

# Political Research Quarterly

<http://prq.sagepub.com>

---

## The "Kling Thesis": An Early Effort at Systematic Comparative Politics

Mitchell A. Seligson

*Political Research Quarterly* 2008; 61; 17

DOI: 10.1177/1065912907311896

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://prq.sagepub.com>

---

Published by:

 SAGE Publications

<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



Western Political Science Association



The University of Utah

**Additional services and information for *Political Research Quarterly* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://prq.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://prq.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

# The “Kling Thesis”: An Early Effort at Systematic Comparative Politics

Mitchell A. Seligson  
*Vanderbilt University Nashville, Tennessee*

An entire generation of political scientists trained in the field of comparative politics with a Latin American specialization grew up reading the “Kling Thesis,” as it was called (Kling 1956). I know: I am part of that generation. I first read Kling’s piece as an undergraduate enrolled in the only Latin American politics course that was offered (rather irregularly, I should add) at my institution. I recall the piece to this day because it made such a strong impression on me, being, as it was, in such sharp contrast to so much of the scholarship of the period. Re-reading it today gives us surprising insight into the epistemological battles of Kling’s day.

First, a brief background about the author of this highly cited paper. I never had the honor of meeting Merle Kling, but a little digging on the web and consultation with those who knew him allow me to sketch out the bare outlines of his academic life. Unlike the lives of our itinerant contemporary scholars, who do their undergraduate studies at one institution, their PhD degrees at another, get their “starter jobs” at a third, and often move several more times before retiring, Kling received his BA, MA and PhD from Washington University and joined the Political Science Department faculty in 1946, three years *before* completing his PhD in 1949. He wrote a dissertation that is perhaps best classified as “diplomatic history,” a subject much in vogue at the time (Kling 1949). Kling spent the rest of his career at Washington University, rising through the ranks and, at a relatively young age, moved into university administration, serving as dean of arts and sciences and also as provost. Despite the strong reception to the article under discussion here (as evidenced by the high citation rates of the piece), Kling did not prove to be a prolific scholar. While today’s electronic search engines may have missed some of his writings, as far as I can tell, this piece and few others were his only published studies.<sup>1</sup> When Kling retired as provost from Washington University in 1983, a chair was established in his honor. Curiously enough, it was not in political science but was designated the “Merle

Kling Professor of Modern Letters” and has been held ever since by scholars in the humanities.

The first two paragraphs of the Kling article, “Towards a Theory of Power and Political Instability in Latin America,” make it clear that it was going to be different from the standard political science papers of the day. Despite its title, focused on power and stability Latin America, Kling does not mention these topics at all in his introduction. Rather, he begins by making a forceful statement about the philosophy and practice of the social sciences. The terminology he uses will, no doubt, confuse the young social scientist of today. Kling begins by criticizing “empiricism,” yet the rest of the article self-consciously provides a great deal of empirical data. Kling uses the term “empiricism,” however, in the manner in which physicians do when they refer with derision to “empirical medicine,” that is, treating the symptoms presented by a patient without any attempt to diagnose the underlying illness. Kling’s critique is to make a strong case against what he calls “metaphysical speculations unrelated to experience” (p. 21) and demands that political scientists start to build explicit theories based on real-life data. Kling directly targeted the field of political theory. He says: “Academically, in fact, the field of political theory, within the discipline of political science, traditionally has defined its role as recording, with varied degrees of interpretation, the history of metaphysical speculations in the area of politics and the state” (p. 21). To support his argument he cites approvingly what was later to become a long-standing classic, written by the then “Young Turk” David Easton in his 1953 book, *The Political System: An Inquiry into the State of Political Science*.

With one bold stroke, Kling on the one hand condemns the subfield of political theory as being “hopelessly removed from empirical observation,” while on the other he seeks to legitimize the enterprise of theory building based on empirical evidence. That he would attempt to build theory in what was then the embryonic field of comparative politics, and within

that, the esoteric field of Latin American politics, rather than what was then the far more mature field of American politics, is a testament to Kling's intellectual chutzpah. There is probably no way of ever knowing if Kling first submitted this paper to *The American Political Science Review* and had it rejected as being "too cheeky," but the force of the writing clearly suggests that he was looking for a fight and demanding to be heard.

In essence, Kling argues for an empirically based political science that leads to testable theories. Since much of the profession is engaged today, and has been for some time, in doing exactly that, the message sounds dated, but the approach Kling took in the 1950s is nonetheless to be admired. He creates for himself a challenge of devising "a theory of power and instability in Latin America" (p. 21) that would accomplish four distinct goals. First, the theory must be based on empirical reality. Second, the theory must be "compatible" with the evidence. Third, it must offer a guide to future research. Fourth, a theory must be able to account for change if it is to endure over time.

The first three elements are self-evident and have become standard practice in contemporary political science. The fourth element, however, allows Kling to enter into yet another controversy in which he again seems to be battling the conventional wisdom of his day. By requiring acceptable theories to be able to account for change, Kling makes a strong case against deterministic arguments, even though he does not explicitly refer to them in those terms. Kling argues that a good theory cannot be based on immutable "constants" (my term, not his), since by doing so there could not be any variation in the "dependent variables" (again, my term, not his). The three illustrations he uses reveal rather starkly some of the conventional wisdom of his day and why he was so motivated to fight it. He refers to theories of instability based on so-called "Latin hot blood" and cites a classic text from the 1940s as making that argument. Kling properly classifies such theories as "racist," mocking such explanations and pointing out that there is no evidence that the blood of Latins is of any higher temperature than that of other groups. Kling also argues against the "hot blood" theory because he anticipates a day in which Latin American politics will become more stable. When such a transformation occurs, argues Kling, it will be impossible to demonstrate that the so-called "hot blood" has in fact biologically mutated.

