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Preconception vs. Observation, or the Contributions of Rational Choice Theory and Area Studies to Contemporary Political Science

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A curious and little-noted ideological development accompanied the end of the Cold War. Just as the United States was stridently proclaiming its ‘victory’ over the materialism of the former USSR, its academic political science establishment was endorsing a form of economic determinism that is more rigid and less insightful than the Marxism it had seemingly just discredited. This is so-called rational choice or public choice theory, the attempt to apply the neo-classical (i.e., the University of Chicago Economics Department’s) model of a market to politics. This exercise infects political science with the same flaws that an extreme version of laissez faire ideology has inflicted on economics. As Robert Kuttner (1997, 30) notes, “Nearly half the articles in major political science journals have reflected a broad public choice sensibility.” It also leads to jejunе turf wars and attempts to excommunicate from university political science departments those now identified as heretics, typified by Robert H. Bates’s (1996) “Letter from the President: Area Studies and the Discipline.”

It seems obvious why some political science pedants want to emulate economics. They envy the prestige attached to academic economics in contemporary Anglo-American political culture and would like to acquire a little of that aura of authority for themselves. As Jim Richardson (1997, 56) puts it, “In the contemporary West, above all in the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ societies, accreditation in economics is coming to be analogous to membership in the Communist Party in the former Soviet Union—a sine qua non for a role in policy making or for acceptance as an authoritative commentator—and familiarity with the discourse is analogous to command of the esoterics of Marxist-Leninist ideology.”

In the jargon of these self-promoters, the intervening variable is “science.” Economics is thought to be scientific because some of the relationships in its models can be expressed as simultaneous equations or other forms of mathematical expression. In emulation of this practice, for the past decade and more the American Political Science Review too has littered its pages with equations so complicated as to make the formulae for derivatives used to hedge large investment portfolios look like child’s play. As Martin Anderson (1992, 101) puts it, “The main problem is not that much of the writing of academic intellectuals is too mathematical, but that it is insignificant, unimportant, trivial. If the ideas were significant and important ones couched in the language of mathematics, that would be fine, for presumably it could be reworked into English. But if the writing is devoid of any merit, expressing it in plain English would expose the intellectual sham.”

In order to advance the rational choice agenda within academic political science, Professor Bates has launched an open attack on what he calls area studies. He proposes that since scholars who have acquired the skills to do empirical research in non-Anglo-American environments do not fit his definition of a “scientist,” they should be discriminated against within the discipline. “Area studies has failed to generate scientific knowledge,” he writes (Bates 1996, 1). Area specialists have “defected from the social sciences into the camp of the humanists.” A certain sign of this ‘defection’ is the area specialists’ commitment to the study of “history, languages, and culture.” Area specialists lag behind others in terms of “their familiarity...
with mathematical approaches to the study of politics.” Most irritatingly, they often stand in the way of the plans of rational choice vanguards who want to take over departments and establish what they like to call a “paradigm” of standards for the discipline. Such a paradigm is needed in order to protect rational choicers from criticism and allows them to rig the customary systems of peer review in their favor. “They [area specialists] often oppose the appointment of those who have trained in such areas [as algebra, etc.] but who may be deficient in language skills.” According to Bates (1996, 1), “wily directors” of area centers can “become independent of departmental chairs.” He evidently considers this wily because whenever the marketplace of ideas is actually allowed to function in a university, area specialists attract more customers than the scientists do. Hence Bates intones: “I have long regarded area programs as a problem for political science.”

One of the ironies of the we-too-can-be-economists fad in political science is that rational choice theory represents one of the last gasps of ‘modernism’—i.e., the belief that science and materialism equate with progress towards the best of all possible worlds—and fails even to consider the new realms of complexity opened up by the postmodern perspective on race, gender, and culture. “The rational-choice segment of political science,” writes David Hollinger (1997, 347-48), “has been as far removed from the identity debates as have been the model-building economists . . . Critics accuse the rational choicers of failing to illuminate anything of genuine significance to the study of politics, just as model-building economists are sometimes accused . . . of avoiding the complexities of the real world with the determination of Methodists avoiding a local saloon. Rational-choice scholars [have] responded . . . by insisting that they actually offered a general, impeccably scientific approach to all politics that promised to create a universal explanatory theory. Nowhere in the social sciences and the humanities is the Enlighten-
ment flame of epistemic universalism kept with less respect for the concerns of thinkers who believe this flame to be a flash of artificial light.”

