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The Disciplines of Political Science: Studying the Culture of Rational Choice as a Case in Point

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Nothing has demonstrated the "context sensitivity" of organized science more dramatically than the impact of the end of the Cold War on budgets for area studies in America. Hundreds of area studies programs, centers, publishing houses, bookstores, essay contests, and fellowship competitions, have been overthrown, threatened, or at least put on the defensive by developments that had nothing whatever to do with a change in their scholarly or scientific value. Unfavorable changes in the attitudes of some leading foundations toward support of area studies and the comparative advantage of scholars able to apply conceptually sophisticated and theoretically explicit techniques to reliable data. For there always have been debates over the legitimacy of social science research focused on any one country, culture, or region—indeed on one case of any kind. In many important respects the current controversy over the balance to be achieved between theory-driven and area-based, knowledge-driven scholarship is a rerun of debates forty to fifty years ago between "nomothetic" and "idiographic" approaches. Now, as then, the nomothetic side argues that knowledge of specific cases is possible only on the basis of general claims—"covering laws," as it were—whether derived in a process of logical inference or inspired on the basis of empirical observation. The idiographic side responds that each case is unique and that knowledge of it can be acquired only through direct immersion in the subject matter.

But in political science we need not tread and re-tread this well-traveled discursive field. Our epistemology is better than it was then. We know for example, that the idiographic scholars were correct in their contention that no amount of general theory could ever produce complete knowledge, or even definite partial knowledge, about any one event, person, people, country, or institution. We also know that they were wrong to think that they themselves were not using general theories (made invisible as language or as their common sense about the way the political world must work) to perceive, interpret, and portray the material in which they immersed themselves. And the idiographers were doubly wrong to think, despite the abuses of “Orientalism,” that real knowledge of particular places could not be produced by the application of theories and methods developed in other contexts and in other languages. We also know that the nomothetic scholars were correct to claim that no "fact" about the world is apprehended independent of propositions (theories) more abstract than the “factual claim” itself, and that a critical perspective toward knowledge production is possible only to the extent that the nature of those theories is explicitly identified. But we know now as well that nomothetic scholars were wrong to have
imagined that their aspiration to test theory against “facts” could be sustained without accepting as “certain” particular beliefs about measurements and fact production that themselves could not be tested. Just as the idiographic approach rested covertly on the employment of theories, so did the nomothetic approach rest covertly on “understood but unexplained” truths of the sort the ideographs claimed to know.

We are now in a better philosophical position than we were in the past to evaluate positions taken in the debate over area studies and the other disciplines of political science. Any position which insists on the availability of theory-free facts, whether facts produced to test theories or facts produced as reports of objective reality, should be equally suspect. At the same time, thanks to Kuhn, Lakatos, Toulmin and other philosophers of science, we appreciate the conditions under which “political” competition is of central importance to the scientific project—competition among those whose research, conclusions, and criteria for success within distinct paradigms and research programs, situated across the chasm of “la differance,” are not directly comparable. Such a perspective validates competition and criticism, but not demonization, e.g. area studies specialists as prescientific intellectual Neanderthals, post-modernists as cultic mumblers. Not surprisingly, therefore, as the idiographic approach rested covertly on “understood but unexplained” truths of the sort the ideographs claimed to know. We are now in a better philosophical position than we were in the past to evaluate positions taken in the debate over theories and area studies, over general vs. local sources of knowledge production, and over more formal, deductivist approaches vs. more discursive and/or inductivist modes of scholarship, is due to the robustness of research programs in each of these domains and the pride that able scholars of all kinds take in their work.

Not surprisingly, therefore, as circumstances and funders demand new rationales for budgets and staff, we hear vigilant proponents of each type of political science proclaiming the virtues of their own techniques and analytic agendas while trivializing those of others. Since I consider a healthy struggle among different approaches a good thing, since I do not believe that excellent scholarship is possible without isolating oneself from certain kinds of questions and criticism, and since I expect no more (well, maybe a little more) honesty or sincerity in academic politics than in any other sort, I challenge neither the appropriateness nor the vigor of these disputes. I do suggest, however, that a sense of humor is needed and appropriate. Those who can remember the ultimate contingency of their operative epistemological commitments, and who can suspend their own negative heuristics (the questions they have chosen not to be able to ask) long enough to appreciate the insights and knowledge available across methodological divides, will do better work themselves, contribute to a healthier professional and scholarly climate, and have more fun doing so.

