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An Interview with Dr. Theda Skocpol

By Sarah Russell

On November 1, 2012, Dr. Theda Skocpol visited the University of Tennessee to give a keynote speech at the Third Annual Anne Mayhew Lecture Series, sponsored by the Chancellor's Honors Program. Dr. Skocpol is the Victor S. Thomas Professor of Government and Sociology at Harvard University, where she has previously served as the Dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences from 2005 to 2007 and as the Director of the Center for American Political Studies from 2000 to 2006. Dr. Skocpol is the author of several books that cover a variety of topics, from the development of social revolutions to the creation of the modern welfare state. She is currently working on projects about the development of American higher education and about the transformations of policies under the President Obama.

Dr. Skocpol received her Master's and doctorate degrees from Harvard, but in an interview conducted on November 1, she described her years as an undergraduate at Michigan State University. "I was in the honors college at Michigan State," she recalled, "and I wrote many research papers as an undergraduate that were highly interdisciplinary, using ideas from political science, sociology, and even anthropology."

Notably, such an interdisciplinary approach remains an aspect of her current scholarship, one that has received many accolades. Dr. Skocpol is widely recognized for her use of historically based sociology and her emphasis on comparative studies. "Research in the social sciences is about groups and actors in the real world," she remarked, "and one of the purposes of studying history or sociology is to understand how people build on or correct what has happened in the past." Her research often traces changes throughout history in order to understand the development of particular ideas or events; for example, her most recent book, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism*, seeks to understand where the Tea Party rhetoric came from and what it actually seeks to achieve. Her research approaches often use elements from a variety of disciplines such as history, sociology, and political science.

When asked about the benefits of interdisciplinary research, Dr. Skocpol remarked that in many ways, interdisciplinary approaches make common sense when studying an increasingly interconnected world. "Many questions require an understanding of different

disciplines,” she noted, citing healthcare as an example, which was the subject of her keynote speech “Will Healthcare Reform Survive and Succeed after 2012?” She also believes that some questions bridge the gap between the humanities or social sciences and the natural sciences or engineering. Research projects in disciplines like public policy, city planning, or psychology benefit from an understanding of environmental science, civil engineering, or neuroscience; as a result, these questions are inherently interdisciplinary. Dr. Skocpol’s numerous books and articles serve as an example of interdisciplinary methods and their applications to particular projects.

Although she is very well known for her publications and her innovative research, Dr. Skocpol emphasizes her love of teaching, especially the seminar she leads at Harvard about undergraduate research. “In the seminar, we primarily work on clarifying a research question,” she said, “because it is important to know how to ask the kinds of questions that lead to a workable research project.” She added that even though not all of her students go on to write a senior thesis, the skills they learn in the undergraduate research seminar are invaluable as they go on to graduate or professional schools. She also added, “The seminar format is useful because it requires students to practice talking about their research questions. Being able to describe your research to other people is difficult but an important skill to practice.” She noted that as the former Dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, she found an important part of the admissions process was that the potential student showed an interest in research; even professional schools like law schools or medical schools are participating in research projects.

Dr. Skocpol also discussed her involvement as the director of the Scholars Strategy Network, an initiative to bring university-based scholars together to discuss current public challenges in the United States. These scholars condense their research down to two-page briefs that can also be used by advocacy and citizens groups or legislators. “There are about 170 scholars from all over the country involved in the network,” Dr. Skocpol said, “and we have a few regional groups forming as well.” The network will even assist scholars in turning their research into op-eds that can be published in local or regional newspapers. The goal of the network, according to Dr. Skocpol, is to “translate scholarly research into real-world applications” so that they may be used to advance discussions about policy in the United States.

Through her work as a scholar, as a teacher, and as a public intellectual, Dr. Theda Skocpol promotes interdisciplinary research and the need to make scholarly research both understandable to the public and applicable to current issues. She serves as an example for young scholars seeking to answer our world’s most pressing and complex questions, and undergraduate researchers could learn a great deal from her teaching and her scholarship.