Kling argues against two other forms of determinism. First, he believes that since basic geographical features do not change in any substantial way (he

mentions as examples the height of the Andes mountains and the length of the Amazon River), when Latin America eventually does become politically stable, these immutable geographical features could not be the cause. Second, he argues against historical and cultural determinism, his target being another classic and deeply racist conception of the day, namely the notion that the mixture of Spanish and Indian cultures in Latin America has produced chronic political instability.

The heart of the "Kling thesis" was a single eloquent sentence that almost certainly graced the pages of many PhD comprehensive exams in the 1960s and 1970s: "Political instability in Latin America is distinguished by three characteristics: (1) it is chronic; (2) it is frequently accompanied by limited violence; (3) it produces no basic shifts in economic, social or political politics" (p. 22). With this framing, Kling succinctly describes in unquestionably accurate terms the profile of political instability in the region. In the decades before Kling wrote, nearly all Latin American countries had suffered repeated coups d'état, most of which involved little more than a "changing of the guard" rather than major upheavals. Moreover, and to the frustration of many, the basic conditions of poverty, inequality, and instability remained unaltered by the events.

The remainder of Kling's article offers a series of explanations for these three characteristics of Latin American political power and instability. He begins with a discussion of military coups, providing a list of those that had occurred in the decade before the article was written. He then presents the core of his theory, seeking to attribute the instability to the static basis of economic power, leaving the seizure of government as the only dynamic route to power. The static basis of power results from three key factors. First, he argues that the concentration of land in the hands of the wealthy "injects an element of rigidity into the power relations of Latin American groups; for the effect of the land tenure system is to establish relatively fixed economic boundaries" (p. 27) between rich and poor. Second, he notes the prevalence of a postcolonial pattern of foreign ownership of mineral wealth. Here Kling very much anticipates the dependency argument that came to dominate Latin Americanist thinking in the 1970s and 1980s (Cardoso and Faletto 1979). Kling's argument is that "The control of mineral wealth. . . introduces an external element of restraint on the exercise of power by domestic forces and movements within Latin America" (p. 30). Kling gingerly suggests that foreign-owned corporations are behind some of the

coups in the region but laments the fact that evidence of such involvement, by its very nature, is extremely difficult to come by. Third, he decries the lack of widespread industrialization in the region. Kling believes that were Latin America to industrialize, the pattern of instability would be broken: "Undoubtedly a successful program of industrialization could alter radically the distribution of power in the Latin American area." Indeed, he goes on to argue that to the extent that industrialization has taken hold, economic power has shifted.

Kling sums up his argument this way: "Chronic political instability serves as an avenue of socio-economic mobility, but it does not pose a genuine danger to control of the conventional bases of power" (p. 34). Thus, when the reigns of power are seized by the military in a coup, the underlying control of the economy, described above, is not altered. Kling struggles to frame this insight "scientifically" as he concludes his piece: "Using the vocabulary of mathematics, *chronic political instability is a function of the contradiction between the realities of a colonial economy and the political requirements of legal sovereignty among the Latin American states*" (p. 34, italics in original).

How does the "Kling thesis" stand up in the light of fifty years of scholarship? Quite well, I believe. From the perspective of modern political science, the weakness of Kling's research cannot be ignored. Its evidence is largely descriptive and drawn from secondary sources, and, despite the call for "science," the reader will not find a single regression equation or formal model. Yet the innovative and well-supported ideas were there. It would not be until a decade later that Robert Putnam would publish his path-breaking paper in *World Politics* using correlational and path analysis, in which he found a link between social

underdevelopment and military intervention (Putnam 1967). Many other studies followed, of course, but much of what Kling published in 1956 is consistent with what we know today about the subject. Indeed, the contemporary withdrawal of the military from politics in Latin America should provide further support for the Kling thesis since the region has become far more industrialized and less dependent upon agriculture and the traditional patterns of land holding. It is also the case that many formerly excluded groups (labor, the middle class, and, most recently, indigenous populations) have come to hold or share power in one country or another. Thus, Kling's insistence on the value of developing empirically based theory that could explain both contemporary and future conditions clearly seems to have been met in this landmark piece. It is a classic, and deservedly so.

### Note

1. The additional works include a five-page essay published in 1964 in the *American Behavioral Scientist*, a very short monograph on Mexican political parties, and another paper, ten pages in length, on the Cuban revolution published in *The Annals*.

### References

- Cardoso, Fernando H., and Enzo Faletto. 1979. *Dependency and development in Latin America*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press.
- Kling, Merle. 1949. "The tenability of isolationism and internationalism as designations of the foreign policy of the United States—A case study of Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg and Representative Vito Marcantonio." Dissertation, Washington University.
- . 1956. "Towards a theory of power and political instability in Latin America." *The Western Political Quarterly* 9: 21-35.
- Putnam, Robert D. 1967. "Toward explaining military intervention in Latin America." *World Politics* 20 (1): 83-110.