

POLITICS AS A SCIENCE¹

(aka Politology)

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Preface and Acknowledgments

These are the reflections of a professor who has had a lengthy career researching and teaching “the politics of others” – known in the profession as “comparative politics.” Always being on the outside looking in has its advantages – and disadvantages. It should make one less susceptible to presuming that the rules and practices of one’s own polity are normal and should provide the standard for observing and evaluating the politics of others. It also, however, means that the necessarily short exposure to other people’s politics – and it gets shorter and shorter as one gets older – deprives the researcher of the depth of observation needed to capture the subtleties and secrets of their behavior. Of course, one can always take refuge in statistical manipulations of data that can be gathered at home --

¹ I have cribbed my title from an essay by Max Weber – substituting *Wissenschaft* (science) for his *Beruf* (profession). Originally given as a lecture in 1919, this essay has always seemed to me to be a model effort at communicating scholarly knowledge about politics to a more general audience and this is what I hope to accomplish here. (Imagine a work by a German academic that does not have a single footnote! Admittedly, it was only a lecture to students and its text is full of exotic and erudite references which I doubt the students could have understood). From Max Weber, tr. & ed. by H. H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946).

without having to go to some exotic locale. My experience has suggested that there is no substitute for living among and talking with the subjects of one's analysis – and preferably in their own language.

This lengthy essay makes no claim to being scientific. It contains no disprovable hypotheses, no original collection of data, no search for patterns of association and certainly no conclusive inferences about causality. It is self-consciously “pre-scientific.” Before one can do any science, but especially any social science, one must identify and label what it is that one is trying to understand or explain. Without the ‘right’ words (and the right theory surrounding them), the researcher could not even begin his or her task, much less gather the relevant data. In the case of political (or any social) research, “Que Dire?” comes before “Que Faire?” This indispensable first stage is called “conceptualization” in academic jargon. It is a sort of mapping process in which the researcher tries to specify the goal of his or her trip, some of the landmarks that he or she is likely to encounter *en route*, and the boundaries that circumscribe the effort.

For those readers who are in the business of explaining politics to others, I hope you will find this effort useful when generating explicit hypotheses that can be tested and, if verified, allow you to make reasonable inferences about why specific forms of power are exercised and what their effects are likely to be.

The essay also contains only a few novelties. Most of its assumptions and concepts have been borrowed from my forerunners in what has been a very lengthy effort to understand the reality of politics. I am convinced that almost everything that is meaningful about politics has already been said – somewhere by someone and often a long time ago. It is just a matter of finding it and assembling it in a novel manner. This is what I have tried to do here.

To those who are long or recently gone, I can only apologize for not having cited their eternally valid work. Doing so would have made this essay excessively academic – and much too long. For those who are still around – in many cases, my former students and colleagues at Chicago, Stanford and the European University Institute – I am sure that they will recognize their respective contributions and hope that they will accept my gratitude for them. I do, however, want to formally acknowledge the multiple contributions of my wife, colleague and muse, Terry Lynn Karl. Without her support (and not infrequent disagreements), none of this would have been possible. Or, if possible, it would have been decidedly inferior.

I have tried to write this essay without excessive professional jargon. Like all social scientists, political scientists have developed a vocabulary of their own. As we shall see, this poses a serious problem of communication since some of their concepts are identical to those used by the political agents they are studying, but can have a different meaning. Other concepts are unique to their discipline. These can seem esoteric

and confusing to the unspecialized reader. In an effort to avoid this, I have made frequent (perhaps excessive) use of **boldness** to indicate key concepts and tried to convey (admittedly only briefly) their meanings.²

The Subject Matter

Politics is **a** (if not **the**) quintessential human activity.³ It brings to bear on the relations between persons many of the qualities that are unique to the human species. All of those involved in politics are **agents** of some kind or another. Their actions are not completely predetermined by the physical or social context in which they find themselves, and they are intrinsically “restless” with regard to that environment.⁴ Some are dissatisfied with their existing situation and, hence, willing to try to change it. In so doing, they are very likely to provoke a response from those who are not so dissatisfied. The latter will react to defend the *status quo* and, therefore, also become agents. To do so, both types have to be able to

² I have eschewed inserting empirical references in footnotes to bolster my credibility by citing the work of others. I have, however, not been able to resist the insertion of conceptual clarifications and critical observations at the bottom of the page. The more serious, discipline-oriented, reader should ignore these expressions of biased opinion (not to say, of my “pet peeves”).

³ Should politics be singular or plural? In this text, I have tried consistently to use the former when referring to its generic properties and the latter when referring to its diverse practices.

⁴ This encapsulated description of the generic nature of the political agent combines the very well-known observation of Aristotle that human beings are *Zoon Politikon* (political animals) and, therefore, intrinsically disposed to use power over others (and resistance to it) to realize their goals (or to protect themselves from the efforts of others to do so) with the much less well-known observation of the philosophical anthropologist, Arnold Gehlen, that human beings are distinctively “incomplete” with regard to their environment and, thus, intrinsically disposed to being dissatisfied with it and seeking to change it – by institutions if possible, by force if necessary. A. Gehlen, *Der Mensch. Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt* (1940). The fact that Gehlen was a convinced and unrepentant Nazi no doubt has contributed to the reluctance to attribute this important observation to him. It also probably did not help that his brother, Reinhard, was a Nazi general in charge of intelligence on the Eastern Front who subsequently became the founder of the West German equivalent of the CIA.

imagine future conditions and the alternative actions that might improve or threaten the quality of that environment and their existence within it.

If these generic characteristics of agents are true, politics as a human behavior is likely to be in almost permanent violation of two of the foundational principles of the physical sciences: the First and Second Laws of Thermodynamics: (1) The agents involved will not normally be able to contain their actions and reactions within a closed homeostatic system and, hence, will be continuously subjected to exogenously induced changes in their relative power resources to which they will have to respond by changing their behaviour or preferences; (2) Even if they do succeed in isolating, controlling and/or satisfying these disturbing outside influences and, therefore, in promoting entropy in their institutions, they will never be completely successful in sustaining an equilibrium between conflicting and competing forces. Proponents of change may tire of “the costs of politics” and be tempted to withdraw from the struggle; their opponents may welcome the stability of the institutions and policies that brought them to power and protect their resources, but this does not prevent even conservatives from inventing new motives for being dissatisfied, not to mention the perpetual presence in politics of progressives who are by definition dissatisfied with the magnitude or distribution of results. In other words, politics is an intrinsically dynamic and imbalanced process. The quest for stability has been an eternal component of the practice of politics (not to mention, objective of

conservatives), but even when it seems to prevail, it is likely to be either illusory or momentary. Unlike other animals, humans are condemned to be repeatedly dissatisfied with their individual and collective accomplishments. There is no finite status or outcome that can induce them to remain inactive.

And, if this were not enough, political agents to be effective have to communicate their complex thoughts to other human beings through a shared spoken and (usually) written language – which is itself a perpetual source of misunderstanding and potential conflict. In order to formulate and communicate the as yet unrealized conditions they desire to satisfy, they must possess sufficient empathy with other human beings as to be able to anticipate their responses and to seek their approval – and they often make miscalculations in both regards. Since these agents can rarely achieve their goals alone, they must also be capable of committing themselves to contracting with others and trustful enough that their interlocutors will honor that contract – and continue to do so under changing conditions. On the other side of the equation, one must sadly admit that human political agents are also collectively capable of committing acts of malice, cruelty, vengeance and violence on a scale that no other primate seems capable of – and this generates memories of past treatment that persist and can impede present agreement – even when the conditions for a mutually satisfactory outcome and,, hence, some degree of institutional stability do objectively exist..

This is not to say that all aspects of politics are unique to *Homo Sapiens*. Most primates are capable of physically coercing others of their species to comply with their demands and some of them seem also to have the capacity to command obedience without using force. While elaborate language seems to be beyond their comprehension, they can “read” the meanings of gestures and sounds and some species apparently can form mutually beneficial alliances that may be based on implicit contracts.

The Exercise of Power

What we think of as politics rests on the exercise (or the threat of the exercise) of **power** and of resistance to it. What is unique to human beings is their capacity to “domesticate” this activity by inserting rules and practices that serve to channel the actions and reactions of agents according to mutually agreed upon rules and/or reliably applied practices.⁵ These regulated exchanges, negotiations, deliberations and decision-making allow conflicts to be resolved pacifically and, thereby, preclude the resort to violence that would otherwise be needed to resolve the differences in resources and preferences that give rise to political activity in

⁵ The attentive reader will have noted my repeated reference to “rules and practices.” This is my attempt to indicate that politics always involves different combinations of formally enacted rules and informally recognized practices. Both can serve to domesticate the exercise of power – although the former are usually more reliable (perhaps, because they are backed up by a set of specialized juridical and penal institutions). The latter has only custom, convenience and mutual advantage going for it.

In some polities, the informal element has been especially prominent. Brazilians even have an expression for this: “*um jeito*” or an unorthodox and ingenious way of solving problems and avoiding conflicts that cannot be accomplished through legal procedures by relying on “inconfessable,” but often well-known, consensual arrangements that usually shift the burden to others. Italians have taken this notion further and made it into an alternative regime form: *il sottogoverno*. In both cases, the public scrutiny and competitiveness built into ‘real-existing’ democracy led to a major institutional crisis over corruption that, in the Italian case, destroyed its party system and, in the Brazilian case, to an as yet unresolved challenge to the government in power.

the first place. Needless to say, the effort is not always successful, hence, the long list of atrocities just mentioned above.⁶

Power in turn rests on the uneven distribution of resources and returns among human beings living within a given political unit. Some of these asymmetries may be “natural” given the different endowments that human beings receive upon birth, but most will be “social” and rooted in subsequent accomplishments (or non-accomplishments) during their respective life-cycles – along with the unequal inheritance of previously established social, economic and political privileges. Agents seeking to change the *status quo* – “progressives” in the generic sense, whether individuals or organizations – will be tempted to exploit asymmetries when they try to compel others to conform to their preferences, either by threatening to deprive them of resources or by promising to reward them with greater resources. The defenders of the *status quo* – *conservatives* -- will resist these efforts and will usually have an intrinsic advantage due precisely to their incumbency. They will try to control the agenda of public choice, influence the course of decision-making, suppress the demands for change and/or alter the preferences of the challengers and their allies. The “normal” outcome of these challenges and conflicts should be a reaffirmation (or, in many cases, a revision) of the *status quo ante* –

⁶ The ‘quality’ of politics can be measured by the extent to which any given unit has succeeded in domesticating the exercise of power without either removing its subjects/citizens from participating in the game or being able to prevent them from using individual or collective violence to resolve their disputes. On both scores, the United States regularly dominates the bottom of the rankings among ‘real-existing’ democracies, although it is easily surpassed by most ‘real-existing’ autocracies.

provided they are contained within a pre-established, mutually acceptable set of rules and that the incumbents have come to power by observing those rules.

Which is not to say that there are not many “abnormal” outcomes in politics. As we have just argued, the logic of action-reaction that underlies the exercise of power is not “thermo-dynamic.” The interaction may be reciprocal, but the conflicting agents are rarely equal in their power or effect; the conflicts may be more oblique than strictly opposite; and the eventual outcome may not produce a stable equilibrium, just a temporary arrangement. Institutions are not always self-enforcing and require periodic injections of energy from other sources in order to survive. In other words, incumbents do not always prevail. Not only may the decision rules and the means for coming to power be ambiguous in specific instances, but also the prior conditions presumed by these rules may have changed in ways that incumbents have not discerned or responded to adequately. Their performance once in office may have alienated their supporters and/or mobilized those previously indifferent to participate. Most importantly, the rules themselves may only embody a temporary compromise that is vulnerable to contestation. Only when these clusters of rules have become **institutions** that are valued for themselves by most agents can incumbents rest assured that they are most likely to prevail. In other words, they are protected in power for some foreseeable period by

the **legitimacy** of the institutions they govern, especially when these institutions are clustered together into a coherent **regime**.⁷

This is one reason why power has proven so elusive to observe and difficult to measure. It is most effective when those who have it do not have to exercise or even display it, i.e. when their power is so overwhelming that it intimidates any response by subordinates and, even more so, when it is accepted by subordinates as legitimate. Nevertheless, the entropy embedded in such relations is not likely to endure when threatened by exogenous transformations in the power resources of conflicting agents or by the endogenous emergence of new expectations and preferences among them,

The Micro-Foundations

Every systematic study – whether of physical or human subjects – rests on micro-foundations. These are the basic assumptions shared by its practitioners. They shape the way in which topics are identified and transformed into projects worthy of teaching or researching. Normally, they are invisible – as befits most foundations – and are usually accepted implicitly and without controversy. However, the visible structures of a science – its concepts, hypotheses, methods, data, associations and

⁷ This reminds me of an Austrian expression I once heard: *die Rute im Fenster* (“the Whip in the Window”). It referred to the fact that, while the negotiations between social partners (capital and labor) were ostensibly between private (or, in the Austrian case, semi-public) institutions, the participants were fully aware that the state, i.e. the Whip, was always present and if agreement could not be reached or if it exceeded anticipated limits, someone would break the glass and the state would intervene. In other words, in normal, “domesticated” political situations – regardless of appearances – legitimate public authority is never far away.

inferences – are only as valid as these foundations. And the study of politics is no exception to this maxim, even if it is exceptional in the extent to which its micro-foundations have been and still are visible and subject to dispute.

