

POLITICAL SCIENCE: RESEARCHING A MULTIFACETED TOPIC IN ESSENTIALLY CONTESTED WAYS

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Political science has its distinctive subject matter – the exercise of power and its consequences – and its distinctive set of assumptions, concepts, theories and methods.ⁱ These shape the way in which its practitioners identify topics and transform them into subjects worthy of being taught, researched and published. In a ‘normal’ physical or social science, such foundational elements are virtually invisible since they are regarded as givens and accepted without controversy. Political science has only rarely been a ‘normal’ science in this sense.ⁱⁱ The scholars who have been practicing it since Plato and Aristotle have frequently disagreed on what these are – even though all of them ultimately draw on the same accumulated wisdom of their predecessors. They engage in endless disputes about basic assumptions and core concepts; they draw both of these from contending, if not contradictory, theories; and they apply a wide range of methods – both empirical and normative, quantitative and qualitative.

The core of their problem rests with the changing nature of the discipline’s subject matter: power. Its exercise can be omnipresent but elusive; obvious when it involves force or coercion, but invisible when it focuses on manipulating preferences or invoking conformity to norms. Actors often pretend that they are not acting politically – while doing so. And virtually everyone has an incentive not to admit what his or her true objectives are. Maddeningly, the most powerful actors often have

to do nothing since subordinates have already been programmed to obey or convinced that it is in their best interest to do so. The consequences produced by the exercise of power are always risky, but usually calculable when circumscribed by established rules and practices; however, during periods of rapid change, they are fundamentally uncertain and, hence, incalculable. They are usually bundled together with allegedly “natural” social, cultural or economic phenomena from which they are exceedingly difficult to disentangle. Of decisive importance as the discipline has become more self-proclaimedly “scientific” is the fact that power is not only difficult to define, but singularly difficult to measure, especially quantitatively. Experimentation, controlling for existing conditions and measuring precisely for the effect of deliberately introduced ones, is usually not possible and even when it has been used the results can be misleading. One of the most salient features of politics involves so-called “fallacies of composition.” What is true or workable at one level of aggregation produces very different results when practiced on a larger – or smaller – scale. Democratic individuals do not necessarily produce democratic regimes, and the inverse can be the case for autocratic ones. If, as Aristotle noted, a science should only “look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits,”ⁱⁱⁱ then, political scientists face a more daunting task of being precise than any of the other social scientists.

Their science rests on seven foundational components – all of which can be and have been “essentially” disputed: (1) **agents**; (2) **units**, (3) **motives**; (4) **mechanisms**; (5) **regimes**; (6) **methods**; and (7) **theories**.

Agents:

This is the most distinctive feature of a human as opposed to a natural or physical science. It begins with the assumption that the objects of research are also its subjects. In the case of politics, this means that agents can make relevant choices that are not completely determined by the conditions in which they find themselves. If this were not the case, if as contemporary politicians have so often proclaimed, “There Is No Alternative” (TINA) were really the case, there would be no

politics and, hence, no political science. Binding collective decisions would be made by the experts who know what that alternative is and how to apply it.

Agency also implies that the subjects have the capacity for reflexivity. They are historical in the sense that their present actions are influenced by reflections (“memories”) from the past, and, hence, by learning they may alter their responses (“wisdom”) when faced with analogous situations in the present. Inversely, agents may find themselves anchored in habits of obedience (“standard operating procedures”) that can be difficult to break when new opportunities appear. Moreover, the very process of researching the power relations among actors – past or present – can produce changes in the behaviour or expectations of those who are being studied.

The vast majority of political science researchers presume that these agents are **individual and autonomous human beings** faced with and capable of making choices between alternative and consequential actions. They may agree that these actors are uniquely capable of exerting political agency, but they differ considerably about the properties that humans are capable of bringing to bear on their choices. Recently, thanks to the wholesale importation of assumptions from neo-liberal economics, these individuals are supposed to have pre-established and relatively fixed preferences, are able to rank these preferences consistently; possess adequate information about alternative courses of action and theories about their effects, will predictably choose the one that they think best realizes those preferences, and still have the same preferences once the consequences of their choice have been experienced. This generic conception also reflects the much deeper ideological commitment of modern social and political thought to liberal individualism and rational progress. Shifting to a different micro-foundation would seem to declaring that politics is a ‘passionate’ activity rooted in raw emotion, blind faith, mindless imitation, instinctual tradition, collective stupidity and/or random events - and, hence, incapable of collectively improving the world that we live it.