In this spirit I suggest an illustration of how “culture,” a necessary aspect of any “area study” project, might be studied by practitioners from each of the four approaches I have listed. What could be more satisfying in this regard than to take as our example the “culture” of rational choice theorists? In a provocative and illuminating “Letter from the President” on “Area Studies and the Discipline,” published in APSA-CP: Newsletter of the APSA Organized Section on Comparative Politics [Winter 1996], Harvard Professor Robert Bates attacked, but then expressed sympathy and support for a reconstituted program of area studies. He formulated his position against a background of a “theory of games of imperfect information” he described as “newly ascendant in political science.” Bates began by characterizing area study specialists as possible “defectors” from the social sciences to the humanities, a defection “signal(ed)” by “their commitment to the study of history, languages, and culture. . . .” Here, interest in “culture” is used as evidence of a lack of interest in politics or social science, suggesting that the rational choice, game theoretic, and formal modeling techniques Bates uses and advocates might not be appropriate for its study.

A closer reading of Bates’s essay, however, shows not only that his own approach can focus on culture (without, presumably, being classifiable as having “defected” from or to anywhere), but that it poses distinctive and interesting questions about culture and cultural change. “Cultures,” writes Bates, “are distinguished by their distinctive institutions . . . distinctive histories and
understandings . . . distinctive ways of reacting to events and of interacting with others.” Game theory and associated approaches, he continues, are advanced as specially designed “tools with which to analyze institutions.” If “cultures” are “distinctive institutions” and game theory is designed to study institutions, then, voila, game theory is designed to study culture! How then might game theorists, or, more broadly, rational choice theorists, pose and seek to answer questions about the culture of rational choice theory?

Since the unit of analysis in this approach is choice, the “distinctive institutions, histories, and understandings,” which Bates would mean as constituting the culture of rational choice theorists, would be studied as the intended or unintended consequences of choices and as constraints on choice. Thus the rules that are, from a rational choice perspective, institutions and culture (and that constrain choice) might be traceable to other choices made in previous iterations of current games, to dominant strategies within a metagame, or be seen as reflections of the self-enforcing consequences of choices made within a particular kind of incentive structure. Among the choices leading to the production of rational choice culture were investments in game theoretic approaches at particular times by certain institutions and personalities. Such decisions, leading to institutional (cultural) differentiation across university settings, enabled streams of choices by future rational choicers to attend particular undergraduate or graduate political science programs (Cal Tech, Stanford, Washington University, University of Rochester, Indiana University, Carnegie-Mellon) for which they had an elective affinity. Evidence of cultural change (socialization) would subsequently be present in the work of these scholars: patterns of publication presentation (in-text parenthetical bibliographical references rather than footnotes or endnotes, formulas, and fine print appendices of “proofs,” diagrams, etc.); oral presentation (overhead projector centered); or choices about topics of empirical research interest (transparent and stable American political institutions). One might also explain decisions by journal editorial boards to change their notational and citation formatting rules, thereby producing an “institutional” and “cultural change,” as linked to preferences of rational choice and other formal modeling oriented researchers. Alternatively, one might use the principle of increasing returns to ask how the developmental history of rational choice models (from cybernetics, economics, and neoconservative politics) influenced the choices made by budding rational choice theorists to define problems in ways that would maximize their expected utility under the belief that judges of their work would hail from, or use the standards of, those particular fields and that kind of politics. Each of these questions would pose the problem of what kind of game, what sort of formal model of interactive rational decisions, in the context of what sort of information availability and payoff arrangements, would logically produce patterns of behavior, attitude, and expectations similar enough to observed patterns (rational choice culture) to be judged satisfying by other rational choice theorists.

A middle-range, theoretically eclectic approach to rational choice culture could see the rational choice project as an opportunity to test and refine a neo-Gramscian theory of “wars of position.” (No surprise here, since this is my line of work). This approach would treat the analytic weaknesses in formerly dominant paradigms as political openings for brilliant and ambitious masters of techniques previously foreign to political science, but widely respected as “scientific.” The school which Bates represents would be seen as now seeking to achieve complete domination of the discipline of political science by turning the particular preferences, beliefs, methods, and standards associated with that approach into the generic meaning of “political science.” If successful, to paraphrase Gramsci, “politics” (domination of a particular method and group) would be reclothed as “culture,”—those things which political scientists do, believe, and expect, quite “naturally,” because they are political scientists. The refinement and testing of these hypotheses would be accomplished by systematic comparison with analytically comparable hegemonic projects in previous decades by behavioralists, modernization theorists, and/or Parsonian structural-functionalists.