American academic economics remains the last great modernist project awaiting the attention of post-modernist critics and serious deconstruction. This would involve above all placing works such as Paul Samuelson’s Foundations of Economic Analysis (1947)—perhaps the last great modernist text still read with the naivete of a turn-of-the-century progressive—in their true political setting and displaying their ideological uses in the Cold War, regardless of the alleged intentions of the author. It is possible that some of contemporary neo-classical economics and its offspring could survive a post-modernist critique of their alleged scientific credentials. But rational choice theory has come nowhere close to providing models of political process that approximate those of Samuelson fifty years ago. Unfortunately, Kuttner’s (1997) example of the payoffs from rational choice theory is not a caricature: “Public choice claims that office holders have as their paramount goal re-election, and that groups of voters are essentially ‘rent seekers’ looking for a free ride at public expense, rather than legitimate members of a political collectivity expressing democratic voice. Ordinary citizens are drowned out by organized interest groups, so the mythic ‘people’ never get what they want. Thus, since the democratic process is largely a sham, as well as a drag on economic efficiency, it is best to entrust as little to the public realm as possible.” This might pass as an official statement of Singaporean ideology or even help explain the current enthusiasm among America neocon-servatives for the authoritarian oligarchies of East Asia, but as political science it is dangerous nonsense (Heilbrunn 1996).

Nowhere do the rational choicers look more sophomoric than when contending that rational choice theory contains a unique capacity to transcend culture and reduce all human behavior to a few individual motivational uniformities. Bates (1996, 2) thinks that “cultures are distinguished by their distinctive institutions” and that rational choice theory provides “the tools with which to analyze institutions.” He is confident that his set of deductive axioms when allied with game theory “will lead to scientific progress.” But he fails even to acknowledge the existence of evidence that rational choice’s key assumption, i.e., that all behavior can be reduced to rational individuals’ short-term attempts to maximize their utility, is both wrong and culture-bound. This failure is the strongest indicator that rational-choice theory is more an ideological expression of United States’s interests in the post-Cold War period than an attempt at social science. Greider (1997, 187) expresses the basis of this ideological interest in these terms: “As the organizational structures of global industrial firms gradually converge, a profound debate is forming between two competing capitalist systems: the American model of independent, profit-maximizing enterprises versus the cooperative and state-administered version in Japan. One promotes Anglo-Saxon legal rules to ensure free-wheeling competition. The other constructs webs of business relationships and social obligations among many firms. One preaches a laissez-faire approach to managing the overall economy. The other plans national strategies for industrial development and actively supervises competitors in the marketplace. One thrives on individualism, the other on loyalty.”

In short, the rational choice project not only does not transcend culture and may itself be an expression of contemporary American culture, it also fails even to understand the concept of culture that it repeat-

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edly attacks. Contrary to the view that culture is merely a set of institutional alternatives, I believe the present understanding of culture dates from Thomas S. Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). In that pathbreaking work, Kuhn provided a historicist and relativistic explanation of culture (i.e., for a particular society's structure of values and how this interacts with its division of labor) that is more empirical and less easily transcended than Marx's reduction of culture to the interests of a ruling class. Rational choice scholars like to cite Kuhn without ever appreciating that the lasting effect of Kuhn's breakthrough was to take "the glitter off of the more extravagant claims of the scientific method in the humanities and social sciences (Bender 1997, 25)."

This view of culture, which rational choice theory trivializes, makes it the master concept of all social science. It also leads directly to genuine area studies since it requires that for a researcher to break free of his or her own culture, he or she must immerse oneself in one's subject, learning the language, living with the people, and getting to understand the society so thoroughly as a participant that it problematizes one's own place as an objective observer (Suehiro 1997, 20-27)." This is what social scientists do naturally when studying their own culture, and it is what they must do in order to study another culture. There is no alternative or rational-choice shortcut. I will return to this point in my conclusion.