Let us begin with the venerable advice of Aristotle, “It is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits.” Therefore, those who would study politics should be resting their research on a set of assumptions that are as “precise” as their subject matter is distinctive. Their problem begins with the intrinsic “imprecision” of that subject matter.⁸

To start with there are two quite different “classes of things” that students of politics have historically tried to explain. In this, I am following the advice of Niccolò Machiavelli whose micro-(or, better, meso–foundations since they rest on a number of prior micro-assumptions) consisted of a mixture of three elements: (1) *necessità* or the imperative of taking costly and consequential decisions under conditions of scarcity of resources, threat of violence and/or ambition of persons; (2) *virtù* or the capacity of rulers to understand the political context and to exploit it in

⁸ If the assignment of labels to scholarly specializations and academic departments, institutes or faculties followed some logical-linguistic principle, the study of politics should not have been called “political science,” but “politology” or “politicology”—following the examples of sociology, anthropology and psychology. This conveys the appropriate message that each of these subject matters has its own logic of explanation and even more importantly that these are distinct from those of the physical sciences. Actually, in French, Italian and Spanish, one does occasionally find references to “politologie” or “politologia” and their practitioners have sometimes been called “politicologues,” “politistes,” “*politologi*,” “politologisti.” *ecosivia*. This labelling is even further complicated in some Latin languages when the subject matter itself is pluralized: “les sciences politiques” or “le scienze politiche.” As we shall see *supra*, Machiavelli has given us good reasons for dividing the discipline into two – but this distinction does not seem to be what the French and Italians had in mind.

order to create order and security; and (3) *fortuna* or the ever-present likelihood of unforeseen events and irresistible processes. When the later becomes the dominant element, the very nature of politics is different. Without prudent “men, when times are quiet, (to) provide them with dikes and dams,” the necessary exercise of power leads to unexpected (and usually unwanted) results. Since Machiavelli found himself in “a country without dams and without dikes,” he had to “enter upon a new way, as yet trodden by anyone else,” i.e. to invent a new science of politics. In normal times Machiavelli implied, politics takes place within established units, i.e. states, and between established institutions, i.e. within a regime, that circumscribe the options of actors and make their behaviours more predictable and peaceful.⁹

Until recently, this line of demarcation between Type One (“normal”) and Type Two (“abnormal”) politics was supposed to run between domestic politics and international relations and was used to justify their separate status as sub-disciplines within politology (or, if you insist, political science). The latter was potentially anarchic, with no higher authority or predictably binding rules above its (allegedly) unitary and sovereign actors – the nation-states – that were expected to do whatever was necessary to further their particular interests and to defend

⁹ Machiavelli's *opera magna*, *The Prince*, has often been misinterpreted in this regard. Nowhere does he advocate the use of violence indiscriminately, only when it can contribute to the eventual domestication of politics. His expression for this objective is “per fare lo Stato,” (my translation would be “in order to do what is necessary to produce stateness”). Politicians (“Princes”) who succeed in doing this have *virtù*. Only once they have constructed these “dikes and dams,” can politics can follow its “normal” course and can agents peacefully resolve their conflicts within predictable and acceptable limits.

themselves from predation by others. The former took place within a political space pre-defined by formal (if not always constitutional) rules and informal norms, ordered by a supreme (and sometimes legitimate) authority over a specific territory in a social setting that possessed a distinctive common identity.

This distinction within the discipline of politology is no longer valid. International (or, better, interstate) relations have become clogged with a myriad of conventions, treaties, “regimes,” inter- and non-governmental organizations and even (especially in the case of Europe) regional supra-national governments and courts. Sovereignty has become more and more of a formality; nationality is less and less exclusive. Meanwhile, the number of putatively sovereign and national states has proliferated and many of them have little or none of the orderly qualities described above. The list of outright “failed states” is getting longer and there is a growing waiting list of “defective ones.” Sometime (I suspect in the late 1970s or early 1980s), the line was crossed and it became statistically more likely that the resident of a given country would be killed in a civil war by one of his or her co-nationals than in an international war by foreigners.

The fact that the empirical loci of these two generic types of politics – the normal and the abnormal – has shifted does not invalidate the difference in terms of micro-foundations. Both are still very much present in our world and they definitely still require contrasting, not to say antithetic, sets of basic assumptions and concepts.

What, then, are the generic components of a solid and well-balanced micro-foundation for the study of politics? These should be *a priori* assumptions that are more or less isomorphic with the situations involving power that are usually faced by politicians – whether of Type One or Type Two – and presumably justifiable with regard to the publics involved. Basing one’s science upon conditions that do not exist or values that cannot be satisfied may be useful for constructing formal models or for exhorting people to change their behaviour, but both are, at best, of marginal utility as foundations for building a ‘realistic’ science of politics.

The indispensable elements of such a foundation are discussed below. They begin an assertion of the critical importance of **concepts** (How should we think, talk or write about politics?). This will be immediately preceded by a discussion of the most important and contested of all concepts, namely, **power** (What is it?) There follows a lengthy disquisition about **agents**, (Who exercises it?). Next come discussions of **cleavages** (What shapes their activity?), **motives** (Why do they do it?), **processes** (Through what means do they do it?), **mechanisms** (How do they do it?), **units** (Where do they do it?), **regimes** (With whom do they do it?) and, finally, **consequences** (Who benefits or suffers from their doing it?)

One item will be conspicuously absent, namely, the **telos** of politics (Where is it going?). It used to be routinely assumed that politics was heading in a predictable (and usually benevolent) direction – that the entire

sub-structure of power and authority was moving somewhere over time, however erratically and unevenly, across different units. The Will of God, the power of human rationality, natural selection by historical evolution, or the greater normative appeal of liberal democracy have been at various times candidates for explaining why better values and institutions would eventually win out. More recently, we have been told that we have fortunately reached “the End of Politics” thanks to the spread of more and more liberal democracies. None of these seems sufficiently plausible to me to waste time including them among the micro-foundations of political research. As we shall see, there is plenty of movement in the contemporary world of politics, but it is not headed in a pre-destined direction – least of all, a benevolent one.

The exploration I have undertaken below is a personal one, not a doctrinal affirmation valid for everyone who wishes to study politics. Each of these elements has involved and continues to involve controversial choices. Those made by any one student will be a complex function of the fads and fashions present in the discipline, his or her theoretical predisposition and the nature of his or her research topic – perhaps seasoned with some of his or her own normative preferences. Whatever these choices are and however implicit they may often be, they cannot be avoided when conducting research on any political topic.

The Concepts

Concepts are the building blocks for studying politics.¹⁰ “If you cannot name it, it does not exist” should be the maxim for all politologists.¹¹ The deeper foundations of their work are provided by theories and all concepts are either taken from or inspired by prior theories.¹² “If no theory has mentioned it, the concept must not be relevant” is, therefore, a derivative maxim. Granted, some concepts become so commonplace that they are routinely relied upon, taken for granted and not explicitly defined. Even worse, some of them become divorced from the broader set of theoretical assumptions in which they were originally embedded and are applied indiscriminately as if they continue to refer to the same phenomenon and have the same effect. In other words, concepts can deteriorate when they

¹⁰ And concepts give rise to **conceptualists**, those persons within the discipline who devote concentrated attention to the meaning of concepts and their application. Usually, they more-or less passively accept the theory that has generated specific terms and concentrate their attention on the ambiguities and misapplications that may be associated with them. This has not been a prestigious specialization within politology. I have never heard of anyone getting a job for practicing it. Doing it well, moreover, involves a difficult balancing act, not just in adjudicating between overlapping phenotypical and genotypical references, but also between the analytical utility of a concept within the discipline and its ability to convey meaning to those outside it.

One marked professional deformation of conceptualists is the attention they have to pay to the vocabulary of the agents they are studying. What the natives are saying about who they are, what they are doing and why are they doing it often provides vital clues to what the analyst should be looking for. In my experience, this was especially significant when I was working on regional integration in Europe. This process was (and still is) unprecedented and barely resembled that of the previous processes of national integration in its member states – all of which had relied on differing degrees of coercion and violence. Precisely because of this, the agents involved in trying to peacefully and consensually bring about a supra-national level of political authority in the region had to invent a specialized lexicon – Euro-speak, I called it – to describe what they were doing. And learning it alerted me to aspects of their behavior I might have otherwise ignored. Charles de Gaulle made the same discovery, although he called it “volapuk integrê” in contrast, of course, to his elegant (and pompous) French

¹¹ Perversely, “if you can put a label on it, it must exist -- everywhere.” A striking example of this has been the recent diffusion of the concept of “governance.” It had been completely unknown and unused for over 400 years when it was picked up for opportunistic reasons in 1989 by the author of a World Bank Report on the problems of development in Africa. Since the Bank is prohibited by its statutes from intervening in the internal affairs of its member **governments**, the author had to invent a new concept rather than refer to the real problem which was corruption in African governments. Once the IGO, NGO and academic communities had taken hold of the concept, it has been found and applied everywhere – usually with the prefix “good” attached to it.

¹² The fancy word for this is that all theories have their **ontology**, a set of prior assumptions about what exists and what it is capable of becoming, and these are then translated into concepts that are presumed to be relevant with regard to these assumptions.

are “stretched” and applied in different places or time periods – especially when they have been detached from the theory that gave rise to them.

Concept formation is a difficult but unavoidable obstacle when conducting political research. For most students, it will be easily removed when they choose a particular “school of thought” or “fashionable approach,” adopt its conceptual apparatus and apply the methods typically associated with it. Not infrequently, however, the student will find him or herself deprived of such guidance or convenience – if the topic chosen is novel or out of fashion. One answer suggested above is simply to listen carefully to the language of those he or she is studying – and then to search for its affinity with pre-existing (and more academically respectable) theories. Another trick, once the principle components of a potential explanation have been identified inductively, is to work with dichotomies, i.e. to identify and label the extreme versions of the phenomenon or process being researched. The real world of politics is filled with them: Left-Right, Center-Periphery, Insiders-Outsiders, Civilian-Military, Capitalist-Communist, Centripetal-Centrifugal, Dispersed-Cumulative, Winners-Losers, Unitary-Federal, Presidential-Parliamentary, Pluralist-Corporatist, e così via. Granted that most of the relevant behavior to be observed will lie between these extremes, having nailed them down with antonymic **ideal types** should facilitate subsequent identification and measurement. Often this will mean proceeding *per genus et differentiam*

as the research advances, i.e. by identifying and labelling sub-types that lie between the extremes that serve to define the continuum.¹³

Students of politics have a special problem with concepts because the ones they use are often already being used by those whom they are studying. Although it is rare, politicians and the public can even pick up concepts from scholarly works and use them for their own purposes.¹⁴ The fancy words for this potential source of confusion are: **phenotypical** and **genotypical**. The former are concepts produced by political activity itself; the latter are generated by the practice of politologists (or the various adjacent disciplines from which they have regularly stolen their concepts). Historians who are usually focused on understanding specific events or processes in bounded time periods tend to be phenotypical since the words that agents use are *eo ipso* pieces of important evidence about their actions and intentions. Political scientists are more interested (usually) in explaining classes of events or processes occurring (at least potentially) in several places or different time periods. Moreover, they tend to be more sceptical about the overt protestations of politicians.¹⁵ For this reason,

¹³ Conceptualization also has its practical side. One temptation is to conceptualize as operative variables or enabling conditions only those phenomena that the researcher knows *ex ante* that he or she can measure empirically. Another is to rely on the trade-off between the number of potential cases (the “universe”) and the number of variables. When the N is small, even as little as one, the temptation is to pile on as many variables as can be imagined to be relevant – most of them with upper-case labels. When it is large and extends not only across many cases but also time periods, the concepts are much more likely to be given lower-case labels from an upper rung on the ladder of abstraction.

¹⁴ I was a perpetrator and victim of this confusion when I re-introduced the concept of **corporatism** into the discipline and then kept finding it repeatedly being used by politicians with wildly different meanings and normative implications.

they need a vocabulary that captures the generic features of actions and intentions. Put simply, historians tend to use “upper-case” words and names and political scientists “lower-case” concepts.¹⁶ Just think of the difference between: “She is a Democratic activist” and “She is a democratic activist.”

The Agents

This is the most distinctive feature of a human as opposed to a natural or physical science. **Agency** begins with the assumption that the objects of research are also its subjects. In the case of politics, this means that agents can make choices that are not completely determined by the conditions in which they find themselves. This inevitably introduces significant elements of innovation and unpredictability into the analysis. It also implies that the subjects have the capacity for reflexivity. Political agents are historical in at least two senses: (1) Their past actions can become valued traditions that are difficult to break when presented with new opportunities; and (2) Their present actions can be influenced by reflections (“memories”) from the past and, hence, by learning they may alter their responses to similar situations in the future. These two

¹⁵ As usual, the Italians have a word for this intrinsic scepticism: *dietrologia*, or the science of capturing and understanding what lies behind the public statements and manifestations of politicians. The implication is clear: politologists should be sceptical and practice dietrology in their research – perhaps, more so in some countries than others.

¹⁶ A related issue concerns the so-called “ladder of abstraction”—the level of generality built into a given concept. At the bottom are those upper-case words that are only intended to denote some specific instance; at the top are those lower-case ones that are presumed to connote the complete range of whatever empirical phenomenon is being referenced. Most works of politology are based on concepts that occupy some middle-rung of the ladder. How far up or down from that middle is a strategic choice the analyst must make and will vary with the temporal and spatial characteristics of the outcome he or she is working on – as well as the pretentiousness of the theory from which the concept is drawn.

observations assume that agents do not change their preferences in the course of trying to satisfy them – which itself is highly improbable. Whether by their own experience or by observing the efforts of others, they may conclude that what they thought they wanted is no longer so desirable. Learning by doing and from diffusion are integral parts of the political process through which preferences are routinely altered. If that were not enough, the very process of outsiders researching the power relations among agents can produce changes in the behaviour or expectations of the persons and organizations one is studying.

The vast majority of researchers of politics presume that these agents are **individual** and **autonomous human beings** faced with and capable of making deliberate choices between alternative and consequential actions. While scholars tend to agree that these actors are uniquely capable of exerting agency, they differ considerably about the properties that humans are capable of bringing to bear on their choices. We have been told by economists and political scientists who imitate them that individuals have pre-established and relatively fixed preferences, are able to assign to them a specific intensity and 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 at the least cost, and still have the same preferences once the consequences of their choice have been experienced. Even with the insertion of such caveats as “bounded

rationality,” “limited or asymmetric information,” “intransitive preferences,” “transaction costs,” and “logics of appropriateness or habit,” this generic conception of the role of agents accords not only with currently fashionable theories of rational choice, but reflects the much deeper ideological commitment of modern social and political thought to liberal individualism and social progress. Shifting to a different micro-foundation would seem to many participants and observers to be equivalent to declaring that politics is a ‘passionate’ and not a ‘rational’ activity which would be 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.

