms of the quest for orthodoxy to the universities and their constituencies among students, alumni, boards of trustees, and the larger society, I think we can heavily discredit this endeavor. But this requires mobilizing evidence, not rumor, hearsay, fear, and prejudice on our own parts.

Second, colleges and universities must ultimately be accountable to their consumers, students. Most undergraduate students do not find the economistic way of viewing politics sufficiently illuminating or satisfying, for the same reason that so many of us do not. Most students who major in political science want to understand how government works, when political forces mobilize, why democracies fail or succeed, at a level of empirical richness and explanatory comprehensiveness that heavily reductionist formal models cannot accommodate. And they want to (and for their careers, need to) understand the politics of particular countries and regions in historical depth and analytic breadth. If they are to meet the demands and needs of students, political science departments need excellent area specialists, and comparativists who do not confine themselves to a narrow, economistic approach. This is not pandering to the lowest common denominator, it is responding to the real needs of our society.

And third, the external needs go well beyond students. While rational choice and game theory offer powerful insights and tools that may advance understanding of particular problems and processes, or lead us to see old dynamics in newly illuminating ways, they are also limited in their ability to meet the increasingly urgent needs of policymakers and the public at large to understand what is happening in the world: why Pakistan is a failing state, why the Middle East has been unable to democratize, why Africa has been ravaged by civil war, why Latin Americans are rising up against market reforms, why dozens of lower-income countries have been unable to develop despite sizeable infusions of foreign aid over the last several decades. I do not say that rational choice theorists have nothing to offer in answer to these questions, but too often they seem content to address only a narrow academic audience, using frameworks and vocabularies that are bound to close off broader access. And if these tools do prove useful for some public policy purposes – for example, in developing predictive models for consulting companies and intelligence agencies – they cannot be useful in isolation. They still require real knowledge, in depth, of actual countries and regions, honed through years of field research and mastery of the language, culture, and history of specific countries and regions.

All of this is to underscore what I have said (at greater length) in a recent essay for PS online: in the post 9/11 world, when we face diverse and potentially calamitous security challenges, political scientists have an obligation to illuminate these challenges in their concrete realities, and not to rest content with theoretical abstractions and games. We have an obligation to train students to understand not only the theories of why people behave politically as they do in particular circumstances, and why various political systems persist and change as they do, but

also the international and country details: who are the actors, what are the institutions and cleavages, where did they come from, why do they persist, what are the cultural understandings and assumptions surrounding them.

There is a danger that many of us know well. Some prominent political scientists, and departments, and even deans who have bought into this misguided logic, are inclined to say, fine: we will teach about these areas, we will have area studies. But it is the “real” political scientists—the ones who are developing general models and formal theory—who we want to be tenured political science faculty. The area specialists, the ones who know the realities of particular countries, can only be real, or really good, political scientists if they also use game-theoretic methods and a rational-choice approach. Otherwise, they belong in the history department, or the area studies center, or some other research institute, or can be hired as adjunct or untenured (and untenurable) faculty.

This hierarchy is ultimately unviable, but I do not want to wait for twenty years until university administrations realize that, and only then begin to find the time and resources to undo the damage that has been done by a long train of monolithic hiring decisions. We have to fight this prejudice openly and vigorously. But to prevail, we have to do so respectfully, pluralistically, with evidence, energy, and a professional spirit. Here are some guidelines for how I think we should do so, and I will close with these:

1. We have to recognize that good work in political science cannot be merely descriptive or exclusively country-focused. In this sense, a hierarchy does prevail. My mentor Seymour Martin Lipset often observed that one cannot understand a single country

except in a comparative (and thus by extension, theoretical) context. To really know a country or region well, to do good work in area studies, one must know the relevant theories of comparative political development or governance, and one must have a concern either to examine those theories in the light of the country experience, or to extend or reformulate theory from country or cross-country experience, or ideally both. Otherwise, we really are only doing history, and not very good history at that.

2. We should strive to use—or at least understand—multiple methods. Resentment at the aspiring hegemony of economistic approaches should not lead political science graduate students to feel that they are justified in failing to grasp basic statistical methods. To be a literate and “good” empirical political scientist today, one must have some grasp of quantitative methods. And the better political scientists will use appropriate, even if simple, statistical methods when the problem they are investigating lends itself to those approaches and the data is available. Certainly they should be able to read and critique or draw upon the relevant works of others using basic to intermediate statistical methods.
3. I think graduate students will be better prepared as political scientists if they gain some exposure through coursework and other research and reading to the tools of game theory and to the ideas and modes of analysis of the rational-choice approach. Then they can pursue these enthusiastically, borrow selectively from them, or reject them altogether. But departments also need to recognize the reality of limited time and the need for students to make choices. Mastering the contemporary politics of a

country (or two) requires field research, historical knowledge, and command of one or more relevant languages. Ability to analyze country-level or comparative quantitative data may also be needed. Or field work might fruitfully be combined with or inspired by the development of a formal model. But most Ph.D. students cannot realistically master a foreign language, learn statistics, learn formal modeling, learn more mathematics to do better modeling, take substantive classes, take general exams in two fields, TA, do field work, write a dissertation, and graduate in six years. Most students who are clearly heading toward a dissertation based on field research will better profit from a course in qualitative research methods, and possibly in sampling and survey design, than they will from a course in modeling. They need to be given this type of option.

4. To graduate students in this room, finally, I want to say: Do not fear and do not be intimidated. Explore various theories and methods. Decide for yourself who and what you want to be as a political scientist. There is only one condition for true and lasting scholarly success. That is to have an intellectual fire. To examine what really excites you, to push out the boundaries of our understanding about that problem or phenomenon, and to do so with methods and concepts appropriate to the challenge. If you do what you think you *must* do rather than what you really believe in, your work will be pedestrian, second-rate. If you pursue in your dissertation research what excites you, and work exhaustively to understand it, you will find people to work with, in your department and if necessary outside it. You will blaze a trail. You will

become known, and you will get a job, and as your work matures, perhaps a better job. Sooner or later excellence, in all forms, will once again prevail. The hegemonic moment will pass.