Equally important, rational choice theory also has no way to account for cultural change, and its conclusions are therefore commonly outdated by cultural developments that rational choice theory ignored. As an example, consider the impeccably rational-choice-cum-inane-quantification treatment of Japan's ruling party that the *American Political Science Review* published five months after the party had lost power (Cox and Rosenbluth 1993). Never once did the authors' allegedly powerful theoretical apparatus suggest to them that in the post-Cold War period the Liberal Democratic Party had lost its most important cachet, its anticommunism, and that even though it had long ago rigged the political system so that it could not lose at the polls, it might simply collapse from internal irrelevance and infighting. Something similar was happening in Italy at the same time, but rational choice theory does not promote meaningful comparisons. One of the reasons why Kuhn's model continues to have such currency today is precisely because it contains a genuine theory of cultural change, which Kuhn calls a 'scientific revolution.'

Rational choice theory on the concept of culture is simply puerile; rather than transcending culture, it appears merely to reflect the parochialisms of American culture and what *Daedalus* calls "American academic culture." As even Bates himself inadvertently acknowledges, rational choice theory is inseparable from the overgeneralization of American political culture. "Developed for the study of politics in the United States, these tools [rational choice theory] are increasingly being applied elsewhere," writes Bates (1996, 2).

In order to do this, Bates understands that an analyst will have to learn something about the foreign country he or she is studying. "These tools," he writes, "cannot be applied in the absence of verstehen (1996, 2)." But verstehen if it means anything at all requires skills and tools that the rational choice adept specifically rejects. The joke that much American social science on the enrichment of East Asia (e.g., Paul Krugman (1994), who has argued that it is a flash in the pan) comes from people with no more knowledge of the area than they acquired from flying over it during daylight applies specifically to the rational choice theorists. Rational choice scholars explicitly refuse to acquire the tools needed to attain verstehen through their own efforts, and are left to rely on graduate students from the country under study.

Bates's gloss on the verstehen problem is an old confidence trick. It proposes that the relationship between area specialists and rational choice theorists is that of a hierarchy, with the area specialist in the role of a gold miner digging away at the cliff face of a foreign culture, while the rational choice theorist is the master goldsmith who can turn this raw ore into beautiful things. "I do not regard area studies as an intellectual rival," writes Bates (1996, 2), "rather I regard it [sic] as a necessary complement to the social sciences." In Bates's vision of how academic life should be organized, "They [area specialists] would record the data from which political inferences would be drawn by social scientists residing in political science departments."

One problem with this proposed division of labor is that these social scientists do not produce beautiful objects but junk and real area specialists have a much better record of producing theory than their self-proclaimed theoretical rivals. By theory in this context I mean the formulation of apparent relationships or underlying principles of observed phenomena that have to some extent been verified. Theory in this sense stands in contrast to the concept of hypothesis. This kind of theorizing is inherent and routine in area studies but is nonexistent in rational choice analyses.

Contrary to Bates's contention, area specialists within political science and related disciplines have produced some of the most notable classics of contemporary social science. In my view, such a list would include Barrington Moore, Jr. (Russian area specialist), *Social Origins of
Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World (1966); Lucian W. Pye (China area specialist), Asian Power and Politics: The Cultural Dimensions of Authority (1985); Robert A. Dahl (U.S. area specialist), Modern Political Analysis (1970); Robert Putnam (with Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Y. Nanetti) (Italian area specialists), Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy (1993); Albert O. Hirschman (Latin American area specialist), Exit, Voice, and Loyalty (1970); G. William Skinner (China area specialist and a very mathematical one at that), Marketing and Social Structure in Rural China (1965); Cynthia Enloe (Southeast Asian area specialist), Ethnic Soldiers: State Security in Divided Societies (1980); Guillermo O’Donnell (Latin America area specialist), Modernization and Bureaucratic Authoritarianism (1973); Juan Linz (Spanish area specialist), The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes (1978); Philippe C. Schmitter (Latin American area specialist, ed.), Patterns of Corporatist Policy-making (1982); and Paul Kennedy (diplomatic historian), The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers (1988). As an area specialist of China and Japan, I consider my own books derived from study of the Chinese revolution (Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power, 1962) and from study of the postwar Japanese economy (MITI and the Japanese Miracle, 1982) as aiming for the same level of theoretical discourse as the books listed above. Equally important, these books intend to communicate knowledge about some important parts of the world to citizens of democratic politics. These books concern real world politics, not the doodles of game theorists still stumped by the prisoner’s dilemma.

I have tried to think of one book in which rational choice theory has been applied to a non-English-speaking country with results even approximately close to the claims made for the method. I cannot.