I have had two reasons in my research 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, all of the available) alternatives and, even less, what all of their eventual consequences will be. For him or her to even approximate these search conditions in the real world would require so much time and resources that little would be left to subsequently pursue his or her interests – and someone capable of short-cutting the whole process by simply accepting the solutions proposed by pre-existing institutions or ideologies would likely prevail. In short, it would be irrational from a political perspective to act rationally in this fashion!

Moreover, this individual is very likely to discover upon such a complicated and time-consuming reflection that he or she has many conflicting interests, passions or even convictions – especially over different time horizons – and, hence, cannot possibly pursue them consistently according to rank and intensity.

And, if those reasons were not enough, he or she is typically acting within a multi-layered and poly-centric “nested” set of institutions – some public and some private – all potentially capable of making binding collective decisions. Acting as a rational individual, he or she would have, not only to discover which of these institutions is relevant, but also, in the likely event that several are involved, to spread and adjust his or her calculations accordingly.

My research on interest politics has led me to conclude that agent preferences are not fixed, but contingent upon which policies are proposed and by whom and upon which “others” they are observing. In other words, preferences will probably change during the course of political exchange as it moves across the various layers and centers of domestic power and as agents react to the efforts and experiences of foreigners.

The second (and more compelling) reason for resetting one’s micro-foundations is even more subversive of the prevailing orthodoxy. What if most of the significant actors engaged in normal politics were permanent **organizations**, not individual persons? Granted that these organizations

are composed of individuals and some of them may depend on the contributions and compliance 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. In other words, they are not just the arithmetic sum of independent and individual preferences. Moreover, political parties, interest associations, social movements, non-governmental organizations, business firms, government agencies and private foundations are often in the business of teaching these potential agents what their preferences should be and committing them to obeying policies made in their name.

As we have just seen, very few individuals can determine alone what their interests, passions or convictions are or should be – much less act alone as effective agents. They require stimuli from their social environment in order to discover what these motives are and coordination with and support from other citizens/subjects in order to act with any chance of success. Moreover, these collective agents of instruction, information and coordination are less and less episodic alliances, clusters of like-minded voters or spontaneous demonstrators. They have become more and more permanent, often highly bureaucratized, organizations, most of which have existed before being joined by their individual members and will survive after they are gone. The most important implication of this omnipresent development is that the agency of these

intermediaries between citizens or subjects and their legitimate or illegitimate rulers cannot be reduced to the mere sum of the choices and preferences of their members or followers. These intermediaries have interests of their own related to both their distinctive needs as organizations and to their role in coordinating the diverse interests, passions or convictions of their members or followers. As historical agents, they tend to develop standard-operating-procedures and in-house ideologies. This usually serves to extend their time horizons when calculating their interests, passions or convictions beyond what individuals are likely to do. Moreover, they can also enter into longer-term contracts with other organized interlocutors and state agencies. The latter may even extend to them rights by which they are guaranteed access to public decision-making and participation in policy implementation.

When one adds to these distinctive qualities the fact that very few of these intermediary organizations have competitive internal processes for choosing their leaders or staff, their autonomous contribution to the political process should be abundantly clear – and, therefore included in any “model” of how contemporary polities operate – whether democratic or not.

Contemporary politics in both autocracies and democracies is all about **representation** – about collective intermediaries acting in lieu of individual persons by intervening between them and their rulers. In the former case, the number of those involved is smaller and the criteria for

their selection are more restrictive, but organizations are still likely to be the key actors. In the latter, freedom of association, assembly and petition – coupled with the diffusion of organizational skills from the private to the public realm – has made it almost mandatory for individuals to resort to permanent collective bodies if they are to have any impact upon rulers and their policies.

And organizations have, indeed, transformed the nature of politics. By definition, they have solved the dilemma of rational collective action by individuals and, in some cases, they may even have addressed some of the issues involved in the inequality of power resources by combining large numbers of individuals to countervail the concentrated influence of smaller, privileged groups. Their preferences do not have to be inferred or indirectly revealed; they are articulated publicly through the organization's normal activity. Granted there are bound to be some elements of dissimulation, strategic action and hypocrisy in these activities, but these are minor when compared to those of less well-informed and publicly committed individuals. As we have noted above, organizations are also capable (if they choose) of extending the time horizon for political calculations because they usually outlive their members (and sometimes even the social category they claim to represent). They tend to develop standard operating procedures and official ideologies that greatly facilitate their member's calculation of preferences and they "package" these preferences into acceptable and justified demands, making it much easier

for authorities to consult and negotiate with them. It does not seem exaggerated to describe these organizations as “secondary citizens or subjects” with their own rights and obligations – not mention their own channels of access to authorities independent of the electoral one.

It has become customary to distinguish between three generic types of organized intermediaries. **Political parties** are by far the most studied by political scientists. Indeed, they are often described by them as the exclusive (or, at least, the most legitimate) intermediaries representing citizens/subjects in relation to their elected or self-appointed rulers. Their most distinctive features (which they monopolize in most established democratic regimes) are to nominate candidates, conduct elections, organize legislatures and form governments. They usually do this by developing a distinctive ideology or image that offers to their members/voters a convincing (and sometimes alternative) set of policies that will benefit them and then promises to use this program to order its priorities if elected. Granted that not all organizations that call themselves parties perform all of these functions (and definitely not all parties deliver on their promised policies when in government) and some other types of political organization do occasionally manage successfully to challenge these monopolistic claims; nevertheless, the competition among political parties or the dominance of a single party is one (if not the) most salient feature of almost all regimes. Their absence is a sign that the polity is probably a failure and has no regime at all.

The second generic type of organized intermediary is the **interest association**. Its distinctive claim is to represent some social or economic category in its relations with public authorities in such a way as to benefit its own members exclusively, although it is not infrequent that its activities will also benefit “free-riders”-- persons or organizations in the category that are not members. Class, sector and profession are the usual, but not exclusive, functional categories. If there are competing, over-lapping associations claiming to represent the same category, the system of interest intermediation can be described as **pluralist**. If there is only one or only a single cluster of related associations – and even more so if public authorities recognize such a monopoly and grant it privileged access – then the system is called **corporatist**. While the number of political parties is relatively limited by the very nature of the electoral process and its constituencies, the number of interest associations and the relations among them is not so limited – or, better, only limited on the demand side by the state’s regulation of the freedom of association and on the supply side by the division of labor and the social or cultural categories with which individual citizens/subjects identify collectively.

The **social movement** is the third generic type of organized intermediary – although many of its exemplars pretend not to be formally organized and certainly not to be bureaucratized. The most distinctive characteristic of a social movement is its claim to represent a “cause” or a “public good,” i.e. a declared objective that would not benefit only its

members, but some larger group -- if not the society as a whole. In other words, interest associations are self-regarding and social movements are other-regarding. Political parties are usually a peculiar mix of both. Needless to say, the causes that can be represented in this fashion are almost infinite and will vary constantly over time from objective to objective. Another distinguishing characteristic is that membership in a movement can be a benefit in itself and not a cost. Members may derive a reward from the interaction with other like-minded persons and from the excitement of participating in group events, especially public demonstrations. The latter incentive is particularly important compared to other forms of intermediation (although it is not absent from them) since one's own contribution may not make much of a difference to the outcome and, if the movement does produce a difference, the putative member can enjoy the collective good without having paid for it ("free-riding" is the usual term for this behavior).

Except for those with regimes that either prohibit the formation of organized intermediaries' altogether or make them subject to control by the state or a single party, all polities have some mix of the three types and together they may form what has been called a **civil society**. As early as the 1830s, this has been identified (by Alexis de Tocqueville and Adam Ferguson) as a distinctive and positive component of democratic regimes.

In theory, civil society is composed of “intermediate bodies,” i.e., formal organizations and some informal groups that have the following characteristics:

- (1) They are relatively independent of both public authorities **and** private units of production and reproduction, i.e. of firms and families;
- (2) They are capable of deliberating about and taking collective actions in defense or promotion of their interests, passions or convictions;
- (3) But they do **not** seek to replace either state agents or private (re)producers or to accept responsibility for governing the polity as a whole;
- (4) But they **do** agree to act within pre-established rules of a "civil," i.e. mutually respectful and law-abiding, nature.

Needless to say, some polities have much richer, more diverse and more active civil societies than others (and this variation is often correlated with the level of development of the economy and the length of time the polity has been a liberal democracy). The reigning assumption seems to be that the more civil society in a given polity, the more likely the survival of its democracy – which, it seems to me, ignores the possibility that the emerging civil society after a period of autocratic rule may be deeply divided in ethno-linguistic identities, highly fragmented in class and sectoral interests, polarized by religious or cultural passions, or all of the above.

The Cleavages

Political power and its diverse outcomes depend on why and how power is being exercised. As we have seen above, it can be used to accomplish something and to prevent something from being accomplished. Almost always, it involves working with someone else and these days (as we have just seen) this in turn more often involves working through organizations. Given the growing complexity of human interactions, it cannot always be assumed that power will be confined within a single unit, e.g. a nation-state. More and more often, it will be exercised across units – sometimes in global or regional international organizations.

As we have seen from the beginning of this essay, politics begins with the inequality of resources available to agents. Some of these may be “natural” but most will be “artificial,” i.e. produced by their social, economic and cultural activities. The latter are almost never distributed randomly, as many natural differences tend to be. These purposively generated inequalities tend to be (or to become) **structural**, i.e. embedded in self-reproducing **cleavages**. These enduring differences in interest, passion, conviction and habit (as we shall see in the next segment) are likely to be both multiple and mutable. Where they are not only multiple but tend to cut across each other and, therefore, to produce different winners and losers according to the issues at stake, politics will tend to be **centripetal** in nature and moderate in content. Agents are more likely to compete for support from those with centrist positions and, hence, more likely to reach

and accept compromised solutions. On the other hand, if they are cumulative across cleavages and conflicts so that the same persons or groups are always on the winning or losing side, the politics will tend to be **centrifugal** in nature and extremist in content. Agents will claim to represent the preferences of those at opposing ends of the political process and be much less likely to accept compromises as binding on all parties.

Whatever the conflicts, the social, economic and cultural cleavages that give rise to them will change as a result of past political decisions, but also as a result of quite autonomous processes and events. Politics is always deeply embedded in a wider context that it does not and cannot completely control, *pace* the claims of totalitarian regimes. Its rules and institutions are intended by their creators to be immutable – especially if they are constitutional – but they are constantly being challenged. Hence, political conflict is never just about wielding power within the pre-established parameters of a given polity, but often about changing its rules and practices.

The Motives

Most political struggles, however, are channelled according to pre-established and mutually acceptable rules, i.e. they are being governed by a **regime**. As we shall see *infra*, differences in regime tend to be

associated with different motives for exercising power (or resisting it) and this leads to different outcomes of conflict.

Roughly speaking, agents form their preferences and acquire their motives in one of five ways. Probably the most common in contemporary societies is the pursuit of self-regarding **interests**. It is not unusual for analysts – academic or otherwise – to presume that it is the or, at least, the most common basis of conflict and motive for action. Even more restrictive is the notion that these interests are primarily if not exclusively material in nature and can be pursued as rationally as one may purchase goods and services through the market.

In its origins, political thought gave priority to **passions**, i.e. some inbred compulsion to act in response to either to the agent's sense of self or his/her personal understanding of the social/ethical norms of some group of reference. honor, glory, justice, respect and identity figure prominently in such 'passionate' works, but the principle one has always been "the desire for power" itself. Human beings from the earliest recorded thoughts about politics have been regarded as having an intrinsic passion for and deriving a distinctive pleasure from dominating other human beings.

Thirdly, there are **convictions**. Historically, this was usually connected with religiously inspired beliefs. More recently, in more secularized societies, the key element of motivation has become ideology

– a system of concepts that provides the agent with a comprehensive understanding of his/her environment and position within it. Needless to say, interests and passions are usually embedded somewhere in such belief systems, but the motive for action is more other-regarding and oriented to the community as a whole. With the emergence of political parties as important competing agents, their appeal to members or voters was (at least, initially) based on ideologies combining different elements of religious, ethnic or class conviction.

Fourthly, people -- even citizens in a democracy -- may act politically neither intentionally, nor responsively, nor emotionally, but simply out of **habit**. They are socialized to conform to rules and norms that were chosen under different circumstances in the past, but have been reified and dignified so that they can be applied in the present. Or, they observe the behavior of others who may be more consciously and critically motivated and just instinctively imitate what these “relevant others” do. Voting may be an appropriate example of this. Most potential voters have no **interest** in participating since their individual contribution to the outcome is minimal – unless the contest is thought to be very close. Nor are they likely to feel **passionate** about such an activity – unless they are particularly attracted to a single candidate’s personality.¹⁷ **Conviction** is only likely to play a role if some social group (religion, family, work unit) makes voting a characteristic of belonging. *Faute de mieux*, most voters

¹⁷ Or because they are particularly repelled by some candidate and vote passionately against him or her.

probably vote out of **habit** (unless they are compelled to do so by law). They did it before, their neighbors are doing it; the norms of citizenship seem to require it. Unfortunately, this habit seems to be waning in virtually all established and many new democracies. The proportion of abstainers has been increasing almost monotonically from one election to the next. Most people do not live for or because of politics. Many prefer to live without it and to do so frequently and habitually – if they can.¹⁸

Finally, there is the omnipresence of **fear**. Regardless of who the agents are and what is the regime in which they are embedded, politics is ultimately all about coercion and, in order to be effective, it must be accompanied by the threat or the application of sufficient sanctions to invoke fear. In well-established democracies, most citizens will accept this as legitimate, i.e. as a necessary and predictable condition for the peaceful resolution of conflicts and distribution of public goods. Someone has to police the rules and it is likely to be more acceptable if those who apply them can be held accountable for their actions. In autocracies – with the possible exception of those based on traditional norms of dynastic inheritance or religious virtue – coercion is much more frequently applied, feared and resented. It is usually a motive for inaction and, hence, difficult to observe and measure. Only if the sanctions are unpredictable or

¹⁸ One reason that abstention from politics (and distrust of politicians) has increased may have something to do with the fact that more and more of the representatives they elect live off of politics and have no other profession.

ineffectual are subjects likely to demonstrate or rebel – whether out of self-interest, passion or conviction.

