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**Author: Stephen E. Hanson, Joseph Jupille, David J. Olson, Barry R. Weingast**

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# Margaret Levi: Institutions, Individuals, Organizations, and Trust in Democratic Regimes

**Stephen E. Hanson**, *University of Washington*

**Joseph Jupille**, *Florida International University*

**David J. Olson**, *University of Washington*

**Barry R. Weingast**, *Stanford University*

For a generation of political scientists witnessing dramatic declines in social and political participation and rising distrust in government at all levels, APSA President Margaret Levi's research program addresses fundamental issues concerning the bases for and effects of legitimacy, compliance, and consent in democratic regimes. Levi's scholarship has made pioneering contributions to understanding enduring questions about the conditions for and consequences of trust and distrust, compliance and resistance, and individual versus collective action. Animating this research agenda are Levi's commitment to greater authentic democratic participation, enhancing trust between the governed and those who govern, and the quest for social justice.

Spanning three decades, Levi's intellectual influence has extended across and transformed several subfields in political science, including comparative politics, political economy, and comparative historical analysis. Employing the comparative historical method, Levi has confronted fundamental questions about the relationships between individuals and collectivities, on the one hand, and the state and state officials, on the other, with institutions and organizations mediating the two. Why do citizens acquiesce and consent to the demands of government? What makes citizens comply with costly extractions from government, such as paying taxes and consenting to military conscription? What are the conditions under which citizens give, refuse, and withdraw their consent? Why at some times and in some places is there widespread protest and resistance to government policy? What institutional arrangements promote compliance and consent in democratic regimes, and how do institutions affect the performance of political and economic systems?

Levi's pioneering contributions to these issues cut across traditional methodological, disciplinary, and substantive lines. They fall into four analytically separable

but interdependent categories. These categories center respectively on Levi's conception of political economy, institutions, history and methods, and rational choice. Collectively, her work paints the picture of a scholar simultaneously disregarding and recasting received intellectual categories.

## Early Career

Levi earned her undergraduate degree in political science at Bryn Mawr College in 1968, where she worked closely with Peter Bachrach, and her Ph.D. degree in government from Harvard University in 1974. At both schools Levi was involved in the civil rights, anti-war, and women's social movements, which stimulated her interest in the capacities and constraints of collective action over nonmaterial and ideological-based forms of resistance. She also became active in community organizations that advocated poor peoples' rights and came to know first hand the internal dynamics of community-based organizations. As a student at Bryn Mawr she published (with Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz) a book chapter on "The Political Significance of Citizen Participation." And while still a graduate student she published (with Michael Lipsky) an article on "Community Organization as a Political Resource" that foretold her deep interest on how poor and relatively powerless people could create resources through a repertoire of organizing tactics that they themselves controlled.

Levi's Ph.D. dissertation focused on the rise of public employee militancy and the formation of unions among public service sector workers. In nascent form, it forecast the more fully developed concrete empiricism and analytic theory that informs all of her work. Seen through

## APSA President (2004)

### Margaret Levi

Bacharach Professor of International Studies, *University of Washington*

B.A. *Bryn Mawr College*, 1968

Ph.D. *Harvard University*, 1974



**Stephen E. Hanson** is Boeing International Professor, associate professor of political science, and director of the Russian, East European, and Central Asian Studies (REECAS) Program of the Jackson School of International Studies at the University of Washington. His research focuses on Russian and post-communist politics.

**Joseph Jupille** is assistant professor of political science at Florida International University and co-director of the Miami European Union Center. His research focuses on international institutions and political economy.

**David J. Olson** is professor of political science and Harry Bridges Endowed Chair Emeritus at the University of Washington where his research focuses on state and urban politics and labor politics.

**Barry R. Weingast** is senior fellow at the Hoover Institution and Ward C. Krebs Family Professor of Political Science at Stanford University. His research focuses on the political foundation of markets, economic reform, and democracy.

the lens of the then-developing political economy framework, she relied on both a structural Marxist and a neoclassical economic perspective for her analysis of police unions in New York City, Detroit, and Atlanta. Utilizing the case study method, the dissertation combined an historical analysis of why and when police formed unions with a study of the kinds of responses their militancy evoked from public managers. The book that resulted from the dissertation, *Bureaucratic Insurgency* (1977), analyzes the ways in which police unions affect power relations between workers and managers, and workers' consequent influence on government policy and budgets. In workers' militancy and the state responses these evoked, Levi also saw the development of constraints on formation of unified working class movements.