Without going so far, there are two grounds for calling this time-worn foundation into question. The first has to do with the sheer complexity and contingency that surrounds the contemporary individual. He or she cannot possibly know what are the 'real' (or, even less, all of the available) alternatives and what all of their eventual consequences will be -- which means that he or she must rely on the **surrounding social milieu** in order to make these choices. Moreover, this individual is very likely to discover upon reflection that he or she has many conflicting interests or passions – especially over different time horizons – and, hence, cannot rank them consistently. And, if those reasons were not enough, he or she is typically acting within a multi-layered and poly-centric set of institutions capable of making binding collective decisions affecting him or her – some public and some private. All of which implies that agent preferences cannot be fixed, but are always contingent on which policies are being proposed and by whom, and they will probably change during the course of political exchange between the various layers and centers of power.

The second reason for resetting the micro-foundations of political science is even more subversive of the prevailing orthodoxy. What if most of the significant actors were **permanent organizations**, not individual persons? Granted that these organizations are composed of individuals and some of them may depend very closely on the contributions and allegiance of these persons, but many do not and have developed elaborate rules and sources of support that cannot be reduced to such individual actions. They embody collective choices made long ago and have acquired a reputation and legitimacy of their own. And, not infrequently, these political parties, interest associations, social movements, non-governmental organizations, business firms, government agencies and private foundations are in the business of teaching individuals what their preferences should be and committing them to obeying policies made in their name.

If one switches to organizations as the principal actors, the political scientist's task is greatly facilitated. By their very nature, these "its" have internal processes for dealing with the diverse motives of their members and followers – and for coming up with a mediated expression of their

interests, convictions and passions that is publicly justifiable and normatively appropriate. Granted, that there is plenty of room for dissimulation, strategic action and outright hypocrisy on their part, but revealing these will be facilitated by the more abundant and public nature of the information that organizations are compelled to provide.

Units

Ever since Aristotle collected the constitutions of one hundred fifty-eight Greek city-states, the privileged unit in political science for both observation and analysis was supposed to have a relatively autonomous economy, a self-governing polity, and a distinctive collective identity—all institutionalized and coinciding with one another in a given territory. Eventually, thanks to the evolution of European polities and their overseas empires, this unit became the sovereign **national state**. It is usually presumed that only within it are agents capable of making choices and implementing them effectively, individuals or organizations capable of calculating their interests and passions, mechanisms of competition and cooperation capable of operating, and most regimes capable of developing stable and complimentary institutions. Nothing is more firmly rooted in the foundations of political science than this assumption. Virtually every existing hypothesis or observation in the discipline should be prefaced with the phrase: “Take an existing national state and, only then will X be related to Y in the following manner... .”

But what if this unit of analysis can no longer be taken for granted? What if that presumed coincidence between autonomy, capacity, identity and territory has been disrupted beyond repair? In the contemporary world, no political unit can realistically connect cause and effect and produce intended results without regard for the actions of agents beyond their borders. Virtually all of them have persons and organizations within

their borders that have identities, loyalties and interests that overlap with persons and organizations in other polities. Nor can one be assured that polities with the same formal political status or level of aggregation will have the same capacity for agency. Depending on their insertion into multilayered systems of production, distribution and governance, their capacity to act or react independently to any specific opportunity or challenge can vary enormously. This is most obviously the case for those units that are subordinate parts of **empires**; it also is the case for national states that have entered into **supra-national arrangements**, such as the European Union (EU), or signed **binding international treaties**, such as those of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the World Trade Organization (WTO). Not only do they occasionally find themselves publicly shamed or found guilty by such organizations, but also they regularly anticipate such constraints and alter their behavior accordingly.

If that were not enough, many national polities have granted or recently been forced to concede extensive powers to their **sub-national units** and, in some cases, these provinces, cantons, *regioni*, *estados autónomos*, or *départments* have even entered into cooperative arrangements with equivalent units in neighboring national states. Political scientists need to dedicate much more thought to the units they choose and the properties these units supposedly share with regard to the specific agent, motive, mechanism, or regime that they are examining. There still remains a great deal of variation that can be explained only by conditions prevailing at the national level, but exorcising or ignoring the increasingly complex external and internal settings in which these allegedly sovereign national units are embedded can result in a serious analytical distortion.