Another irony of the fad for rational-choice theory in political science is that it is occurring just as the model science, economics, is starting to back away from its basic theory. Economics today is rethinking whether the ‘as if’ assumptions in its models diverge too far from reality. Economists are undertaking these reforms because the anomalies in the paradigm have become too numerous for comfort and also probably for practical reasons. Massive and sustained downsizing based on pure laissez faire theory has started to hit the professional classes in the United States, and some members of comfortably tenured academia have begun to realize that this theoretically sanctified practice might ultimately impinge on them. A purely rational choice analysis of American universities today, many of which look as bloated as IBM before the value of its shares collapsed, suggests that they are ripe for a good dose of Maggie Thatcherism. Even Nobel laureate Robert M. Solow (1997, 56-57) has started to acknowledge that “the part of economics that is independent of history and social context is not only small but dull” and that “theory is cheap, and data are expensive.”

Just as James Baldwin (1963) once wondered why anyone would want “to integrate into a burning house,” young political scientists should be asking themselves the same question. In recent months George Soros, William Greider, and Robert Kuttner have all drawn attention to the economic contradictions of the global economic system and to the need for the United States to confront the weaknesses of its own dogma (Soros 1997). When George Soros argues that financial prices are always “wrong” in that they never reflect economic fundamentals and William Greider points out that overproduction and the abandonment of a powerful rule-setting function by governments portend a new global collapse of demand, neoclassical economics and its offspring rational choice theory are in serious trouble. If prices are wrong, they cannot be a guide to making rational choices; and if the only answer to inadequate demand is state action, then political science’s contemporary disparagement of the state (something that assuredly does not occur, for example, in China) is a form of unilateral disarmament.

Kuttner (1997) points to three fundamental flaws in the model of the market derived from neo-classical economic theory, each of which applies with even greater force to rational choice theory as it is applied to politics. The model (a) oversimplifies the dynamics of human motivation to such an extent that it turns the ‘as if’ assumptions underlying the model into science-fiction; (b) it misinterprets that civil society needs political rights in which some things are not for sale; and (c) it misprices many things (e.g., national currencies), which means that pure markets do not yield optimal economic outcomes. This critique returns us to the preoccupations of Adam Smith’s Wealth of Nations—the things that the state must do in order to allow a market economy to exist and flourish, even from a minimalist perspective (nightwatchman, defense, education of the labor force, etc.). State and market coexist symbiotically; the model of the neoclassical market does not recognize this.

To conclude, neither neoclassical economics nor rational choice theory provides a mechanical alternative to genuine social science analysis, i.e., what political science but no other discipline of the social sciences calls area studies. This means immersion in a subject or a society that the political analyst is studying, including mastery of the relevant languages and history, participant observation, and an empathetic attempt to understand its culture (in the Kuhnian sense). The problem with knowledge gained in this manner is that in its totality it is incommunicable except perhaps in novels or to those who have similarly immersed themselves in the object of study. This is where social science discipline comes in. It provides the concepts and vocabulary with which to communicate knowledge gained through area studies, and the attempt to express area studies knowledge in disciplinary terms unavoidably involves inductive theorizing about the results of research. Graduate study of a discipline such as political science is intended to introduce and explain the ideas, concepts, and terms that must be used to communicate doctoral and professional area studies research to those who have not personally immersed themselves in the research. But knowledge of the political science discipline is in no way a
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substitute for area studies. It is merely the means of communicating them, without which they emit no more of an intellectual message than the raw materials of cultures themselves.

Herbert A. Simon, political science’s first Nobel laureate, is arguably the leading role model for the discipline as it exists today. Another equally distinguished political scientist, Charles E. Lindblom (1997, 228), writes, “About Simon, we might suggest that he made his several great contributions to the study of behavior and society by distancing himself from the dominant interests of political science.” Pondering the current fad for rational choice theory, I think that is good advice.

Notes

1. For an application of Kuhn’s concept of culture and cultural change to political systems, see Chalmers Johnson, Revolutionary Change (Stanford University Press, 1982, 2nd ed.).


References


About the Author

Chalmers Johnson taught Asian politics for more than thirty years at the Berkeley and San Diego campuses of the University of California. At Berkeley, he was chairman of the Center for Chinese Studies from 1967 to 1972 and of the Department of Political Science from 1976 to 1980. He is today president of the Japan Policy Research Institute. For its web site, see <http://www.jpri.org>.