From this perspective one might, for example, explain a changing demeanor on the part of rational choice specialists. Rather than argue directly and forcefully that their project deserves recognition, has accomplished a great deal, or is, indeed, gaining widespread support, the “ascendancy” of rational choice is now asserted casually, and without supporting evidence, implying that this supposed ascendancy is or must be taken as a given by all sensible people. Toward those whose work they may have previously denigrated, rational choice theorists now turn a more gracious face. For if a hegemonic project has once gained control of significant institutions (journals, schools of public policy, endowed chairs, departments in prestigious universities, peer-review panels for major grantors, etc.) by virtue of hard work in the publication trenches and the sharp politics of “wars of maneuver,” its adherents are likely to adopt a more inclusive tone for the long term war of position which will determine whether the next generation of political scientists will be able to even understand the notion of a political sci-
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ence which is not expressed as a formal model. The object now is not to achieve visible, discrete victories, but to redefine, recategorize, reformulate discourses, and establish working compromises with key rivals whose work can be subsumed as only slightly suspect variants within the rich diversity of the ascendant culture. Thus “theory” becomes a synonym for “rational choice theory;” game theoretic modeling becomes “political economy;” mathematical expertise is offered as a crucial measure of competence; while area studies is regarded (a la Bates) “not . . . as an intellectual rival,” but as a “necessary complement to the social sciences.”

Along these lines, an explanation can also be offered for why the battle with area studies specialists takes on particular importance. To establish itself as a comprehensive political science culture rational choice must expand its empirical referents well beyond the well-ordered rows of the American Congress and the space-less “regimes” of international relations. Hence the growing interest of rational choice specialists in historical and “foreign area” topics, as well as the crucial need to either gain area specialist assistance and approval for their efforts or deny the latter’s standing to make social scientific criticism. Once area studies scholars accept their subordinate position, as “fact-producers” for the “analytic narratives” (stylized rational choice depictions) produced by social science “theorists,” calls for an end to “confrontation” will be made and area studies scholars acknowledged as worthy of enough resources to keep them minimally satisfied (Bates, 2).

Of course the thickly descriptive, narrativist approach adopted by most area studies specialists, and the aggregate data based evaluation of trends and correlations which may be considered its quantitative counterpart (describing patterns without generating systematic theory to account for them), offer distinctive ways to study rational choice culture. An interpretivist, field research based study of the culture of rational choice might well entail a prolonged period of participant observation at panels, conferences, workshops, and coffee hours where the formal modelers and game theorists gather. Preceded by in-depth study of the techniques used by these scholars and as much biographical and institutional material as is available from secondary sources, the researcher would determine and then communicate to the broader scholarly community, the “distinctive histories and understandings . . . [the] distinctive ways of reacting to events and of interacting with others” that Bates (above) described culture as entailing. One promising strategy for gaining an “understanding” (verstehen) of the local culture would describe the stages through which budding rational choice theorists become full-fledged members of the “social science” elite—identifying the histories of the discipline they came to embrace as “true,” the texts they chose to honor, the heroes worshiped, and the villains execrated.

Observing the befuddlement of visitors and novices, the researcher might well attribute political importance to the scholastic problems and formalist and mathematized language used in presentations and question and answer sessions, and might also speculate on the shielding thereby achieved of sacred beliefs and taboos concerning the universal centrality of rationality and the impenetrable and uninteresting character of human cognition and psychology. This kind of research, of course, would require a great deal of language proficiency, without which the researcher’s findings would hardly be expected to be given a respectful hearing—certainly not by the rational choicers themselves! Indeed, after much language learning (of a language called “theory” by its speakers), the researcher would find that despite the highly artificial codes involved, the cultural potency of the community would be revealed in the creative, if annoying ways the language tended naturally to spread to ordinary conversation (“My family has settled into a nice Nash equilibrium solution to its weekly dinner menu. What about yours?”)

An epistemologically comparable approach that could be followed by aggregate data oriented political scientists would be to examine the cluster of values associated with participation in rational choice culture. Aggregate-data researchers might wish to know whether the “congruence” hypothesis applies to rational choice culture. Does adherence to the paradigm produce an instrumentaizing frame of mind in all domains of life, or can these people “choose” to display or embody one culture in the workplace and the values of another culture outside it? What correlations are there between political opinions on welfare reform, gun control, or the decriminalization of marijuana, and scholarly commitments to rational choice? Would an approach which abjured the individual and unique for the universal and rational discourage the development of intimacy skills? Might these be reflected in higher divorce rates among rational choicers than among other kinds of political scientists? Such research would produce data highly relevant to the general theoretical question of whether culture, even one based on “rational instrumentalization,” can ever be either “chosen” or “given.”