Motives:

Establishing who the agents are does not tell us what is driving their political actions. Again, contemporary political science has its orthodox response: **self-interest** (sometimes tempered by the caveat, “rightly understood”). Presumptively, the individual political agent can invariably be relied upon to maximize, i.e. choose that alternative that best satisfies his or her own and highest ranked preference at the lowest cost and without reference to anyone outside of the immediate family. Needless to say, for this motive to dominate, the agent must have a comprehensive knowledge of what these alternatives are and a reliable understanding of what consequences they may produce – not to mention, the time to make such a calculation. There is a simpler solution which, nevertheless, is still rooted in self-interest. He, she or it can choose to minimize, i.e. to choose the alternative that seems to avoid the worst possible outcome in terms of either cost or ranking. In between the two lies the reasonable possibility of “satisficing,” i.e. mini-maxing his or her or its course of action somewhere between the two extremes.

The scenario changes when the presumed motive is other-regarding rather than strictly self-regarding. In this case, actors have **convictions** about what is at stake in any given political transaction. Historically, analysts of politics tended to stress such motives as family honor, ethical responsibility, personal glory, religious belief, conformity to tradition, or even justice and fairness. The emergence and eventual dominance of capitalism demonstrated the enormous advantage to the individual in pursuing one’s own interest in economic advantage without regard for others; but why should this always be the case in politics where the response of others (strategic or not) is a crucial condition for success and may not always be rooted in purely material terms?

Human being can also have **passions** that cannot be reduced either to self-interest or conviction. They care about expressing themselves emotionally, about participating with each other in collective actions, about fulfilling their potential, even about caring for the welfare of the whole society or political unit in which they live. Without some degree of irrational passion, it would be impossible to understand why individuals choose to participate in “lost causes,” to devote such

energy and resources to “utopian ideals,” or even to vote in “elections with obvious winners” where, objectively, their contribution to success or failure is irrelevant or meaningless.

Finally, the most banal (and probably most frequent) motive of all is **habit**. Established regimes – whether democratic or not -- cultivate a wide range of routinized behaviors that are simply expected of their subjects/citizens. Granted that some of these are “shadowed” by the prospect that non-conformity may result in a coercive response by authorities, but most of them are apparently voluntary – but do not involve any of the motives mentioned above. This is an element that has rarely been explored by political scientists – presumably, because they prefer to think of their subject-matter in more appealing terms.

Mechanisms:

By and large, the mantra of the discipline (especially where it is practiced in ‘real-existing’ democracies) is **competition**. Agents exercise their relative power by competing with each other in order to better satisfy their respective interests, convictions or passions. This usually presumes the existence of a pre-established institutional context (i.e. a regime) in which conflicting motives are channelled by mutually respected rules into a process that limits the use of power resources and the range of possible outcomes, i.e. by existence of a government and state. The American science of politics was literally built upon the presumption these rules would be constitutional in form and democratic in process. Elsewhere – in continent Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia – this could not be taken for granted. Only recently and only in some units has the exercise of power has been domesticated in this fashion to the mutual benefit of the agents involved.

The major distortion within the discipline comes when political scientists assume that electoral competition is the major or even exclusive expression of this process. The fact that political parties compete with each other for the representation of territorial constituencies and the right to form governments – even when these elections are freely and fairly conducted, and their outcomes

uncertain – does not exhaust the mechanisms whereby political agents compete with each other. Not surprisingly, these other mechanisms are populated less with individuals than with organizations: competition between interest associations to influence public policy; prosecution of politicians for violating legal norms by law firms or public interest groups; demonstrations by social movements to set the public agenda or to block the implementation of policies; revelations by rival media firms to discredit or support the reputation of rulers. All of these are important (and often highly institutionalized) features of competition in modern polities that deserve at least as much attention as the more sporadic and routinized conduct of elections.