Whatever the motive(s), the central feature of power is to get some person, group, organization or agency to do something that the agent prefers and that he/she/it would not otherwise do and may even actively oppose. Presumably that “something other” is to the self-perceived advantage of the power-holder whether because of interest, passion or conviction. Virtually everyone who has written about power – and there have been many – would agree with this generic definition. Where their disagreement begins (and has not ended) is what has to be done to accomplish this feat.

The Processes

Motives have to be put into motion. This involves interacting with others in accordance with their power capabilities. Really powerful agents, especially those backed by legitimacy, may simply refuse to enter into annoying transactions with weak claimants. Less well-endowed agents will not be capable of resisting the politicization of the issue at stake and will, therefore, be compelled or choose to enter the political process. When they do, this usually means (as we have discussed above) acting within some prescribed set of rules which are embedded in some type of regime (as we shall see below).

By and large, the mantra of most modern scholars of politics is **competition**. Agents exercise their relative power by competing with each other in order to satisfy their respective interests, passions or convictions. In the case of politics within an established regime, this presumes the existence of a pre-existing institutional context in which conflicting motives are channelled by mutually respected rules into a process that limits the use of specified power resources and the range of possible outcomes. Otherwise, the agents would engage in unruly **conflict** not bound by such constraints and would exercise their power by threatening or exercising violence to impose their interests, passions or convictions.

This seems both a reasonable and realistic assumption and there are certainly many cases of politics in which the use of power has been domesticated in this fashion to the mutual benefit of the agents involved. The major source of distortion comes when students of politics reduce its application to the process of electoral competition. 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 channels through which political agents compete with each other over “the authoritative allocation of values.” Not surprisingly, these other channels 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 normal politics that deserve at least as much scholarly attention as the more regular and routinized conduct of electoral competition.

Another process also deserves a more prominent place in the micro-foundations, namely, **cooperation**. Unfortunately, it is when politics fails and violent conflict prevails that both the consumers of political knowledge and its producers pay the most attention to it. The much less salient and routinized processes whereby agents solve problems collectively tend to pass unobserved. Why should politicians feel more satisfied when they have defeated their opponents, rather than cooperated with them?¹⁹ Why should the general public reward their rulers for winning at the expense of others, rather than for improving the welfare of all of the protagonists? Why is it not recognized that, if competition is not to degenerate into conflict, agents have first to cooperate by agreeing upon the rules – formal or informal – that limit and channel their use of power? Admittedly, many of these rules consist of habits inherited from previous generations and are taken for granted, but they are continuously subject to challenges as power

¹⁹ Could this be due to culture or to hormones or to both? Are those cultures that value men over women – and, therefore, have political regimes exclusively dominated by men – more likely to reward those leaders who score a successful victory over those who negotiate a successful compromise?

relations and the identity of agents change and therefore require periodic re-affirmation. Moreover, these agents also cooperate in alliance with each other, both to modify the pre-existing rules of engagement and to affect present policy outcomes. While it is understandable that the public should pay more attention to disorderly conflict because it is so threatening and orderly competition because it is so “theatrical,” that does not excuse politologists from also doing so. Cooperation deserves greater status and more attention within the discipline than it usually receives.

And so does its perverse form: **collusion**, i.e. when agents on the inside act in concert to prevent outsiders from competing or cooperating. This process is much more likely to escape detection since the agreements involved are usually secret or implicit. It can, however, be inferred from patterns of behavior – for example, when previously competing political parties develop more similar platforms or even co-sponsor candidates. In the case of autocratic regimes, collusion would seem to be the normal *modus operandi* of the political process. In democracies, it is a rarer occurrence and, when it appears, a sure sign of entropy or decay.

Political theory should be capable of explaining which of these processes will be used in a given instance, time and place. The task is greatly facilitated if the context is Type Two (abnormal). Virtually by definition, in the absence of “dikes and dams,” the agents involved will be in **conflict** and, therefore, compelled to resort to coercion (or the treat of it)

to resolve the issue at stake – and the outcome will be determined by the relative distribution of power resources and the willingness to apply them in that specific instance.²⁰ The choice of processes is more complicated in Type One (normal) situations. The range of alternatives is greater and the strategic choices are more difficult to make. The ‘standard’ assumption among politologists working on established regimes is that agents will **compete** with each other through channels that are fashioned by pre-existing “dikes and dams.” Only when these channels are poorly defined or disputed will they resort to overt (and potentially unregulated, i.e. violent) **conflict**. The strategy of **cooperation** seems to be contingent on a factor that has not yet been mentioned: **trust**.²¹ If the agents involved are confident enough that their opponents will respect the existing rules and practices, even when it is manifestly not in their immediate interest, passion or conviction to do and, moreover, will continue to do so if the outcome is not what was expected, then, a mutually binding agreement can be reached and should be self-enforcing, i.e. not require either additional coercion or competition. In other words, trust emerges in situations in which the (relative) winner agrees to limit his or her gains and the (relative) loser can afford to lose because he or she is confident of

²⁰ Although even the most hard-core realist in this sub-discipline would probably admit that there are elements of **cooperation** in the formation of alliances and **collusion** in the balance of power. Nevertheless, these are expected to be episodic rather than institutionalized as in Type One politics.

²¹ Trust has recently become more prominent in the politological literature, which is ironic since virtually all of the research on public opinion demonstrates a remarkable decline in it – whether applied to political institutions or the people who run them. Perhaps, this is yet another case of Hegel’s Owl of Minerva flying only when the phenomenon that one is attempting to explain is already in decline or disappearing.

being able to play the game in the future. Granted that trust is in short supply in most political contexts and that the exercise of power tends to breed mistrust about intentions and motives – even in Type One situations -- but it can develop over repeated interactions when agents have learned to respect each other in the past and know that they will have to deal with each repeatedly in the future.²² Its great advantage is not only to save the costs of expending scarce resources, but also potentially to generate more resources by enlarging the total sum of benefits. Its great disadvantage is that it can morph into **collusion** in which the cooperation among favoured agents is intended to exclude or pass on the costs to others.

The Mechanisms

The instruments or mechanisms for exercising power are not only multiple, but they can be wielded in different combinations as agents attempt to produce their desired outcomes.

Coercion: This is no doubt the most common feature of power-wielding and involves an action or threat by the power-holder to deprive the power-recipient of some valued resource, up to and including his/her/its freedom of action or even of existence. It can be wielded legitimately according to established and mutually acceptable rules – usually, but not always by

²² Political trust is not the same thing as cultural or social trust. It is a strategic choice not an inculcated or habitual reaction. It is possible to have a great deal of the latter and very little of the former. For example, I live in Italy and I trust my neighbors sufficiently to give them a key to my house (and they do likewise). However, we are both extremely mistrustful about Italian political institutions and the politicians who run them.

state institutions – or it can be wielded illegitimately – usually by private agents.

Co-optation: This involves an action or offer that promises rewards to the recipient in exchange for their support either for some given party or policy or against some other party or policies. This usually means offering some positive benefits in return for conformity, but it can also include promises to be left alone and not be subsequently affected by the power-holder.

Manipulation: In this case, the power-holder seeks to limit or distort the information available to the power-recipient either to narrow or widen the agenda for decision-making and/or to alter the conception that agents have of the alternatives available to resolve a given issue. Its utility depends on the availability (or not) of multiple sources of information and the capacity of actors to process information independently and critically and to disseminate their opinions.

Hegemony: This is an extended and deepened version of manipulation in that power is wielded long before it is actually exercised by influencing through indirect, social, cultural and/or educational means the preferences that citizens and subjects have in such a way that they conform to or are compatible with those of the dominant political elite.

As we have observed above with regard to manipulation, the efficacy of these mechanisms does not depend alone on the resources and efforts of those who are in power. It also depends on the resources and efforts of

the subjects/citizens whose behaviour they wish to influence. In the case of autocracies, it can be presumed that the resources of opponents and dissidents will be fewer (and more dangerous to exploit) which in turn implies that it may be possible to combine the four mechanisms described above in order to produce a more encompassing and formidable mechanism of power, namely, **domination**. In this case, individual and collective subjects would be much less able to resist the imposition of arbitrary rules and actions – whether of a public or a private source. How enduring this situation will be depends on many factors, not the least of which are the evolution in the relative distribution of resources and the change in ideals and expectations that may occur despite autocratic domination. What is novel about the present context is that this contingency is not just a domestic matter. Increasingly, the balance of forces in autocracies are being affected by foreign influences, mostly coming from neighboring democratic countries, but also from international advocacy groups and foreign democracy promotion programmes.

All of the four power-exercising mechanisms can also be found in democracies, but they can rarely be combined to produce the sort of domination one finds in autocracies. The primary reason for this is that, under democracy, citizens should have greater resources to pursue their competing interests, passions and convictions independently of the efforts of rulers – and, therefore, it should be more costly and risky for incumbents to try to suppress them. At the extreme, citizens may even have the

capacity to exit from particularly arbitrary constraints – even from the polity itself. However, the price for avoiding domination is that the citizens have to observe greater respect for the rules of the game (given the presumably greater legitimacy of power-holders) and this implies voluntarily limiting the pursuit of some of their more intense interests, passions and convictions.

Another major difference between the two types of regime is that democratic rulers, when faced with the inevitable changes in resources and ideas, can adjust peacefully (and usually incrementally) by changing their composition and policies in response to the outcome of elections, the pressure from interest associations and/or the mobilization of social movements. Autocratic rulers – especially when they are bound to a comprehensive system of domination – are either deprived of these signals for change or incapable of making marginal adjustments in their practices. In short, the great historical advantage of democracies in the eternal struggle for power has been that “they can change without changing” and, in so doing, retain the legitimacy of their institutions.

The Units

Politics has to be practiced within a unit, usually one bounded by territory and possessing a distinctive population, although there do exist some that are functionally or ideationally determined and operate across different territories and peoples, e.g. the International Monetary Fund or Amnesty International. Ever since Aristotle collected the constitutions of

one hundred fifty-eight Greek city-states (it is alleged since only one, that of Athens, has survived), the privileged unit in politology 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 **nation state** which combines internal sovereignty (control over its own territory and people) with external sovereignty (control over domination and predation by others) It is usually presumed that only within it are agents capable of making choices and implementing them effectively; individuals or organizations able to calculate their interests, passions and convictions; processes of political competition and cooperation capable of operating; and mechanisms of coercion, co-optation, manipulation and hegemony likely to be effective. Virtually by definition, regimes can only develop their stable and complimentary institutions within such a framework. Nothing is more firmly rooted in the micro-foundations of politology than this assumption. Virtually every existing proposition about politics in the discipline should be prefaced with the following phrase: “Take one (or more) existing national state(s) and, only then, will ... (X be related to Y) ... in the following manner and for the following reason.”

But what if this unit of action and analysis can no longer be taken for granted? What if that presumed coincidence between autonomy, capacity

and identity 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 multi-layered 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**, but it also is the case for nation states that have voluntarily entered into **supra-national institutions** 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 blamed, shamed or even 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 recently granted or been forced to concede extensive powers to their **sub-national units** and, in some cases, these provinces, cantons, *regioni*, *Länder*, *estados autónomicos*, or *départments*

have even entered into cooperative arrangements with equivalent units in neighboring national states.

It will not be easy for students of politics to abandon the presumption of “stateness.” Sovereignty has long been an abstract concept that “everyone knew” was only a convenient fiction, just as they also “knew” that almost all states had social groups within them that did not share a common national identity. One could pretend for analytical purposes that the units were independent of each other in empowering their agents, in institutionalizing their cleavages, processes and mechanisms, in choosing their regimes, and in defending or extending their “national” interests in relation to other similar units – even when one “knew” that much of this was not true. The reason for this convenient fiction was obvious: there existed no other concrete, observable political unit that could do all this. Now that we are beginning to observe supra- and sub-national units that can accomplish some of these feats, should we not at least challenge the monopolistic grip that the “sovereign national state” has had upon the study of politics in general and the discipline of political science in particular? It still seems self-evident to most analysts that this form of organizing political life will continue to dominate all others, spend most publicly generated funds, authoritatively allocate most resources, enjoy a unique source of legitimacy and furnish most people with a distinctive identity. However we may recognize that the sovereign national state is under assault from a variety of directions – beneath and beyond its borders

– its “considerable resilience” has been repeatedly observed and reasserted. To expunge it (or even to qualify it significantly) would mean, literally, starting all over and creating a whole new language for talking about and studying politics. The assiduous reader will have noted that I have already tried to do this by frequently referring to “polity” or “unit” in this essay when the normal expression would have been “state” or “nation”. I doubt if many others will follow such a dubious precedent.

The Regimes

Most students of politics assume that the political unit they are analyzing has a relatively stable configuration of institutions that are complementary to each other, presumably as the result of a historical experience of trying alternatives and eliminating incompatible ones through competition or conflict. The actions produced by its agents, motives and mechanisms are somehow – functionally, ideationally or intentionally – related to each other at a higher foundational level, such that their nature or importance cannot just be assessed alone and uniformly. They are embedded in an institutionalized (in many cases, constitutionalized) whole that conditions what role can be played by individuals or organizations, self- or other-regarding interests, competitive or cooperative processes.

These regimes are given a label and it is presumed that those in the same generic category will share many foundational elements. At one time, there were three such generic labels: **democratic**, **totalitarian** and

authoritarian (or, better, **autocratic**, since all regimes depend on authority). More recently, the middle one has almost completely dropped out as the result of the collapse of Soviet Communism and the transformation of Chinese Communism.²³ It has been replaced with “**hybrid**” or with some diminished version of democracy or liberalized version of autocracy.

