

CENTRAL AMERICAN STUDIES: COMMENTS ON THE COATSWORTH MEMORANDUM

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The Coatsworth memorandum states that the ability of the ACLS/SSRC Joint Committee on Latin American Studies to support research on Central America has been hampered in its efforts by the "lack of Central American expertise on the Committee." The memorandum goes on to ask the "Expert Group" for advice as to how the ACLS/SSRC can best assist research on Central America. It seems obvious that in order for the ACLS/SSRC to achieve this objective it first needs to understand why it is that the members of the committee lack expertise on Central America.

Two erroneous perspectives are largely responsible for the current state of events in which Central American scholarship has long remained at the margin of "mainstream" interest. First, and at the more general level, graduate students have long been discouraged from writing dissertations on small states because, as they are told by their mentors, these are "not the important cases." Students are referred to the giants of comparative studies such as Barrington Moore. Moore, for one, repeatedly argues in his classic work on the origins of the modern state, that the big countries that he has studied are the "historically significant" ones. Russia and the United States are "historically significant," Switzerland and, for that matter, Honduras, clearly are not. Graduate students are warned by their mentors, directly or indirectly, that if Skocpol had decided to study Bolivia rather than France, for example, her work would not have had nearly the impact that it did. And those mentors are right: the study of small states is not viewed as important research because the countries being studied are not seen as important cases.

The flaw in the formula that "unimportant cases makes for unimportant research" is that it is an embarrassingly ethnocentric, unscientific and, in any event, inaccurate formula. If the principal goal of the social scientific community engaged in research beyond the borders of the United States is to seek generalizations sustainable in comparative perspective, then the equation of "large countries" with "important cases" is unsupportable. What we seek is valid comparative analysis, and the relevance of any one case is to be determined only within that context and no other.

The deleterious impact of the first perspective becomes obvious when we realize that the heavy emphasis by the Joint Committee placed on the "important cases" in Latin America (especially the Southern Cone) has been justified, implicitly or explicitly, on their size, wealth, and political power. In fact, as we have now come to realize, even the most dramatic changes in the economics and politics of Southern Cone countries have little impact that transcends their own borders, whereas similar shifts in the politics or