If these rules defining the mechanisms of competition do not exist or are strongly contested, political agents are likely to engage in unruly **conflict** not bound by such *de jure* or *de facto* constraints and to exercise their power primarily by threatening or exercising coercion to impose their respective interests, passions or convictions. Here the assumption is that all political units are plagued with multiple social cleavages whose interests, passions and convictions cannot be simultaneously satisfied or managed. Classes, sectors, professions, genders, generations, religions, regions, clans and clienteles – not to mention, the growing number of cleavages rooted in life-style preferences – want different treatment from public authorities. And not all of these can be domesticated according to mutually acceptable rules. What is crucial for understanding the outcome of these power conflicts is whether they are distributed cumulatively so that they reinforce each other or they are cross-cutting (or “pluralistic”) such that they tend to produce momentary coalitions and different sets of winners and losers over time and across issues.

The intra-disciplinary line separating the study of domestic politics from international relations has long depended on this distinction in which the former supposedly involved orderly competition and the latter rested on a presumed “anarchy” of conflict without binding rules. More recently, this line has become less plausible as a barrier within the discipline of political science since conflict has become at least as significant within states (especially failed ones) than between them

and since a large number of interstate units – regional and functional -- have emerged to regulate competition across national borders.

Another mechanism also deserves a more prominent place in the foundations of political science, namely, **cooperation**. If competition is not to degenerate into conflict, political agents have first to cooperate by agreeing upon the rules – formal or informal – that limit and channel their use of power. Many of these are habits or strictures inherited from previous generations (“path dependence”), but they are continuously subject to challenges as power relations and the identity of agents change and therefore require re-affirmation by contemporary agents. Moreover, politicians also cooperate in order to ally with each other, both to modify the pre-existing rules of engagement and to affect present policy outcomes. While it is understandable that political science should privilege competition – if only because its presence is much more visible and consequential – cooperation deserves more status and attention than it usually receives. And, so does its perverse form, **collusion**, i.e., when inside agents act in agreement to prevent outsiders from competing through the usual mechanisms.

The third mechanism is **conformity**. This is the mechanism that is the least obvious and the most difficult to explain. Most of political science presumes the manifest presence of its subject matter (not to mention its importance to human beings). How then does one observe and explain its opposite, namely, seemingly apolitical behavior – actors doing nothing in situations where they might, even should, have acted for one motive or another? The temptation is to explain this as a matter of habit or of having no interest, passion, or conviction concerning what is at stake. But this would be to ignore two very important and omnipresent mechanisms of political life. **Fear** is the most obvious one. Actors conform because they fear the effect that their actions may have upon their rulers. The more desirable one is **legitimacy**. Actors conform – even when it violates or offends one or another of their motives – because they regard their rulers as entitled to exercise authority for any one of many reasons: genealogical inheritance, divine providence, victory in war,

protection from predation, technical expertise, charismatic leadership or, as has become increasingly common, selection by winning a competitive election.

The fourth mechanism is **rebellion**. One might regard this as simply an exaggerated form of conflict, but it involves more than that. Through this mechanism, actors do not just use force (or the threat of it) to obtain concessions or subordinate opponents. Rebels seek to apply violent means to eliminate their opponents from the political game, to change its rules unilaterally and, in some cases, to change the very boundaries of the unit itself. In its most exaggerated version, **revolution**, they do not limit their efforts to changing the strictly political regime, but go beyond this to alter (presumably, irrevocably) the rules and routines surrounding other, social and economic, regimes.

Regimes:

Most professors and students of contemporary politics assume that the unit they are analyzing has a relatively stable configuration of institutions that are complementary with each other, i.e. it has a regime, presumably as the result of a prior historical experience of searching among alternatives and eliminating incompatible ones through competition or conflict. The actions produced by its agents, motives and mechanisms are somehow – functionally, ideationally, intentionally or constitutionally – related to each other at a higher level, such that their nature or importance cannot just be assessed alone. They are embedded in an institutionalized whole that conditions what roles can be played by individuals or organizations, self- or other-regarding interests, passions or convictions, competitive, conflictual or cooperative mechanisms *e così via*. These regimes are given labels and it is presumed that those in the same generic category will share many foundational elements. At one time, there were three such labels: **democratic, totalitarian** and **authoritarian** or **autocratic**. More recently, the middle one has dropped out, thanks to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the transformation of China, and been replaced with “**hybrid**” or some other diminutive version of democracy or augmentative version of autocracy. Needless to say,

each of these can be broken down further by the analyst into sub-types when exploring the performance of more specific agents, motives or mechanisms.