Needless to say, the analyst can break down each of these into sub-types. Democracy typically is subdivided into unitary-federal, presidential-parliamentary, two party-multiple party, pluralist-corporatist, majoritarian-consociational, *e così via* – along with an almost infinite number of combinations and permutations of them. Autocracy also attracts at least as many dichotomies, e.g. civil-military, personalistic-bureaucratic, *jefe-junta*, *ad infinitum*–*pro tempore*, single party-no party, legalistic-arbitrary, domestic-foreign, repressive-homicidal *ecosì via*. Which of these sub-types is useful will depend on the subject matter the analyst has chosen to investigate. For example, Guillermo O’Donnell and I in our work on regime transitions found it useful to divide the hybrid category in two: ***dictablandas*** in which elections are regularly held (but in which the incumbents are foregone winners), various civic rights – of association, assembly, petition and media freedom – are formally tolerated (but informally restricted) and arbitrary harassment and arrest of opponents has declined (although can still be applied) and ***democraduras*** in which

²³ Although it is still on display in North Korea,

elections are regularly held and fairly tallied (but under conditions that favour the governing party), various civic rights are protected legally (but erratically enforced) and the harassment and imprisonment of opponents has become rare (but remains a plausible threat).²⁴

The implications of this intrusion of “regimes” into the micro-foundations of the discipline are considerable – if still debatable. For one thing, the recognition of such categorical diversity means giving up the “Holy Grail” of politologists, namely, the quest for universalistic, immutable “covering laws” that can be applied to all agents, motives or mechanisms. Individuals or organizations do not behave the same way in democracies and autocracies; the “reasonableness” and “appropriateness” of interests or passions depends 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 mechanisms of competition/conflict or cooperation/collusion. This may be reflected in the quite noticeable decline in references to “national” or “regional” peculiarities in explaining political behaviour. Adjectives such as “Asian,” “Latin American,” “African,”

²⁴ While democracy and autocracy typically occupy the opposing ends of the continuum of regime types, there exist plenty of other concepts which attach substantive content to specific cases: plutocracy (rule by the rich), oligarchy (rule by a closed elite), monarchy (rule by a single person), mobocracy (rule by a mobilized mass), aristocracy (rule by the most prestigious), meritocracy (rule by the best), theocracy (rule by clerics), monarchy (rule by inherited family origin), partitocracy (rule by a sclerotic system of parties), kleptocracy (rule by thieves), mediaocracy (rule by or via the media), anarchy (rule by no one), timocracy (rule by property owners), technocracy (rule by experts) and, of course, the one proposed by Robert Dahl as a substitute for democracy: polyarchy (rule by multiple overlapping minorities). *Infra*, in this essay, I have proposed to substitute “politocracy” (rule by politicians) for polyarchy, given the inexorable increase in the role of professional politicians and the decline in the dispersion of power across minorities in so many established democracies.

“Bolivian” or “Albanian” placed in front of substantives such as democracy or political culture tend now to have a descriptive and not an analytic importance. What counts are generic institutional configurations wherever they are located, rather than geo-cultural specificities.

Democracy has always played a prominent role in the modern study of politics – if only because data about these regimes have been more accessible and academic inquiry – even critical inquiry -- about them has been more protected and even encouraged. Indeed, in some countries, teaching and research about politics is confined almost exclusively to inquiry into the rules and practices of democracy.

More accurately said, it has been confined to the institutions and practices of “real-existing democracy” (RED). For what these scholars observe and analyse is not, strictly speaking, *dēmokratía*, i.e. “rule by the people,” but *politokratía*, i.e. “rule by politicians who claim to represent the people because they have been elected by a part of the people.”²⁵ All REDs are based primarily on the “vicarious” participation of their citizens in decision-making (although sometimes they include elements of direct participation such as referendums, initiatives, plebiscites, demonstrations, riots and so forth). They are also the product of some sequence of historic compromises with other pre-existing political institutions, e.g. monarchy, theocracy, aristocracy, oligarchy and tyranny, and with other principles of

²⁵ An even more bizarre development in contemporary REDs has been the emergence (and public acceptance) of self-selected celebrities who claim to represent some deprived and underrepresented social or cultural category (or even an entire continent!).

authoritative distribution, e.g. divine right, inherited privilege, charisma, liberalism, socialism, communism and, above all, capitalism. The first thing to keep in mind when studying “real-existing democracy” is that it is always incomplete and defective when judged by the standards of “ideal-not-yet-existing democracy.” Indeed, it is this persistent (but periodically widening or narrowing) gap between actual practices and ideal principles that explains in part why REDs are under almost constant pressure to reform themselves. Put differently, REDs are (and should be) “moving targets.” Like all social institutions, they are subject to **entropy**, i.e. a tendency to decline in efficacy, but – “mind the gap” – they benefit from periodic injections of renewed energy – usually from below but occasionally from above or from outside.

The Consequences

Politics has consequences – many, diverse, often unexpected, but always serious. Presumably, this is why Aristotle baptized the study of it as “the Master Science,” since virtually all other aspects of collective human existence depend on what it produces. “Who gets What, When, How and Why?” is an encapsulated version of this observation, since the answer is that “almost everyone” is affected in some way or another by this process of allocating scarce values.²⁶

²⁶ The slogan (minus the “why”) is to be credited to Harold Laski. More accurately, politology could be called the science of explaining not only the present, but also “who **got** what, when, how and why?” in the past and (more rarely) “who **will get**, what,

Order: This (or its absence) is certainly the most important product of politics.²⁷ Its presence is not to be confused with **stability** or the mere persistence of the same persons in power or policies in effect. Order is produced by adapting to change and we have just argued *infra* that change is endemic to politics. This process of orderly adaption involves the domestication of power so that it does not degenerate into violence and remains with predictable limits of coercion, but responds to the continuous change in the resources that agents have at their disposition, as well as the intrinsic tendency they have for being “restless” and, therefore, for being curious, experimental, and/or dissatisfied with their environment.

Order can be imposed involuntarily by the superior coercive force of a concentrated group of agents or it can be generated voluntarily through the formation of consent among a broad range of agents. This, more or less, corresponds to different locations along the continuum of regime types with various forms of autocracy at one end and of democracy at the other. One of the abiding strengths of the latter is the greater availability of information about the resources and restlessness of agents and the capacity to respond by peacefully rotating those in authority and responding incrementally to changes in citizen demands. The former have subjects

when, how and why?” in the future. The phrase, “the allocation of scarce values,” is David Easton’s well-known definition of what politics is all about.

²⁷ And, as Hobbes argued, any actions that contribute to it are preferable to those that destroy it – up to and including devolving absolute authority upon a single person. Consider the options open to the inhabitants of a “failed state” (or even of a “failed regime”) in which life has become “nasty, brutish and short,” just as Hobbes predicted. Any order is likely to be more appealing than the existing disorder.

and not citizens. It is much more difficult for their rulers to capture reliable information about them, to respond by “changing policies without changing politics,” and to manage orderly succession in power.²⁸

The by now classic device for ensuring the continuous production of order is to **constitutionalize** the rules for the domestication of power (and, presumably to impose its formal provisions upon the informal practices that inevitably arise from resolving political conflicts). With very few exceptions, these days all regimes – whether democratic or autocratic – have such a document – whether plebiscited from below or promulgated from above. Which does not mean that all constitutions are respected and obeyed.²⁹ And all of them have their “abeyances,” aspects of power relations that cannot be formally codified.³⁰

Production and Distribution:³¹ Politics alters the production of desired goods (and unwanted bads) and it changes their distribution in ways that would not be experienced if they were affected only by social

²⁸ Someone, I think it was Mario Vargas Llosa, once described Mexico as “the perfect dictatorship” because unlike other autocratic regimes it managed to institutionalize rotation in power within its ruling party consensually for more than forty years.

²⁹ From my earlier experience as a Latin Americanist, I remember a *boutade* about someone asking a Venezuelan if he knew the constitution of his country and he replied: “No. I do not keep up with the periodical literature.” Venezuela may be the world’s constitutional champion. It has had 26 of them – the latest dating from 1999 and currently being vociferously contested by the political opposition.

³⁰ Two notable examples of such abeyances are civil-military relations and bargaining between capital and labor. I do not know of any constitution that specifies either of them. Many core political interactions are also left to secondary legislation and usually made easier to modify. For example, very few constitutions contain provisions for electoral competition or recognition of political parties.

³¹ To be more precise, the entry should read: “production and reproduction” and “distribution and redistribution.” Politics can affect not only whether goods and services will be produced (and how much), but also whether the human species will reproduce itself (and how often). It can also choose to distribute these goods and service within the same social, cultural or economic group or redistribute them from one group to another.

custom, religious conviction or market allocation. Whether something is produced and how much of it is produced is affected by the decisions of public authorities. They license the producers and regulate their products. Someone always wins more or loses less when powerful agents intervene to convert private goods in public ones. The critical issue in terms of its relation to order is whether this process of regulated (re)production or conscious (re)distribution is acceptable to those affected. On this issue, the criteria seem to vary considerably according to the type of regime, but they could also be culturally sensitive – regardless of regime type. Absent from subsidization and regulation is the mantra of liberalism, although even the most convinced liberals would admit the political intervention is required for private property to exist and markets to operate at all. Equality of benefits (or in the distribution of costs) is the mantra in democratic theory, although citizens seem to accommodate in practice to various (even more recently, very high) levels of social and economic inequality – provided that the order produced by the regime is conducive to an overall growth in the availability of scarce goods and a noticeable diminution in the existence of avoidable bads.³² In autocracies, the mere avoidance of violence (especially coming from external sources) may be enough to tolerate higher levels of repression, distortions in production and inequalities of distribution. Their leaders are also likely to argue (and be

³² One could say that, realistically, given the compromises that democratic equality has to make with capitalist inequality, most citizens in REDs settle for some version of equity in which the differences in benefits are justifiable according to acceptable criteria.

believed by their subjects) that only their presence ensures a reliable rate of growth in the total quantity of goods to be distributed (and bads to be avoided). A similar rationale seems to be effective in justifying the role of technocrats and experts.

Recognition and Respect:³³ Politics unavoidably involves recognizing the existence of differences and assigning a status to them. The most salient one – at least since the nation-state has asserted its hegemony – has been (and still is) membership in the political unit itself, i.e. nationality. The privileges and obligations that accompany this status have varied a great deal over time and across regime types, but everywhere a distinction is made between those who are recognized as “inside” the polity and those who are “outside” it. Moreover, whether this involves citizenship or “subject-ship,” it is usually presumed that belonging to a given nation-state is primary – and that all other recognitions are secondary and dependent upon it.³⁴

Having made this distinction, politics goes on to recognize a large number and variety of other identities – and to assign to them distinctive statuses and treatments. Supporters and opponents is one of the most prominent and can be augmented to distinguish between loyalists and

³³ Again, to be more conceptually precise, the *rubrique* should say “Recognition and Ignorance” and “Respect and Disrespect,” but this would be awkward and excessively pedantic.

³⁴ In the contemporary context, an intermediate category has emerged between natives and foreigners, “denizens” or those who live legally within a given political unit but do not benefit from the rights and obligations attached to its normal members. Only recently, has this category been recognized and, in some cases, accorded some distinctive status.

subversives. Membership in political parties, interest associations and social movements contribute to the creation of ‘a wide variety of secondary’ identities – whether voluntarily in democratic civil societies or obligatorily in autocratic regimented categories. All regimes recognize the distinction between rulers and ruled, although how one acquires the more exalted status and what he or she can do with it varies a great deal from one type to another.

Just as politics inevitably involves the distribution of goods and bads, so it also involves struggles for the recognition of those who participate in it. The rules that assign memberships and identities are not fixed and are subject to contestation – just as are the rules for allocating costs and benefits. This corresponds to the earlier observation that order is only produced by indigenous change in response to exogenous challenges. Part of that adjustment process means recognizing not just the existence of diverse categories of agents but also modifying the rules that assign differences in status (rights and obligations) to them. To the extent that these assignments are regarded as fair to and respectful of those affected, they contribute positively to the overall objective of domesticating power.

Externalities: No political unit, least of all contemporary nation-states embedded in increasing networks of interdependence with units beyond their borders and beyond their control, can ensure order within its borders without dealing with the consequences of its impact upon these other polities. The fancy word for these effects is “externalities.” They can be

positive in the case of the unilateral exploitation of impotent outsiders;³⁵ they can be negative when the outsiders demand compensation – and are powerful enough to ensure that it will be forthcoming. Historically, in the study of politics, this was a subject that was assigned to specialists in international relations and, therefore, presumed to be condemned to Type Two politics. There could be no orderly solution to such conflicts since, by definition this was a realm of political activity that was “anarchic,” i.e. without orderly rules or practices and beyond the capability of creating them given the (presumed) sovereignty of the agents involved. Only something called a “balance of power” among such independent units could (temporarily) produce order.

One distinctive and original characteristic of contemporary politics has been the attempt to “domesticate” the impact of externalities by creating “international regimes”—usually dominated by technical experts – that register their effects and generate rules that allocate the costs involved among those affected, positively or negatively, on some pre-established, mutually acceptable (“fair”) basis. By far the most elaborate of these regimes has emerged at the regional level in Western (and subsequently Eastern) Europe. It is now called the European Union and, while it is presently in serious crisis, it has made and still is making an important contribution to the over-riding objective of order. Literally, hundreds of other regional organizations have emerged all over the globe, but only the

³⁵ Sometimes referred to as “imperialism.”

EU has managed to acquire a degree of “supra-national” authority that allows it to deal with externalities among its member states in an orderly and consensual fashion. There is also a myriad of so-called “functional” international organizations and agreements – many attached as specialized agencies to the United Nations – that are trying to extend Type One politics into arenas previously characterized by Type Two politics and, hence, regarded as intrinsically ungovernable. Needless to say, these efforts are unevenly distributed – geographically and functionally – but they have contributed to reducing the resort to violence or coercion to resolve cross-border conflicts.

Legitimacy: If the (implicit) theory underwriting this segment of the essay is correct, order occupies the top line among the consequences of politics and legitimacy forms its bottom line. In between, production/distribution, recognition/respect and externalities connect the two. There will only be legitimacy if there is order and how much of it and what kind of it will depend on the intervening consequences.

Power and legitimacy are among the most frequently used and essentially contested concepts in politology.³⁶ They are also very difficult to measure quantitatively or observe qualitatively because they share a peculiar characteristic: when they are most important, they are least

³⁶ Which may explain why they are so often invoked. The ambiguities in meaning coupled, as we shall see, with intrinsic difficulties in measurement can be very useful. The researcher can explain almost any outcome *ex post* by relying upon either of them since no one can be sure that this might not have been the case.

evident. An agent with absolute power does not have to act in order to produce compliant behaviour; an agent who is absolutely legitimate can invoke conformity without doing anything and without meeting resistance from others. How do you explain something that is not happening -- a dog that is not barking? The only available instrument that I can think of depends on the plausibility of exploring a counterfactual, namely, what would the compliant-conformist agent have done if the powerful-legitimate agent not been there? Even the most gifted of politologists will find it difficult to make such an assessment credible.