Finally, consider the post-modern approach to rational choice culture. Here the unit of analysis tends to be “practice.” Indeed the observed practices of rational choice scholars suggest quite obvious deconstructive possibilities. In contrast to an official discourse describing their activities as the production of “positive political theory,” accompanied by an explicitly comprehensive and thoroughly “modern” commitment to the post-modernists could focus on rationalization, abstraction, and systematic mapping of all social relations, postmodernists could focus on rational choicer avoidance of empirical tests, the regularity with which convenient anecdotes are advanced as “evidence,” and even occasional use of the term “evidence” to mean the outcome of logical inferences or of mathematical manipulations, rather than empirical claims about the world. These would be analyzed as classic examples of the way any positive theory tends to undo itself, to resist its own claims. The culture of that most “centered” and modernist of all modern paradigms would thereby be shown to epitomize the de-centered post-modern moment—where any set of behaviors can be
“reframed” to reflect the interpretivist moves and reading strategies of the observer and where scholarship entails neither an investigation into the nature of the world, nor a search for explanation, but a series of opportunities for the display of virtuosity in the application of certain arcane but standardized techniques.

“A Collaborative Research Network”: Identities and Institutions Outside the Academy

The long-cycle tolerant, short-cycle competitive view of paradigms or research programs, illustrated above with tongue-in-cheek, does have “real world” application. After a reorganization which largely eliminated its Regional Committee structure, the Social Science Research Council, in cooperation with the American Council of Learned Societies, decided to encourage the formation of “Collaborative Research Networks”—international interconnected arrays of workshops, publications, conferences, and other projects linked to substantive problems susceptible to useful examination from a variety of disciplinary and methodological perspectives. I am delighted that the SSRC has accepted my proposal to try to develop a CRN entitled “Political Orders in a Turbulent World: Aligning Identities and Institutions.” Within the overall context of the CRN a variety of within-paradigm and cross-paradigm activities is possible, focusing attention on similar substantive problems, no matter how differently characterized and probed. The substantive focus, the problemstellung, of the Network I have proposed may be briefly described as follows.

As an organizing principle designed to naturalize both state and nation by imagining each aligned with the other, the concept of the nation-state today emerges as more obviously artifactual than ever before, suggesting a pervasive decoupling of collective identity and political institutions. Against this backdrop of a decentered, uncalibrated relationship between identities and institutions, the following question is posed: how do institutional and identity transformations at the end of the twentieth century correlate with one another, disrupt one another, evolve in relationship to one another, and how could they in part be molded to correspond to one another? In response to this question a web of overlapping inquiries may be constructed that would have as their basic motif the problem of fit between institutional form and identity content, between structures of rule and collective aspirations, between, at the most profound level, law and life?

The idea here is to tap the distinctive contributions of each of the different kinds of scholarship I have discussed in this essay and bring them to bear on substantive questions of common interest (no matter how differently operationalized) and on one another. The hope and expectation is that correspondences, complementarities, and overlaps will emerge, patterns of findings which may in fact be translatable across paradigmatic boundaries but which may not be noticed or exploited without the institutional framework the CRN can provide. If direct communication will sometimes be difficult across radically different research programs, scholars associated with different approaches, but operating within the same working context, will be usefully encouraged to appreciate the costs of their own “negative heuristics,” the limits of their own projects, and the legitimacy of other approaches. The working groups currently under consideration are “Rightsizing the State: The Politics of Moving Boundaries;” “Theories of Collective Identity;” “Flailing and Failing States;” “Non-National Forms of Governance in World Politics;” and “Non-Territorial Modalities of Conflict Regulation within States.”

The proportion of cross-method to within-method work within these settings is an open question. But even if the dialogue might not always, or even usually, result in cross-method collaboration, it would test and exploit the principle of complementarity and can certainly be expected to enhance the level of critical reflection within each of the contemporary “schools” I have described. Not incidentally, of course, such coordinated but indeterminate scholarly interchange might actually improve available understandings of crucial problems we face on this planet at the end of the millennium.

About the Author

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