The implications of this intrusion of “regimes” into the foundations of the discipline are considerable – if still debatable. For one thing, the recognition of such diversity means giving up the quest for universalistic “covering laws” that can be applied to any agent, motive or mechanism. Individuals or organizations do not behave the same way in democracies and autocracies; the “reasonableness” and “appropriateness” of interests, passions or convictions depend on the institutions to which they are addressed; mechanisms such as competitive elections or cooperative multi-party alliances can take on different meanings depending on their complimentary relationship with other arrangements for competition/conflict or cooperation/collusion.

Methods:

The study of politics has been “multi-methodological” since its beginnings – and seems to be becoming more so with time. Plato and Aristotle could not have used more different methods for drawing their respective inferences. Ever since then, new methods have been introduced and very few have been eliminated. For most purposes, political science has been precluded from applying the most powerful of scientific methods, namely, the use of controlled experiments. The consequences of exercising power – not to mention the controversies surrounding it – are simply too great to permit the student to introduce some treatment and hold all other potential sources of variation constant.^{iv} Politics is a continuous activity that is embedded in a multiplicity of contingencies that cannot be halted or controlled at the will of the researcher. Granted that small-scale laboratory-like experiments have increasingly been attempted by political scientists, but they face very serious problems of inference when shifted to another level of aggregation (or when conducted with groups recruited on a different basis). “Quasi-experiments” in which real world data over time are subjected to some specific policy treatment and the subsequent results are monitored

have been more successful, but they also suffer from serious problems of inference because they cannot control for simultaneous treatments in related domains.

This leaves most of political science dependent upon data generated by the political process itself: descriptive accounts by journalists, memoirs by participants, documents from official and unofficial sources, statistical reports from government agencies, etc. The simplest and most comprehensible method has always been to tell a plausible story (usually a chronological one) using explicitly defined variables and identifying (usually inductively) the relationships between them – something that has been more recently and elegantly termed “process-tracing.” This is usually based on qualitative observations, but can also include quantitative ones. More complicated (and less comprehensible) is the statistical manipulation of exclusively quantitative data for the variables postulated as relevant and testing for the magnitude, direction and significance of their interrelationships. This has the distinct advantage of appearing more scientific (and less subject to observer bias), but is contingent upon whether the data are valid indicators of what they claim to be. The fact that one can put a number on virtually anything is less important than whether that number is meaningful in terms of the variable being measured.

One method that is widely regarded as distinctive of political science is the measurement of public opinion through surveys of randomly selected, representative samples of the population. Leaving aside that the method was transplanted from social psychology, data from this source has become one, in not the, most important original contribution to the understanding of politics for mass publics, but also for elite groups and individual politicians. At one moment in the evolution of the discipline, it was even claimed that this “behavioral” data was sufficient for understanding all of politics (at least in liberal democratic regimes). Since then, the claims for this method have become less ambitious (and the results of survey data have become less reliable). Today, there remains a persistent competition among political scientists as to which method should best be applied to which subject, but most would agree that no one method would suffice for all subjects.

Theories:

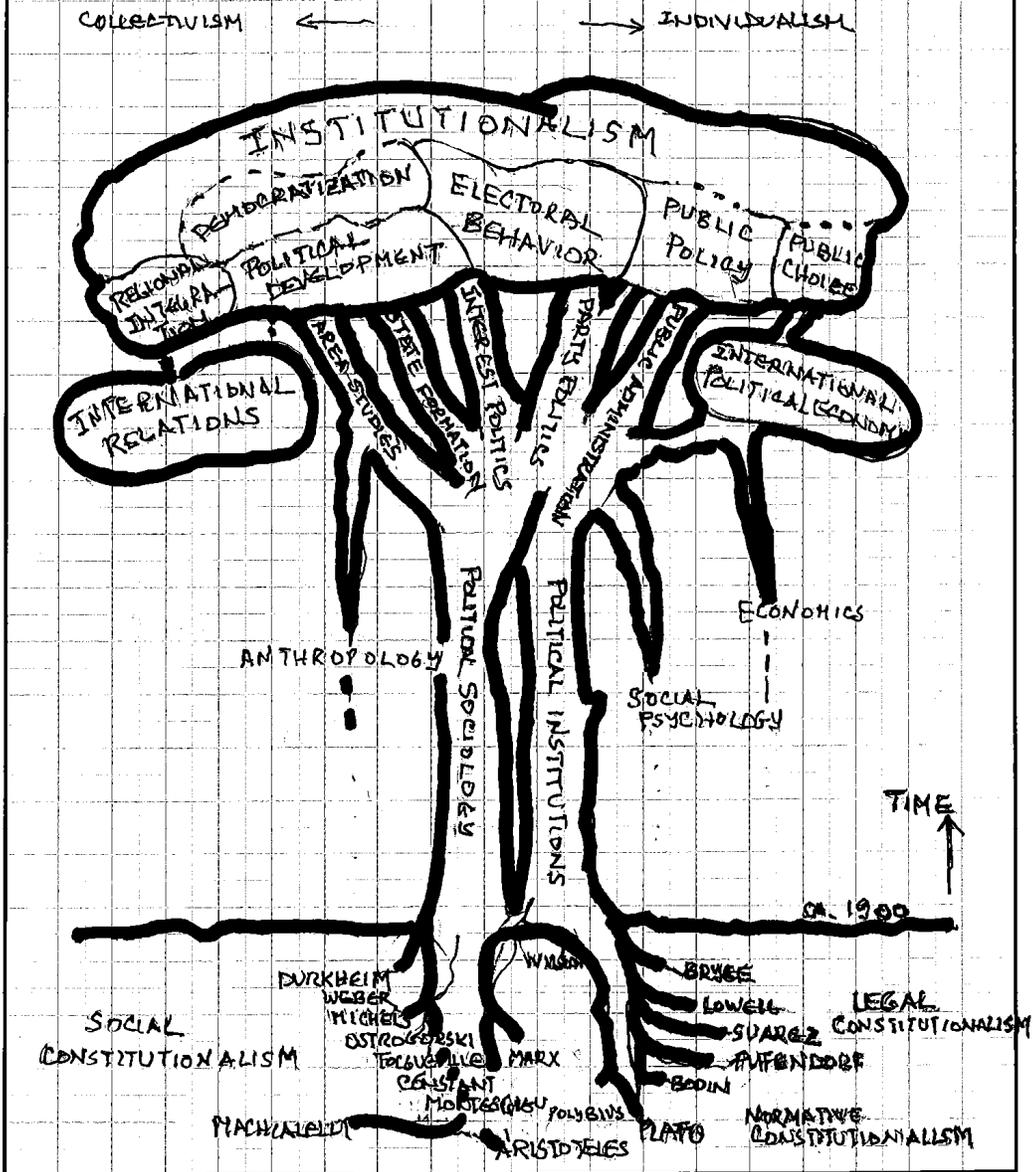
A theory is some combination of the elements outlined above, expressed by means of a specific set of concepts, their relationships (sometimes expressed in terms of explicit hypotheses) and their putative outcomes. Needless to say, given the variety of agents, units, motives, mechanisms and regimes, the combinations and permutations would seem to be virtually unlimited, although at any one moment in time within the discipline only a few are likely to be regarded as plausible.

[Place Figure One Here]



FIGURE ONE

THE 'FAMILY TREE' OF POLITICAL SCIENCE



In Figure One, the reader will find a spatially schematized and temporally compressed representation of the genealogical roots, trunks and branches that have evolved into contemporary and empirical discipline of political science. Its deepest root lies in “**sociological constitutionalism**” as invented by Aristotle and subsequently nourished until 1900 by Polybius, Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Benjamin Constant, Alexis de Tocqueville, Lorenz von Stein, Karl Marx, Moisei Ostrogorski, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Roberto Michels, Gaetano Mosca, and Vilfredo Pareto. Through various extensions and permutations this has become the branch subsequently labeled as “**historical political sociology**.” The other deep root lies in “**normative speculation**” practiced by Plato and later to be converted into “**legal constitutionalism**” fertilized around the turn of the Twentieth Century by distinguished Anglo-French jurists such as Léon Duguit, Georges Burdeau, James Bryce, A. Lawrence Lowell and Woodrow Wilson.