First, let me define this illusive concept: Legitimacy is a shared expectation among actors in a relation of power such that the actions of those who rule are accepted voluntarily by those who are ruled because the latter are convinced that the actions of the former conform to pre-established and acceptable norms. This implies:

1. That the basis upon which these norms are pre-established and become acceptable can vary from one arrangement, site or time to another – not only from one country or culture to another, but also within a single country/culture according to function or place.
2. That the units within which relations of sub- and super-ordination are being voluntarily practiced can also vary in both time and space. While there is a tendency in the politicological literature on legitimacy to accept passively the sovereign national state as the “natural” and “exclusive”

site, there is no reason why other (sub- or supra-national) “polities” cannot have their own normative basis of legitimate authority.

3. That the norms must be accepted and “shared” by the actors, both those who rule and those who are ruled. This implies, first of all, that they must know who they are and what their respective roles should be. It also implies that the exercise of authority is “systemic,” i.e. that it is embedded in a collectivity that is sufficiently interdependent and mutually trustful so that disputes over the validity of rules can be (and usually are) resolved by the intervention of third parties within them.
4. That the actors involved may be individuals or collectivities of various sorts. Most of the literature conveniently makes the liberal assumption that the unique judges of legitimacy are individual human beings. This allows it to rely heavily on notions of family socialization, “moral sentiment,” and a personal ethic of responsibility as the source of norms and the virtually unconscious mechanism for their enforcement. And this in turn tends to lead one to the conclusion that it is only in polities that have acquired a high degree of cultural homogeneity – e.g. nation-states – that legitimate political authority is possible. When one introduces (as I have done *infra*), the heterodoxical idea that most of the exchanges in modern politics are between organizations and that these organizations tend to rely upon and reproduce norms of prudence, legal propriety and “best practice” that transcend individual preferences and even national borders, it then becomes possible to speak of legitimacy

as “systemic” and not just “personal,” and as “strategic” and not just “instinctive.”

5. That the basis for voluntary conformity is presumably normative, not instrumental. In a legitimate polity, actors agree to obey decisions that they have not supported made by rulers whom they have not voted for. They also agree to do so even if it is not in their (self-assessed) interest to do so – and they should continue to do so even when the effectiveness of the polity is in manifest decline.

Having defined this ambiguous concept, let us now turn to the more difficult question of what produces it.³⁷ Above, I have argued that order, in the first place, and then, production/reproduction, recognition/respect and externalities all contribute something to its existence. The more acceptable a given unit, regime or person is to its population with reference to these consequences, the more legitimate it or they are likely to be. But these are correlations not causes. And legitimacy is the product of strategic choice, not of unconscious habit or inculcated obedience.³⁸

³⁷ A caveat, first. As observed some time ago by Max Weber, there are many potential normative grounds for deciding that a given person, organization, policy or unit is legitimate. Here, I am presuming that the relevant grounds are something analogous to what he called “legal-formal” – not traditional or charismatic. A political regime, therefore, would be legitimate if it obeyed prescribed rules that were regarded as legitimate. It would be democratically legitimate if these rules were previously drafted and approved after discussion by the general public or among elected representatives of it. Agreement on these rules would be more likely to be forthcoming and more likely to retain their legitimacy if the subsequent consequences produced by that regime were favorable. This combination has been baptized as “input legitimacy” and “output legitimacy” by Fritz Scharpf in the debate over the legitimacy of the European Union.

³⁸ Most of the existing literature on this topic would disagree with this assertion. It tends to treat legitimacy as the product of something called “political culture.” Presumably, this consists of a set of norms and expectations that individuals learn (“are socialized into”) at an early age and, therefore, are pre-disposed to rely upon instinctively and without calculation when they have to act politically.

Two generic mechanisms seem to be involved. First, the agents (or, more specifically the most powerful ones) have to have demonstrated their willingness to “underutilize” the resources at their disposal that could be used to simply coerce sub-ordinates to comply, which convinces the latter that the commitment of the powerful to obey the rules is not just opportunistic. Second, since the rules of politics are always ambiguous and prone to interpretation in self-serving ways, the legitimacy of any agent in an exchange involving unequal power resources depends on the extent to which he or she can call upon the support of third parties that are not directly involved in the exchange, but may be ultimately affected by the re-affirmed rules at stake.³⁹ Seen from this perspective, underutilization of power (when it is not necessary) and verification by external agents (some of whom may even be foreigners) clarify the internal workings of the process of legitimation, while the consequences discussed above influence the likelihood that they will be successful and continue to be so.

The Discipline

Given its ubiquity, it is hardly surprising that politics has been a constant subject of philosophical thought and empirical inquiry -- probably ever since human beings began to live in permanently settled

³⁹ Needless to say, these third parties may be specialized in this process of outside, presumably neutral, evaluation between contenders, i.e. it is often done by domestic (and very rarely international) juridical institutions – provided they are regarded as sufficiently independent of powerful rulers.

communities. The earliest efforts to understand its peculiarities have been lost to us – either because they were strictly oral or because the material they were written on has perished. Systematic thinking about politics usually is traced to the ancient Greeks who wrote down and conserved their thoughts and who, appropriately, often disagreed with each other.⁴⁰ They and their successors have continued this tradition of contention, but almost all of them agreed upon three things:

(1) Politics is an important component of collective human existence – because as Aristotle observed human beings are *Zoon politikon* (political animals). Therefore, he claimed, the study of politics was the “Master Science” since all other human endeavours depend on the order it produces or fails to produce;

(2) Politics is a relational, conflictual and uncertain phenomenon in that one’s action produces another’s reaction and the outcome of such an exchange is not often predictable because its main determinant, power, cannot be accurately assessed until it is applied;

(3) Politics, however unpredictable it may be in specific instances, does tend to settle into observable patterns of behavior (rules and practices) and

⁴⁰ The Greeks may not have been the first to engage in systemic thinking and observation of politics. In my office at the European University Institute, I have a postcard that I bought at an exhibition in Tokyo of recently discovered archaeological treasures from China, one of which was described as a statue which supposedly adorned the entrance to a school for the study of politics. This could have predated any Greek equivalent. Appropriately, the statue depicts a fearsome warrior stamping on the body of a naked and defenceless peasant!

it is by comparing these patterns across a number of units that a distinctive “science” of politics can be established.

The trajectory of Western thinking about politics has been relatively linear. It began among the Greeks with a strong emphasis on **passion** as the primary motivating (and threatening) force. The Romans continued along this line but began to add an element of **conviction** based on the values associated with Roman citizenship, laws and traditions. Medieval and early modern political theory was firmly and predominantly associated with the notion that **conviction** rooted in Christianity was (or, better, should be) the most important element determining political behavior and was uniquely capable of overriding the erratic and dangerous passions of individuals. Machiavelli represents the turning point when **interest** makes its appearance – admittedly along with heavy doses of a passion for power among leaders and a downgrading of the role of conviction in mass publics. Since then the calculated pursuit of self-regarding advantage without consideration for others has become the standard assumed motivation, although mass passionate convictions in the form of various nationalisms, Fascism, Nazism or Communism have periodically injected a stronger, more emotional and less calculated element into the political life of Western polities. As for conviction rooted in religious dogma, it may have declined in the West (except among Christian Fundamentalists in the United States), but it is still very much on display in the Muslim societies of the Middle East and North Africa. Habit or conformity seems to wax and

wane in accordance with the stakes attached to winning or losing in the political game. The previously indifferent can suddenly discover that they have a passion, an interest or a conviction that is at stake and enter the game with unpredictable results.

During the past century or so, the study of politics has become increasingly specialized and professionalized through the creation of an academic discipline usually called Political Science or, less commonly, Government.⁴¹ It emerged belatedly compared to the other social sciences of sociology, psychology, anthropology and economics and, when it did, it was frequently combined with related subjects such as law, philosophy or even rhetoric. While it first emerged in Western Europe and North America, today virtually every major university in the world has a department or faculty of political science or government.

While the exercise of power can be found in a great variety of sites, e.g. families, firms, churches, tribes *e così via*, politologists have focused almost exclusively on its exercise within and around the institutions of the **state**, i.e. the government and other public agencies that are assumed to be capable of making and implementing decisions binding on all persons within a given territory. Virtually by definition (as we have seen above in the discussion of units), it was further presumed that this political unit possessed **sovereignty**, i.e. that its decisions were not just binding within

⁴¹ As we have argued above, it should be called politology – but almost no one does so.

its borders, but also taken independently from the power of other political units. Even more controversial has been the assumption that these persons within the unit shared an over-riding common identity, i.e. they formed a **nation**. In the contemporary globalized world with its enormous variety of supra-national organizations and policy regimes, all of these assumptions have become questionable. All states, even the most powerful ones, find that their autonomous capacity to take decisions is not only limited by the actions of other states, but subject to review and modification by institutions exercising power (even legitimate authority) over and above them. And virtually all of them also have social groups within them who consider themselves members of a different nation. The academic discipline that calls itself political science has only begun to adapt to these sea-changes in the nature of its units.

From its Greek origins in philosophy, the study of politics has always been concerned with social norms and personal values. This can hardly be surprising since politics itself has always involved judging and acting according to one's assessment of what is good and what is bad, e.g. the famous 14th century facing frescos in the Palazzo Civico of Siena of *il buon e il mal governo*. Even when the choices are manifestly dominated by self-interest, it is at least prudent to justify them in terms of their favorable, other-regarding, implications. Of particular importance has been the role played by **ideals** and **ideal-types**. The former are the characteristics of what politics should strive to achieve: liberty, equality and fraternity (to use

a familiar trilogy from the French Revolution); the latter are configurations of institutions that best exemplify some over-riding norm: democracy, federalism and limited government (to use an American trilogy), but also to indicate their institutionalized inverse: autocracy, centralization and statist intervention. The point of such speculative exercises is not descriptive, but evocative. By definition such concepts cannot be perfectly realized in a political world that involves compromises and constraints, but they can provide an incentive for action that would approximate reaching them or avoiding them.

The modern discipline of politology has prided itself on its **realism** and even gone so far as to claim that its practitioners should only deal with observable facts and are, therefore, free from the potentially distorting influence of their own norms. The discipline observes agents and their effects in the populations it studies, but is presumably unaffected by them. The analyst is not supposed to care about the welfare of their subjects. Most of its many faculties and departments do tolerate the presence of a small group of scholars called “normative political theorists” or “historians of political thought” who do care about the fate of political actors and the good or bad outcome of political choices as a sort of artefact inherited from the past, but their contribution rarely influences the teaching and research of the dominant group of empirically-minded political scientists. In my view, their claim to practicing a value-free science is not only specious, but

also deprives them of access to enormously rich sources of concepts and assumptions.

The Liberal Bias

The study of politics did not begin in the Anglo-American world, but its subsequent development was strongly influenced by scholars coming from the United States of America, Great Britain, Ireland and the countries of the so-called White Commonwealth: Canada, Australia and New Zealand. They brought with themselves a number of normative and empirical assumptions that are rooted in their respective political experiences. The most salient of these are related to **liberalism**. Contrary to the opinion of many, liberalism is not the same thing as democracy. Not only did it precede democracy historically, but several of its basic assumptions (and practices) have been antithetic to democracy – at least in its original unrevised form. “Liberals” (and the nomenclature is itself ambiguous) preferred to confine the practice of citizenship to those with “a stake in the game,” i.e. educated, wealthy males paying sufficient taxes and usually of the dominant religion and race. By the end of the 19th Century, however, most of them had come to terms with “mass democracy” in which these restrictions on citizenship had been lifted and the role of the state expanded.

The influence of liberal ideology, however, continues to affect core assumptions of much of contemporary politology. I consider them to be the following:

1. Liberalism's exclusive emphasis on the individual citizen and on individualism -- substantive and procedural as well as methodological – in its analysis and evaluation of existing political practices;
2. Liberalism's commitment to voluntarism in the form and content of political participation, as well as in the recruitment of politicians who are presumed to be temporarily as well as voluntarily active in politics;⁴²
3. Liberalism's fixation with territorial representation for providing the basic constituencies into which citizens can be meaningfully grouped, and with partisan competition in these constituencies for providing the most legitimate link between citizen and state;
4. Liberalism's confinement to the bounds of the nation- state and its institutions when applying its precepts, as well as its long-standing (if tacit) complicity with nationalism;

⁴² "Freedom" is a concept endemic to the vocabulary of Liberalism and is closely related to the emphasis on voluntarism as the basis for actions by individual agents. The normative claim is that only when they are liberal will democracies produce and protect the "freedom" of its citizens. What is not acknowledged is that freedom in politics can only be realized in the context of the domestication of violence and that this is possible only when it is collectively regulated. Otherwise, it is only available to those individuals who have sufficient power – usually based on property or inherited status – to impose their freedom on others.

5. Liberalism's indifference to persistent and systemic inequalities in both the distribution of material benefits and the representation of citizen interests.
6. Liberalism's preoccupation with the stability of its institutions (despite the inherent dynamism of the party competition it celebrates) and its efforts to reduce all change to incremental and marginal improvements in the *status quo*.
7. Liberalism concentrates its normative attention on protecting the citizen from eventual sources of illegitimate authority (tyranny) and, therefore, advocates limiting political authority to a minimum, i.e. especially to the policing of contracts and protection of property.⁴³

Most practicing political scientists, especially those from Anglo-America, would probably agree with these postulates. They have become so pervasive that they are regarded as commonsensical and rarely contested (or, for that matter, explicitly defended). The problem, however, is empirical. In the contemporary world, virtually every one of these characteristics is threatened by one or another of its major trends: globalization of trade, finance and production systems; change in the role and sources of technological innovation; concentration of ownership of the means of production and distribution and the wealth they generate;

⁴³ Hardcore liberals also harbour ambivalent feelings about one of the core principles of democracy, namely, majority rule. They frequently assume that majorities composed by 'ordinary' citizens, i.e. those who do not owe productive property and who are less well-educated, are disposed to be "tyrannical," when they win elections or mobilize to influence authorities. Presumably, they believe that minorities composed by more affluent and better educated elites are not threatening to the persistence of RED when they come to power. As a student of comparative politics, especially one who used to specialize in the politics of Latin America, I find little or no empirical basis for such a general assumption.

formation of supra-national trading blocs and regional organizations; expansion and inter-penetration of communications systems; increased vulnerability to business cycles; necessity for industrial restructuring; liberalization of financial institutions; individuation of life-situations; and -- last-but-not-least -- growing insecurity due to dramatic changes in the role of Great Powers and declining capacity for government by national institutions alone. Granted that some of these trends are not new and that liberalism and its particular form of democracy have managed to survive analogous challenges in the past; nevertheless, the magnitude and multiplicity of these trends are unprecedented -- as is the absence of any "systemically plausible" alternative regime for coping with them. The discipline of politology is slowly (and, in many cases, reluctantly) adjusting to these changes in the environment in which politics is embedded.