In 1974 Levi joined the department of political science at the University of Washington (UW), where she has served continuously to the present. At UW, Levi met Douglass North, a future laureate of the Nobel Prize in Economics. North was to have a lasting influence on Levi's career, pushing her to develop her strengths combining structural Marxist and neoclassical economic theories, and, more importantly, to think more deeply about institutions that would become the hallmark of her contributions to political science. In 1987 she became the first woman in the history of political science at UW to be promoted to the rank of professor.

## Contributions to Political Science

Levi's conception of political economy gives pride of explanatory place to social, economic, and political institutions, and she was an early and influential participant in the reinvigoration of the comparative field of institutional analysis. Her distinctive brand of "new institutionalism," which continues to heavily influence work across the substantive fields of the discipline, results from her innovative combination of two factors. First, along with frequent collaborator Robert Bates, Levi has consistently embraced methodological individualism, which locates her among the select group of rational choice pioneers in comparative politics. Second, Levi's institutionalism takes seriously not only that institutions serve as sources of human constraint, but also that they represent instruments and objects of human creation and choice. By treating institutions simultaneously as objects of choice and sources of constraint, Levi avoids the reification or the causal elimination of institutions characteristic of less percep-

tive work, providing a fuller account of institutional persistence, change, and political-economic influence.

These currents find full expression in Levi's pathbreaking *Of Rule and Revenue* (1988). The book explains the institutions of state revenue production, and in so doing provides an indispensable element of any theory of the state. It begins with rulers, characterized as rational actors seeking to maximize state revenues. Rulers face constraints, however, and erect taxation regimes subject to their relative bargaining power, agency costs, the transaction costs attendant to institutional change and maintenance, and their own discount rates. Each of these explanatory factors derives partly from institutions: bargaining power through the institutional empowerment or disempowerment of different classes of actors; agency costs, through institutional creation of incentive systems that can mitigate or exacerbate them; transaction costs through the facilitation—or, crucially and originally—the hindrance of institutional change; and time horizons via procedures for the election or selection of rulers. At the same time, institutions result from strategic interaction and human choice.

This work's range of applications is impressive, including Republican Rome; late medieval and early modern France vs. England; eighteenth-century England; and modern Australia. To illustrate this book's logic, consider Levi's discussion of England vs. France. One of her principal questions is: Why did absolutism develop in France while the English crown remained relatively more constrained by institutions, notably, Parliament? Her answer is multi-faceted, and we mention only two elements here. First, geographic differences implied that France was far more militarily vulnerable than England. Indeed, the English occupation of a major portion of France during the Hundred Year's War (1337–1453) helped set the stage for the emerging French nation. The existence of absolutism in France was in part a result of this costly occupation, and the fact that elites were willing to exchange far more with their king than English elites to rid themselves of the occupation. Second, England's superior access to water and trade led to a far larger trading economy and, with it, the development of commercial agriculture (a growing London needed increasingly more food and firewood, transforming a large portion of the hinterland from self-sufficient agriculturalists into specialists in a market exchange economy centering on London). This difference resulted in stronger English landlords and capitalists than in France, providing the basis for the

strong constraints imposed on the English crown by Parliament.

Levi's work, then, initially heralded and has since advanced the development of rational choice approaches to comparative politics. Dissatisfied with the structuralism of the first wave of contemporary comparative political economy in the 1960s, Levi takes seriously the incentives and repertoires of and limitations on individuals seeking to effect social and political change (or seeking to thwart such change). Crucially, though, the (self-imposed) limits of most rational choice work has led Levi to parallel areas of inquiry, which she has proceeded to integrate into a more sophisticated amalgam that defies simple categorization as rational choice.