From these two tap roots have been added a number of exogenous grafts during the 20th century. Political science became a voracious consumer of conceptual and methodological innovations from other, increasingly professionalized, social science disciplines – first, from **social psychology** with the so-called “behaviorist movement” and later (and somewhat more surreptitiously) from **anthropology** with the “structural-functional approach.” Political scientists have always borrowed ideas and concepts from **economics**, especially from such early political economists as Adam Smith, Karl Marx, John. Stuart Mill, David Ricardo, Jeremy Bentham, Friedrich List and Adolf Wagner. More recently, But the real novelty of the past few decades has been the transfer of neo-liberal root assumptions, deductive thinking and mathematical modelling techniques into the study of politics – first, in research on American politics and, increasingly, in research on “other people’s politics.”

Presently, the genealogical tree of theory in political science resembles more a Tropical Banyan than a Florentine Cypress. It has a wide canopy of branches, certainly not

a single tapered and elegant peak. Its most curious aspect, however, is the number of practitioners who are roosting up there in the canopy, and who seem content with sharing the same generic label: **institutionalists**. Closer inspection of the foliage reveals that it contains an extraordinary variety of flora and fauna. About all they seem to agree upon is that “institutions matter.” They differ widely on what institutions are, how they come about, why is it that they matter, and which ones matter more than others. Moreover, some of those perched up there will even admit that other things also matter: collective identities, citizen attitudes, cultural values, popular memories, external pressures, economic dependencies, even instinctive habits and informal practices – not mention the old favorites of Machiavelli, *fortuna* and *virtù* – when it comes to explaining and, especially, to understanding political outcomes. Strangely, if the genealogy in Figure One is at all valid, almost all of those now nested in the canopy seem preoccupied with explaining why “their” specific type of institutionalism is more important than the others and how “their” institutions have a greater impact on individual behaviour and unit performance. The twin trunks in Figure One suggest that they should be at least as concerned with explaining how some combination of social forces and cultural conditions or of legal framing and economic calculus created them in the first place and is still supporting such a variety of institutions up there.^v

How does one choose the right theoretical mix to apply when studying politics? The potential combinations are virtually unlimited, especially if one adds to the seven foundations all of the sub-components of each. Granted that at any one moment in time, not all of them will be regarded as plausible. Still, the prospective researcher is likely to have a wide range to choose from.

Aristotle probably had the best idea: the mix should depend on the **objective** characteristics of the subject matter one has chosen to explain. Plato would probably have replied, no, it ought to depend on the **normative** purpose one is trying to fulfil.

A more historically minded researcher might be guided by the **subjective** perception of the agents involved – their ‘discourse’ when trying to explain what they are doing. A more career-minded political scientist would probably respond by picking what is currently **fashionable** in the discipline. None of these “shortcuts” through the maze of foundational elements is a guarantee of success, but each of them definitely points the researcher in a different direction and, worse, may lead to quite different conclusions about power, its uses and its consequences.

Conclusion

Aristotle famously argued that political science was the “master science” since all of the other human sciences depended upon the order or disorder produced by politics. Ironically, this assertion of its superiority has also been a source of weakness. Political science is bound to be an “open science.” It reaches into and affects crucial aspects of other realms of human behaviour and is, therefore, bound to be penetrated by assumptions and concepts coming from them. Law, philosophy, sociology, psychology and, especially, economics have all claimed to be more closed and, therefore, self-referential sciences. Each of them has attempted to penetrate the deepest foundations of political science. At times, this has threatened to deprive the discipline of its distinctive focus on the use of power and its conversion (sometimes) into legitimate authority to resolve conflicts and achieve collective purposes. In recent decades, attempts have been made to reduce the study of politics to the voluntary exchange of information, the joint product of individual opinions, the rational search for optimal institutions or the deliberative discourse between consenting persons or organizations. This may have served to illuminate some of its peripheral aspects and to expand its scope of inquiry, but they have all

floundered when trying to explain situations in which “the preferences, desires or intentions of one or more actors bring about conforming actions, or predispositions to act, of one or more other actors.”^{vi} When some person (and, even more, when some established public or private organization) can alter the distribution of information, manipulate the attitudes of individuals, restrict the range of ‘acceptable’ institutions or distort the course of deliberations, the outcome becomes different – often radically different – than the one envisaged by any of these models. If political scientists were to narrow their research agenda to situations where these conditions were not present, not only would they be depriving their discipline of the cornerstone of its foundations, but they would also become incapable of providing useful knowledge to the politicians, representatives, citizens and subjects who have to cope with the very real existence of power and its consequences.