The Methods⁴⁴

Politology uses many methods and politologists argue incessantly about which is generically the best -- "the most scientific" -- and even about which is the better for studying a particular topic. Few of their methods are indigenous to the discipline; most have been adopted from one of the other social sciences.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Most courses on methodology in the discipline are essentially exercises in applied statistics. In this essay, "methods" refers to the choices a researcher must make prior to actually gathering the data that is presumed to be relevant to his or her concepts -- whether or not they are eventually to be manipulated statistically or compiled into a narrative. It focuses on how do you find out if something exists, rather than what do you do with the data once you have them.

Gross modo, politologists can be grouped into three “schools” and, needless to say, each of them has its distinctive set of methods.⁴⁶ Most of them are “realists.” They study what is (or has been) and their methods involve various forms of empirical observation and pattern recognition. Some of them count and others describe, but both are only interested in what actually has happened or is happening. Others could be called “idealists” who study what should be happening, and apply normative standards to evaluate what it is (or has been). Finally, there is a very small group of “surrealists” who are interested in what might have been in the past and what might exist in the future.⁴⁷

Since realists dominate the discipline, I will focus on their choice of methods. As I have pointed out *supra*, idealistically minded politologists are usually segregated into a compartment called the “history of political thought” or “normative political theory.” They are tolerated by the former as a sort of residue from the pre-scientific origins of the discipline, but largely ignored. The surrealists are not even recognized by the other two schools and, if they are working in departments or faculties of political

⁴⁵ By far the most distinctive and visible method in politology has been the measurement of public opinion by means of questions posed to a random sample of the population. Almost no election would be complete these days without the application of such a method and without pundits appearing in the mass media to interpret its results. This has become more and more embarrassing for the status of the discipline since this method of research has markedly declined in its capacity to predict election results correctly.

⁴⁶ The fancy way of expressing this choice is “epistemological”

⁴⁷ I have never met one or even heard of one, but there may be some politologists out there who are “sur-idealists.” Presumably, they would be trying to answer such questions as “why did agents not demonstrate more vigorously when this would have resulted in greater social equality?” or “Under what conditions will they demonstrate in the future in order to improve social justice?”

science, they do so clandestinely either by exploring counter-factuals from the past or inventing projections about the future.⁴⁸

Realists have a rich tool kit at their disposition – usually arrayed along a continuum running from the qualitative to the quantitative, i. e. from telling a convincing story to discovering a significant correlation.⁴⁹ The former are proud of their capacity for including many variables in their “rich descriptions;” the latter have a preference for parsimony in their choice of variables and for statistical proofs as the basis for their conclusions.⁵⁰ Both open their respective tool boxes by defining an *explicandum* – that which they propose to explain – followed by an *explicans* – that which is supposed to do the explaining. In the professional jargon, this is referred to as the “**dependent variable**” (“Y”) and the “**independent variable or variables**” (“X or Xs”).” They are supposed to be distinct from each other

⁴⁸ They have created a label for themselves: “futurologists” and are usually to be found in non-academic sites such as think-tanks or firms engaging in risk-analysis. Not infrequently, they produce best-selling books for the general public proclaiming the advent of some disastrous, “shocking,” future. They also specialize in appearing as pundits on television programs. Unfortunately for them, politology is much better at retrodiction than prediction. For example, those specialists who were researching the units involved failed to anticipate the most significant developments of recent decades: the collapse of the Soviet Union, the reunification of Germany, the Arab Spring and, most recently, the crisis of ‘real-existing’ democracies and the emergence of populist candidates and parties in Western Europe and the United States. Once these seismic shifts had occurred, of course, they were posthumously capable of explaining why they had to have occurred.

⁴⁹ “You can put a number on anything; you can describe (almost) everything” -- but which is better for analysing a specific topic?

⁵⁰ A growing number of politologists can be found somewhere in the middle of this methodological continuum. For example, it has become very fashionable to collapse some combination of quantitative and/or qualitative data into something called an index and then using it to rank the units involved. This method has proven especially appealing to think-tankers and policy advocates who use it to “shame and blame” countries, parties or persons when they are at the bottom of the ranking or when they descend it in relation to their peers. Another intermediate method involves scoring a set of variables by their existence or non-existence (1-0) over time and tracing their respective trajectories toward some eventual cluster of outcomes. This has been called Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) in the jargon of the discipline

in both their origins and presence,⁵¹ but related to each other in some significant manner.⁵² It may be that the latter is necessary for the former to exist and, in extreme cases, both necessary and sufficient for it to exist. In most cases involving politics, it is enough that X is capable of producing some change (positive or negative) in Y and in doing so sufficiently frequently and significantly such that it could not be just due to pure chance. Their relation may be expressed as an explicit and potentially falsifiable hypothesis that specifies why and sometimes even how they are connected⁵³, but often it is enough just to begin with a hunch that they may be related in some fashion or for some reason.⁵⁴ Needless to say, both *explicandum* and *explicans* have been conceptualized in lower case terms, i.e. identified as instances of some class of events or processes. The upper case work on explaining singular happenings is usually left to historians.

⁵¹ If they are not separable, this is called the **endogeneity problem** in the jargon of the discipline and it negates the potential value of testing any hypothesis about how or why that they are related since X and Y are the same thing – just labelled differently. “Demonstrating” that countries with greater freedom of association are more likely to be democratic does not make a significant contribution to knowledge. Nor does “proving” that those democracies in which the media are owned and operated by private firms or persons are more likely to be “liberal.”

⁵² The typical assumption is that this relation is temporal: the independent X or Xs are supposed to come before the dependent Y which means that chronology is an important component of story-telling and lagged variables are often used in the process of calculating statistical correlations. Both of these have a problem in dealing with the occasionally perverse political phenomenon in which agents anticipate behaviour based on foreign precedents or prescient theories and act on the *explicandum* before the *explicans* has occurred. As a rule, political theories are not very good at specifying exactly how long the relationship of X to Y has to exist in order for it to produce its hypothesized effect.

⁵³ Whether or not it is explicitly recognized (and it usually is not), all political research operates in the shadow of the **null hypothesis**, namely, that the relation between X and Y does not exist. It is only by disproving this that the political scientist can go on to prove whether the relation is necessary, sufficient, significant, prudent, desirable, convenient or just plain helpful.

⁵⁴ This situation is often deprecated as “barefoot empiricism,” but it can be indispensable when studying political phenomena that are either rare or unprecedented. Moreover, the very act of separating the variables into two categories may be distortive in contexts where such a high degree of interdependence prevails that there is no distinct “cause and effect” – just a lot of mutual effects (and, not infrequently, confusion and chaos).

Cutting across the classical, intra-disciplinary dispute between quantifiers and qualifiers is another continuum of choice: should the researcher use obtrusive or unobtrusive methods? In the former case, the data gathered involve active intervention, for example, by asking questions to a random sample of citizens or to a select set of informants. In the latter case, the politologist passively collects data that have been made publically available or can be ‘scored’ without the knowledge of the agents involved. Whether the data collected come in the form of numbers or of descriptions depends on the topic (and on the researcher’s training, not to mention the fashion of the discipline at the time) or on the ease of access to the information needed. Both can contribute to the systematic accumulation of knowledge; both can also produce data that are irrelevant with regard to a given concept⁵⁵ or inaccurate due to collection errors. The former method is especially vulnerable to the possibility that the researcher’s intrusion will distort the behavior being observed or counted; the latter depends crucially on the accuracy of those who gathered the data or the intention of those who designed the indicator in the first place

Most politologists conceive of the X-Y relationship in linear terms: changes in the former are expected to produces changes in the latter by direct interaction of some predictable magnitude or reason. For example, so-called “development theory” was rooted in the observable empirical

⁵⁵ In the jargon of politology, this is known as the problem of **validity**. Do the data gathered accurately reflect the meaning of the concept that they are supposed to be measuring quantitatively or observing qualitatively? Needless to say, if they are not valid, the entire research effort is worthless – however elaborate the statistics or rich the narrative.

relation between the per capita wealth of a given unit and its type of regime. The richer a country was, the more likely its regime was to be democratic. If strictly linear, this implied that each increment in USD per capita would “buy” some more democracy. When this did not always happen, analysts began transforming the nature of its linearity – by inserting thresholds or by postulating various curvilinear effects. A more promising variant of this has been to pay much greater attention to the potential role of “contextual variables.” This involves different forms of “lateral thinking” in which the usual linear approach is supplemented with one or both of two considerations: (1) specifying the variables that were previously necessary in order that X and Y could become related to each other; and (2) identifying the conditions that emerge – usually unexpectedly – from the interaction of X and Y and may modify its outcome. The former suggests that X and Y may be related to each other to different degrees and even in opposite ways during different historical periods, in different cultures or according to different sequences of occurrence. The latter is even more subversive for “realistic” analysts since innovation and unpredictability are intrinsic features of their subject matter – and they can intervene *ex post* to change the preferences and behaviors of the agents involved. In other words, politics is a “contingent business,” and the study of it should recognize it methodologically.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ It is possible to test for such mistaken inferences. This tends to take two forms: either some ignored condition is necessary beforehand for the relation between X and Y to exist or the relation between X and Y is an illusion since both are caused by some

As we have seen above, most academic students of politics begin (usually implicitly) by presuming that the politics they propose to study are of Type One, i.e., already embedded in institutions and practices that are capable of channelling the efforts of agents when they exercise power in predictable and rule-regarding ways. Students of international relations used to think of themselves as condemned to studying Type Two politics, but have more recently begun to recognize the orderliness and rule-abidingness that prevails between nation-states in some regions of the world.⁵⁷ It is much easier to gather data and to produce your own data in the former context – although access and availability do vary considerably from one type of regime to another and from one degree of stateness to another.

But politologists are usually not content just to display the data; they want to analyse them (and maybe even to make inferences and generalize on the basis of what they find out). One of the longest lasting disputes in the social sciences has been about the purpose of this exercise.⁵⁸ Is it enough just to demonstrate and correlate the mechanism(s) whereby X and Y are related to each other? Or should one go beyond this in order to capture what the agents thought about the relationship and what they

un-specified third variable (Z). Tests for errors due to **contingency** or **spuriousness** are easier to perform when the method is quantitative – it merely involves gathering additional data and introducing them as control variables into the equation. In the case of qualitative analysis, these two possible errors tend to get surreptitiously submerged in the ‘richness’ of the narrative.

⁵⁷ Today, it is more likely to be students of regime change, civil war and failed states who start with the explicit assumption that they have to deal with Type Two, “unruly and undomesticated,” political situations.

⁵⁸ This was known as the *Methodenstreit* between *Erklären* and *Verstehen* among German social scientists at the end of the 19th Century and it has not been resolved..

intended to do about it? The first presumes that political power is basically “structural or functional” in nature. It is built into entrenched institutions or independent operations and, therefore, produces its effects without the agents considering the possibility of alternative responses or even being capable of fully understanding what they are doing. The second is “voluntaristic” in that the outcome depends critically on the attitudes and objectives of the agents involved – and they are likely to be aware of other potential courses of action. Needless to say, most situations in the real world of politics have elements of both, but the choice to emphasize one or the other at the stage of conceptualization will have a major impact on the methods applied (and, of course, on the eventual data that have to be gathered).

The Purpose

Why bother with politology (or, if you insist, political science)? It has not always improved the practice of politics. It has repeatedly failed to keep up with changes in its subject matter. And, it is probably the most difficult of the social sciences to do well.

Part of the answer lies in that original description of human agency. We study it simply out of curiosity and restlessness because it is a salient component of our environment. For a few, it may help them to adjust to that environment and – eventually – to improve it. For others, it is a fascinating activity in its own right. But from a strictly rational perspective,

the effort is not worth it. Even if you make it your profession, you could become much richer if you spent the equivalent amount of time and effort studying something else.⁵⁹

Historically, the purpose of studying politics comparatively was to explain differences. Why did such diverse institutions and practices exist? And what was their concomitant impact upon different social groups and persons? The units involved – city-states, principalities, bishoprics, monarchies, confederations and, eventually, nation states – had manifestly diverse origins and resources and this was presumed to be related to their capacity to govern, to protect and reward their subjects/citizens and even to survive. While there still are plenty of differences between nominally sovereign units to explain, the focus of politology in the future may be (at least, partially) inverted. It will increasingly be called upon to explain similarities. Why is it that, having such different origins and institutions, so many of today's polities are becoming more and more alike? Admittedly, they are doing so at a different pace (and there are more than a few polities that remain divergent, even increasingly so). This trend toward similarity seems to lie in massive increases in functional interdependence and ideational diffusion – not to mention, in some parts of the world, the emergence of supra-national regional organizations and, almost everywhere, the intervention of global inter-governmental organizations

⁵⁹ Political science is often one of the most popular “majors” for undergraduates in American universities. However, the reason for this is quite often because it provides the gateway to a career that promises much greater rewards, namely, law.

and multi-national enterprises. But whatever the causes, explaining and understanding **convergence** will become a more salient objective than in the past.⁶⁰

From its origins, the study of politics has claimed to improve the practice of politics. When it initially became a recognized specialization within the organizational structure of a few European universities – apparently, first in Sweden and Northern Europe – its purpose was to improve the quality of administration and the legitimacy of monarchs. In the United States where it flourished in the early 20th Century, it was firmly linked to liberal democracy *via* the so-called “Progressive Movement” which opposed the corruption of machine politics and the rapaciousness of unregulated capitalism. This positive orientation toward promoting change did not last long. After World War One – in the 1920s and 30s – its practitioners became preoccupied with preventing Fascism and Communism from destroying ‘real-existing’ liberal democracy, not improving it. After World War Two, when faced with the expansion of communism in the East and the uncertainties generated by the liberalization of so many countries from imperialism in the South, politology became literally obsessed with stability, based both in the hegemony of liberal democracy and the survival of capitalist economy. It was not enough just to promote the generically human objective of “domesticating”

⁶⁰ In the jargon, this is known as the problem of **equifinality** and it was flagged long ago by John Stuart Mill as one of the most serious obstacles to accumulating knowledge in the social sciences. That different causes could produce the same result is not a problem in the physical sciences.

the use of violence. The discipline became committed to protecting the status of particular persons, parties and governments – all incumbents in one sense or the other. Much of its success (and its funding) during the 40 years or so after World War Two was dependent on this effort – and this was reflected in its dominant theories, assumptions and concepts.