Levi has long advocated greater attention by rational choice scholarship to factors such as cultural norms, ideas, and, most recently, trust. Levi's book *Consent, Dissent, and Patriotism* (1997) deploys such factors in explaining one of the most vexing puzzles of rational choice and even democratic theory: Why do citizens comply with military conscription, which entails a conscious choice to risk catastrophic loss for materially imperceptible gains? Building on the concept of "quasi-voluntary compliance" from *Of Rule and Revenue*, Levi develops a model of "contingent consent," in which most citizens give their consent if they believe government actors and other citizens are behaving fairly toward them. As European states sought to build larger armies—inevitably pushing them toward conscription—the problem of perceived fairness grew, forcing these states to expand the franchise and extend other rights at the same time. This argument ties together the long-standing military competition, with its need for larger armies, the problem of compliance with mass conscriptions, and the process of European democratization.

This book also pursues larger themes. Demonstrated fairness is to Levi a critical element in effectiveness and democratic government. Citizens prefer to comply provided the personal costs of compliance are not too burdensome. But citizen compliance is contingent, requiring a positive assessment of both government trustworthiness and ethical reciprocity: the likelihood that other citizens will do their share.

*Of Rule and Revenue* and *Consent, Dissent, and Patriotism* illustrate another of Levi's strengths—bridging the gap separating the micro-behavioral approach of economics from the macro-historical approach associated with Marxism and, more recently, with historical institutionalism. Indeed, both works attempt to provide the microfoundations for mac-

rosopic behavior. In the first, Levi uses models of revenue maximizing rulers to explain differences in tax regimes, both across time and place; in the second, she uses models of individual behavior to explain how quasi-voluntary compliance emerges as part of the military and democratic transformations of modern states.

Levi has pushed rational choice into new substantive areas that demand new methodological tools. She has long defended, and her work has bespoken, the special benefits of marrying deductive models (rational choice) with qualitative evidence, and especially historical narrative. Careful attention to history permeates all of Levi's work. *Of Rule and Revenue* literally spans the millennia from Republican Rome to contemporary Australia; *Consent, Dissent, and Patriotism* (1997) carefully dissects the nineteenth- and twentieth-century institution of conscription in no fewer than five Anglo-American democracies plus France.

Levi's collaborative work on *Analytic Narratives* (1998), a method fusing historical narrative and deductive (rational choice or game) theory developed by a group of scholars at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, advances a complementary view of game theory and narrative. Narrative aids in model specification and formal models specify causal chains, identify counterfactuals, and generate new and non-obvious predictions that can then be confronted with additional historical evidence. This important book has already had an enormous impact on debates about qualitative methods in the social sciences.

Thus, Levi has long advocated a broad conception of (comparative) political economy, which derives from her dual conviction, evident in all her work and reflective of a longstanding immersion in both Marxist theory and neo-classical economics, that economic and political systems cannot properly be understood in isolation and that analytical rigor forms the foundation of practical knowledge. This conviction also locates Levi squarely at the intersection of currents in comparative political economy that traditionally looked past each other but increasingly commingle to form a distinctive and expanding disciplinary subfield. For example, since 1996 Levi has co-directed, with Karen Cook and Russell Hardin, the Russell Sage Foundation Trust project; the three of them have also recently completed a co-authored book for Russell Sage, tentatively entitled "Cooperation With and Without Trust." Similarly, Levi's co-edited volume *Competition and Cooperation: Conversations with Nobelists about Economics and Political Science* (with James

Alt and Elinor Ostrom, 1999) assesses some 40 years of continuous and fruitful cross-fertilization between the disciplines.

## Recent and Ongoing Work

Levi currently serves as the Bacharach Professor of International Studies and is the founding director of the CHAOS (Comparative Historical Analysis of Organizations and States) Center, an interdisciplinary group of scholars interested in problems of governance. Levi has held visiting appointments and fellowships at universities and institutes in the U.S., Europe, East Asia, and Australia. In 2001 she was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Her work has been supported by, among others, the Ford Foundation, the Russell Sage Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the German Marshall Fund, and the National Science Foundation. Levi has been extraordinarily active in community, university, and professional service, and currently serves as general editor of Cambridge University Press's "Studies in Comparative Politics" series. Among Levi's prior professional contributions to the American Political Science Association are: vice president (2002–2003), 1997 Program Committee co-chair (with James Alt), Executive Committee (1993–1995, 1996–1997), Elections Committee chair (1993–1995), and Political Economy Section chair (1992–1994).