The science of politics has had to track and incorporate continuous changes in the practice of politics – usually in response to successive crises and always with some delay. Its foundations are contestable; its methods are varied; its findings are contingent. But it has never completely lost its scientific aspiration. It conceptualizes its subjects in explicit terms drawn from centuries of theorizing; it systematically gathers the required data – quantitatively or qualitatively – as the case may be; it examines these data for patterns of association; and it draws reasoned inferences from them about causality, co-dependence or just plain co-incidence. As messy and tentative (not to mention controversial) as this effort may be, it has produced a dynamic academic discipline capable of attracting more and more students, professors, researchers and – yes – critics. The skills it teaches have also proven useful in an expanding variety of public and private occupations. But the greatest

mark of its success has been its globalization. Today, innovations in methods, concepts and even basic assumptions have been coming from all points of the compass. Political science has yet to acquire recognition as the 'master' science, but it has definitely become a 'global' science.

The present challenge is it to adapt to the increased complexity and contingency of its subject matter. Power and its cognates are being wielded in new units, for different motives, through a wider range of mechanisms and by a greater variety of agents. Hopefully, awareness of this will lead to a loosening and diversifying of each of its foundational elements – and to greater sensitivity to their interactions. Agents can be individuals or organizations ... depending. Motives can be based on narrow, immediate self-regarding interests or broad, future and collective-regarding passions ... depending. Mechanisms of competition and cooperation can involve elected representatives or self-selected ones ... depending. Actors can conform or rebel ... depending. Regimes can be classified as democratic or autocratic ... and they can change, even permutate into each other. Finally, units can be simultaneously relevant at different levels of identity and aggregation ... and so can the agents, motives, mechanisms and regimes within them.

What is needed for advancing such a radically pluralistic science of politics is not the testing of single hypotheses or models from a single perspective, but the generation of hypotheses and models rooted in different foundational elements and the systematic comparison of the different results they predict (or, more often, retrodict). Most probably, this can only be accomplished by also using different methods, i.e. types of data and tests for association. If this sounds messy and

inconclusive, so is “the class of things” that political scientists are condemned to deal with.

Words: 6,218

ⁱ Machiavelli thought there should be two political sciences: one masculine, the other feminine. In the former, power was channeled by “dikes and dams” so that its exercise was relatively institutionalized and its consequences were more predictable. In the latter, power flowed erratically in accordance with the whims of *fortuna*. He lamented being condemned to living in female times and, therefore, had to invent a “new science of politics.” Almost all contemporary political scientists assume (implicitly) that they are living in male times and this will be (explicitly) presumed in the following essay.

ⁱⁱ There have been moments when political scientists seemed to be in agreement on these fundamentals, e.g. constitutionalism at the beginning of the 20th Century, “behaviourism” with its exclusive reliance on individual attitudes as revealed by survey research in the 1950s and 60s, “structural-functionalism” with its attention to the performance of core tasks allegedly necessary for the survival of the political system in the 1970s and 80s, “rational choice” with its assumption that actors exclusively seek to maximize their (imputed) preferences at the margin in each successive transaction in the 1990s and early 21st Century. However, even during these periods of the relative hegemony of a dominant paradigm, there were always detractors within the discipline and, eventually, all of them ended up being discredited or pushed to the periphery. Most departments of political science today are populated by a heterogeneous group of scholars coming from these past hegemonic moments plus a few in pursuit of a new one. The comparison with economics is particularly striking where an orthodoxy of neo-liberalism installed itself within the discipline and managed to drive out all practitioners of competing paradigms.

ⁱⁱⁱ Nicomachaen Ethics, Book 1, Chapter 3, 2-3.,

^{iv} Which is also why, with few exceptions, political scientists are banned from using the method of participant observation.

^v A major exception to this generalization is the burgeoning literature in the canopy on democratization which one might even characterized as “obsessed” with both the social and cultural origins and the legal and economic aspects of institutions that may emerge in the aftermath of autocracy.

^{vi} This is the classical definition of control (power) provided in Robert Dahl, *Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 16.