Today, politology is changing – in large part by coming to terms with changes in the very nature of its subject matter.⁶¹ It is highly likely that the practice of politics has changed during the time it took for me to write this essay (and, maybe, for you to read it). The threat of communism has evaporated; the prospect of an anti-capitalist revolution as well. More and more polities are attempting to democratize themselves. New units with limited sovereignty (but still significant competences) are emerging beyond and beneath the traditional nation-states; at the same time that so-called “failed states” have been threatening to disrupt radically the *status quo*.

Meanwhile, those paragons of previous virtue, the “well-established, real-existing” democracies upon which so much of the discipline has based its theories, assumptions and concepts have been entering into levels of crisis not experienced since the 1930s. The paradox of these times is that, precisely, when so many aspiring **neo-democracies** have emerged to the

⁶¹ Meanwhile, the discipline has also been fighting off a challenge within its ranks to convert the entire enterprise into a sub-field of economics. These advocates of “rational choice” would have stripped politics of its components of collective passion and conviction, reduced its motivational structure to the marginal pursuit of interests exclusively by individuals, converted politics into a form of routinized consumption between competing “brands” of politicians or policies, and treated its institutions as if they embodied voluntarily established, stable equilibria (rather than the outcome of differences in social power, the capacity for public sanction or the manipulation of information). In my view this struggle is over – helped, I admit, by the concomitant collapse of the plausibility of many of these assumptions within the ‘mother’ discipline of economics.

South and East, the **archeo-democracies** of the West have become less stable. Their citizens started questioning the very same “normal” institutions and practices that new democratizers were trying so hard to imitate. And they tended to find them deficient, not to say, outright defective. The list of morbidity symptoms is well-known (if not always well-understood): Citizens in REDs have become more likely to abstain from voting, less likely to join or even identify with political parties, trade unions or professional associations, much more likely to distrust their elected officials or politicians in general and much less likely to be satisfied with the way in which they are being governed and the benefits they receive from public agencies. One clear response has already emerged: Voters in national elections have demonstrated an unprecedented propensity for volatility in their behaviour and, hence, for throwing incumbents out of office. Historically, REDs were built upon hegemonic parties that ruled for long and consistent periods of time. Now, there are no more ruling parties, only temporarily governing ones. Moreover, citizens have shifted an increasing proportion of their votes to fringe, so-called “populist,” parties of either the Right or Left. They are the side product of systems of sclerotic and oligarchic political parties that have become incapable of representing existing citizen preferences or of articulating alternative and credible future projects for the polity as a whole.⁶² Most populists are not so much anti-democratic, as they are usually less politically liberal, sometimes “supra”-

⁶² The Italians (who have suffered most from it among REDs) have come up with a word for this: *partiocrazia*.

constitutional and very often economically imprudent. Even when they do not succeed in occupying governing positions, they can push more established, centrist parties into adopting items from their platforms, thereby, making it increasingly difficult the formation of coalition governments. The formal procedural attributes of REDs: regular, fair elections; party competition; parliamentary autonomy; freedom of association and petition; freedom of the press with alternative sources of information; public justification and transparency of rulers; independence of the judiciary seem to be assured in most cases, but it can less and less be taken for granted that these institutions will be capable of holding elected rulers and their appointed officials accountable for their actions. Increasingly, elections have become dominated by centrist parties that agree with each other on most issues; parliaments have lost authority with regard to executive and so-called “guardian” institutions; the press is more and more owned by large corporations, even multi-national ones; transparency with regard to policies and their consequences may have increased, but public justification has often given way to “spin-doctoring.” As a result of this menacing (but nonetheless non-lethal) combination of factors, more and more citizens do not believe that their rulers are listening to them, but are acting in response to forces, especially trans-national financial ones, they cannot understand or control. ‘Real-existing’ democracy will probably survive this combination of challenges. It has done this several times in the past, but it will have to change in order to do

so. And, in response to these changes, so will politology have to change if it is to remain (more or less) the same.⁶³

In somma, politology seems headed for an uncertain and exciting future when it will have to devote more effort to dealing with change rather than explaining (and extolling) stability. Fortunately, It will be ably assisted in this effort as more and more of its practitioners will be coming from the East and South where such conditions and expectations are hardly novel.

The Promise⁶⁴

Reflecting in a concerted and cumulative way on the nature of politics, as distinct from merely recording the content of its laws or relating the feats of its leaders, started under very peculiar circumstances in a very specific setting – and we are still indebted to this effort by our Greek predecessors. From its heartlands in Western Europe and North America, it has subsequently spread to virtually all corners of the Earth. New ideas, concepts, methods and even basic assumptions are now coming from a much wider range of sources and sites. Political scientists are also being employed in a much greater variety of places outside of academe.

⁶³ I am, of course, paraphrasing here the famous maxim of Tomaso de Lampedusa in his novel, il Gattopardo (The Leopard).

⁶⁴ Essays such as this one cannot have a conclusion. As the etymology of the term connotes, they are tentative attempts to understand something, not efforts to prove something conclusively. Their intent is to provoke thought not to pre-empt it. Moreover, writing about politics is like politics itself; it never ends and changes frequently. I look forward to your endless disagreements with what I have argued in this essay.

Assessing the contribution of the discipline to the practice of politics is a more difficult task. It certainly is not the case that it has been uniformly successful in improving the quality of politics, but it has made some observable improvement in some cases – although it would be an exaggeration to claim that politicians who have been trained as political scientists have done a better job at practicing politics. The best one can expect is that politologists will be able to describe accurately and explain convincingly what has happened in the past, estimate the probable occurrences and outcomes that are happening in the present, and, maybe, imagine what could happen in the future.

It has been a privilege to have played a modest role in this reflexive process. And, occasionally, it has even been fun and exciting. I must confess that I have never considered myself a scientist. My experience has been closer to that of an artist. A scientist is confident that his or her observations are accurate, valid and definitive, that they conform to reality and that his or her findings are conclusive in the sense that other scientists gathering and manipulating data on the same subject would always arrive at similar (if not identical) conclusions. I have never had that sort of confidence in what I have contributed. An artist is always aware that he or she can never completely grasp and represent reality – least of all, condense it into a parsimonious formula, measure it numerically and calculate the significance of its relationships.⁶⁵ The best one can do is to

produce an approximation or impression of what is an inevitably complex and contingent process of action and reaction whose results are always ephemeral and, then, to attempt to communicate this to others in the form of words which are also only imperfect approximations of reality. An artist also tends to produce “*pentimenti*” – corrections to what he or she has written (or painted or said) and that I have been frequently compelled to do.⁶⁶

From my perspective (paraphrasing Aristotle’s), this “(unfortunate but fascinating) imprecision in the (political) class of things” should make the student of politics wary of applying the exacting standards of the natural sciences to his or her research. Bismarck famously described politics as “the art of the possible” – *ergo* not “the science of the probable or of the inevitable.”⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Although I must confess to having gathered quantitative data, crunched numbers and estimated the magnitude and significance of correlations from time-to-time. I have even done this recently: Carsten Schneider & Philippe C. Schmitter, “Liberalization, Transition and Consolidation: Measuring the Components of Democratization,” *Democratization* Vol. 11, No. 5 (2004), pp. 59-90 and Philippe C. Schmitter (with Arpad Todor), “Varieties of Capitalism and Types of Democracy,” unpublished essay, (forthcoming). This is (unfortunately) still a professional imperative in order to be taken seriously as a “card-carrying” political scientist.

⁶⁶ Looking back at what I have written, I discovered my frequent (some will say, excessive) use of dialectics as a rhetorical device. I have repeatedly placed two (or more) concepts in juxtaposition to each other with the implication that they constitute a dilemma, i.e. that they are in conflict and that political agents will have to choose between them or come up with solution that includes some of both. I also discovered that I am addicted to the use of parentheses (*patenthicits?*) to supplement or qualify my arguments. I leave it to the the reader to decide whether these are accurate reflections of the nature of the subject matter or just stylistic quirks on my part.

⁶⁷ Every department, institute or faculty specializing in the study of politics should have (symbolically) chiselled above its entry the Latin phrase: *Quis custodiet ipsos custodiet: Dependet* (“Who Guards the Guardians: It depends”) to remind those who enter the discipline that whatever they find out about the exercise of power, it will be contingent, spatially and temporally, on factors that they may or may not have considered. Nothing is likely to be true always and everywhere and it is one of the researcher’s tasks to extend his or her purview laterally to take these contextual limitations into consideration.

This may explain my predilection for the use of “ideal” types in this essay. It constitutes my recognition (however imperfect) that political reality is composed of complex relationships and institutions that can only be captured with concepts composed of a multitude of (presumably) co-variant conditions. A student once complained to me that my definition of corporatism contained no less than 14 variables! I was a bit embarrassed by this revelation – until I discovered Austria which almost perfectly fit my ideal-type. All of the other so-called “neo-corporatist” systems of interest intermediation in Western Europe lacked one or more of its conditions. The definitions of other key concepts in this essay may be somewhat less prolix, but they do represent my effort at trying to seize the complexity of contemporary politics – with all of the attendant problems of comprehension and measurement.

As self-serving as it may sound, I believe that the study of contemporary politics has too many aspiring scientists and not enough aspiring artists. As an academic profession, it is unfortunately rigged to reward the former and to discredit the latter. It needs both.⁶⁸

My hunch is that, unless the practice of politics becomes dramatically simpler, the time-tested scientific formula of disaggregating complex phenomena, measuring precisely and analyzing separately their

⁶⁸ Another distinction used to describe different practitioners of the social sciences (invented by Isaiah Berlin) is between “foxes” and “hedgehogs.” The former know a little bit about many things; the latter know a lot about one big thing. The author of this essay is an archetypical (and unrepentant) fox. Again, politology needs both types.

components and then re-combining them synthetically in order to arrive at convincing findings about the behavior of the whole will become less-and-less productive. As mentioned above, many of phenomena that political scientists are most anxious to explain have become “multi-layered, poly-centric and externally penetrated” and, hence, their behaviour is increasingly subject to the effects of interaction between components and contingent relations with their external environment. The result has (not yet) become chaotic, but the practice of politics has certainly become less orderly and predictable.

Also dubious are growing efforts by political scientists to replicate the second time-tested formula of the physical sciences, namely, experimentation. This can lead to findings that are “internally valid” in the sense that replications are likely to produce the same empirical results – but only provided that the subjects of the research have been randomly selected from the same population, exposed to the same “treatment” and then compared to some control group that has not been treated similarly or given some other treatment. If one does not randomize, the subjects of the experiment are likely to have some (or several) characteristics in common, other than the one specific source of variation that is being introduced. However, what is even more questionable is the “external validity” of such experiments in two senses: (1) Would the findings also be valid for a random sample from a culturally, economically or socially different population in a different political unit?; and (2) Would they remain

valid if the individuals involved were gathered into political groups of a larger and larger scale? The first is known in the jargon of the social sciences as the “problem of generalizability;” the second as the “fallacy of aggregation.” In other words, transferring the laboratory to another country is very likely to result in different (but equally scientific) results, or leaving the lab for the real world of politics with all of its layers and angles is even more likely to produce different (but more politically significant) behaviours and results. The world of politics is becoming more and more complex and less and less explicable in terms of either the mechanical combination of its discrete components or the arithmetic sum of individual responses to experimental treatments.

* * *

The practice of politology does follow (and should incorporate) changes in “real-existing politics,” but it has always done so with a considerable delay and often against entrenched professional interests. I have argued above that the most important generic changes that have occurred in recent decades involve the spread of “**complex interdependence.**” Many anomalies and unexpected political outcomes can be traced to its influence. There is absolutely nothing new about the fact that formally independent polities have extensive relations with each other. What is novel is not only the sheer magnitude and diversity of these exchanges, but also the extent to which they penetrate into virtually all social, economic and cultural groups and into almost all geographic areas

within these polities. Previously, they were mainly concentrated among restricted elites living in a few favored cities or regions. Now, it takes an extraordinary political effort to prevent the population anywhere within national borders from becoming “contaminated” by the flow of foreign ideas and enticements. **Globalization** has become the catch-all term for these developments, even if it tends to exaggerate the evenness of their spread and scope across the planet. Politology (usually called political science) has become a globalized discipline, but most of its practitioners have remained national, if not provincial, in their approach to it.

Post-Scriptum

I have exhausted my energy and imagination, and reached the point of diminishing marginal returns. And I do not know what to do with this essay. It is too long for an article and too short for a book. Moreover, my decision to put it on the web and in the public domain (and to encourage my readers to circulate it to others) probably means that no one would be interested in publishing it -- whatever the format. If you must cite it, here is the proper formula: Philippe C. Schmitter, "Politics as a Science aka Politology,"

<http://www.eui.eu/DepartmentsandCentres/PoliticalandSocialSciences/People/Professors/Schmitter.aspx>, (date consulted).

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and

Sheldon S. Wolin, Politics and Vision (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), re-published in a revised and expanded edition in 2004, where I first learned how to think generically and historically about politics.

Most of the rest of politology is derivative, including this essay.