Levi's current research focuses on a range of issues involving global justice campaigns that place workers and their unions at the center of analysis. From 1996 through 2000, Levi held the Harry Bridges Endowed Chair in Labor Studies (the only endowed chair in the nation named for a labor leader) and served as director of the Harry Bridges Center for Labor Studies, both at the University of Washington. Involvement with labor unions, particularly the ILWU (International Longshore and Warehouse Union), rekindled Levi's interest in the organizing power of labor and labor's relationship with business, the state, and community organizations.

An initial puzzle she sought to unravel is how it came to be that "Teamsters and turtles" (unions and environmentalists) came together with community organizations, students, and concerned citizens to confront the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle in 1999 in a four-day standoff now known as "The Battles in Seattle" (in which she participated). The WTO protest involved an unlikely coalition, whose members' past interactions pitted unions against environmentalists, and others. To help understand this

puzzle, Levi relies on the concept of a "community of fate," a set of interests that surpasses job-based interests, interests defined by membership in an industry or organization, and interests stemming from geographic proximity. "Community of fate" interests are more universalistic, and they depend upon shared rational beliefs, or well-grounded expectations, that harm to another constitutes harm to one's self. The key to unlocking the puzzle, Levi argues, is the development of trust and ethical reciprocity among the disparate groups of protestors through an interest in their joint community of fate. Beliefs about mutuality of interests facilitated the WTO protests by uniting a resistance movement composed of unlikely allies.

Levi next turned to the living wage movement that has witnessed over a hundred local government ordinance adoptions in the last decade to ask again: How did the coalition of unlikely allies—featuring unions, community organizations, and religious groups—become a viable political actor? She finds the answer in unions that build trust among groups previously antagonistic toward labor by creating the conditions for coalition formation. Additionally, when labor unions emphasize democracy and social justice, as in the living wage campaigns, they encourage alliances with environmentalists, global justice advocates, and community-based and religious organizations.

Levi's *Perspectives on Politics* article (2003) signals the latest direction of her scholarship. Surveying labor relations in comparative perspective, she finds that coordinated national bargaining institutions present in many countries yield greater power and influence to labor. The decentralized institutional structures in the U.S., by contrast, require labor to intensify organizing, increase internal democracy, increase electoral and lobbying clout, and adopt social movement orientations including coalition formation. Coalition formation confronts barriers when potential allies recall labor's past xenophobia, racism, sexism, and protectionism, thus requiring labor to engage in ethical reciprocity where shared venues for action can enforce compliance through threats of ostracism from the group and its benefits.

Levi's on-going research focuses on related topics, including a re-examination of union democracy, understanding how preferences can be induced within organizations, and prospects for labor power confronting mobile capital. Levi approaches this ambitious research agenda by building upon the past foundations she has laid in order to grapple with the thorny conceptual, methodological, and substan-

tive issues surrounding the role of trust in labor's coalition building. The work promises to broaden prevailing conceptions of rationality to include—stronger, to depend on—trust and ethical reciprocity, and to advance our understandings of not only politics and the economy, but indeed of rational democratic citizenship broadly defined.

An important emerging aspect of Levi's work, exemplified by her work on

conscriptio and on unions and modern mass-based movements, is the crossing of the traditional divide between positive and normative concerns. Her research on conscription showed that, to create the conditions for quasi-voluntary compliance, states had to create the wide perception of fairness. This, in turn, required creating and extending new rights. Similarly, her work on WTO protests, unions, and communities of fate demonstrates the in-

terconnectedness of issues of self-interest with universal values and social justice. In these works, the demand for normatively attractive principles and rights emerge out of the rational choice study of the positive forces surrounding particular problems. More broadly, Levi's work suggests that the solution to certain collective dilemmas—such as mass conscription to provide defense—requires a state or society to sustain various normative goals.

## Note

\* Portions of this intellectual biography are drawn from: Joseph Jupille, "Levi, Margaret," in

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