

# A Plea for Academic Pluralism (and a Little More Intellectual Humility)

## Changing the Subject (Ever So Slightly)

Let me begin with five basic points about scientific inquiry and methodological rigor that ground my own sense of what is to be done in the wake of current methodological battles in the fields of political science and political theory.

First of all, there are many different kinds of political *science*, ranging from traditional positivism to hermeneutics to mathematical modeling to the self-reflexive modes of analysis associated with postmodernism. Hence, we cannot pose the question, “How scientific should the study of politics be?” in general. Instead, we must pose it with particular kinds of science in mind. Likewise, we must expect different answers to the question as so posed rather than an over-arching assessment of political science *per se*.

Second, even though the terms “scientific” and “methodologically rigorous” are now used interchangeably in some political science departments, they are not synonymous. Nor

should they be treated as such. For, as the above references suggest, not all kinds of science meet prevailing standards of methodological rigor. Moreover, there are many perfectly valid

methodologies with

their own standards of rigor that are not scientific.

Third, the question, “How scientific should the study of politics be?” does not strike me as the one now tearing (some) political science departments apart. Instead, a set of related questions come to mind, namely, “How methodologically rigorous should the study of politics be?” “What is methodological rigor anyway?” and, “How should we balance methodological rigor with both the value of political knowledge and the need to create conditions under which different groups of scholars can be productive?”

Fourth, to say that we as individual scholars find it necessary to begin with the value of either methodological rigor or political knowledge is not to say that we have to give priority to one over the other in general. For, we can at least try to hone our methodological standards with the nature of our particular subject matter in mind, i.e., develop standards of rigor that require us to think about knowledge of subject matter and methodology together. Moreover,

there is no reason why we cannot distribute tasks among ourselves pertaining to the honing of methodologies and the development of knowledge and at least try to do so with the production of knowledge in mind.

Fifth, we need to be careful not to confuse questions about the value of particular methodologies with the place that they should be given in any one political science department. For, while the value of a particular methodology is a largely intellectual matter, the proper distribution of methodologies in a particular political science department is an organizational matter to the extent that it requires us to think about what kind of community of inquirers we should try to sustain among scholars from different methodological backgrounds.

## The Value of Self-Consciousness; the Necessity of Pluralism

How might political science departments proceed with regard to these and other questions? Below, I turn briefly both to the place of methodological rigor in studying politics and to the relationship between methodological rigor and political knowledge more generally.

Methodological rigor is of course important. But even if we place standards of methodological rigor above all else, we cannot begin with a sense that scientific standards of rigor or particular kinds of science should prevail. Nor, as long as methodologies are not in general appropriate on an *a priori* basis, can we proceed without justification. Instead, we must justify whichever particular methodology we choose to pursue. How—with respect to what criteria—can we do so? While we might want to claim that a particular methodology is mathematically beautiful, logically high powered, culturally sensitive or historically detailed, we cannot invoke these criteria on their own in this context. Instead, we must show what particular things these intellectual virtues can do for us with respect to the subject matter at hand. For, methodology is by definition a means to knowledge (or creation) rather than either an end in itself or an intellectual virtue.

What, though, if one’s intent is to create a mathematically lovely model of a particular political movement or a logically precise analysis of a particular political concept? (I ask this question as one who is unapologetically trained in analytic philosophy.) I see nothing wrong in justifying one’s methodology in this context with reference to the creation of a lovely mathematical model or a logically

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precise analytic argument. But one cannot, unless one connects one's methodology to the nature of (in this case) a political movement or a political concept, argue that one's methodology is appropriate as a means of studying politics (as distinct from creating a lovely mathematical model or a logically precise argument). Instead, one has to acknowledge that one's methodology is appropriate to the building of a model that is mathematically beautiful or an argument that is logically precise.

All of this sounds like putting knowledge about politics before, rather than together or alongside, methodology. And it is in several respects. But, contrary to Dewey and others who argue for the need to justify methodologies with reference to particular subject matters, subject matters are "known" in different ways through different methodologies. Hence, even though we must always keep in mind the appropriateness of particular methodologies to the particular subject matter before us, we cannot figure out ahead of time, on a perfectly sound basis, what methodology is appropriate. Nor can we claim that political knowledge "stands above" methodology even though the former may "trump" the latter in impor-

tance. Instead, we must assume both a mutually determining relationship between methodology and subject matter, and fallibility with respect to both our own choice of methodology and our ranking of all methodologies together.

Not surprisingly, the ranking of various methodologies here is intellectually very difficult if not downright impossible as long as methodological appropriateness follows from, rather than precedes, the nature of the subject matter in question, e.g., politics. A subject matter like politics has many components, ranging from the statistics of voting to the cultural construction of political membership, all of which have potentially different "appropriate" methodologies, and I doubt very much that anyone could rank different aspects of politics as themselves more or less important than others without acknowledging his or her own methodological biases. (None of this of course precludes us from arguing very cogently that particular methodologies are wrong because, say, they do not do what they purport to do or because they are internally confused.)

Moreover, even if we could rank particular methodologies for use in a particular study, we could not do much with such a ranking in general. Among other things, we could not assume that because methodology X is better than methodology Y for the purposes of a particular study, all or even a majority of any one intellectual community should pursue that particular

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methodology, even in cases concerning the same subject matter. For, even if methodology Y is only 50% as effective as methodology X in the study of a particular subject matter, pursuing methodology Y alongside methodology X might well almost always be more useful than pursuing only methodology X overall, even with respect to the same subject matter, since presumably methodology Y will add a part of the picture that would not otherwise be seen.

The values of methodological rigor and knowledge themselves are even less open to ranking than particular methodologies are. While methodological rigor—whether it connotes either the content of a particular methodology and, say, sophistication, or the keeping of methodological rules and, say, integrity, precision, or purity—is important for a variety of reasons, it does not, if we put knowledge of subject matter first, trump all else. Indeed, it always needs to be balanced with new discoveries or important insights (both of which may be later studied, elaborated on, or proven with greater "rigor"). Not surprisingly, we need to be particularly careful here when it comes to new fields, i.e., fields whose subject matter is new to us, or to some of us, whether it be the study of transitional justice in post-Communist Eastern Europe, family politics, or gay, lesbian and bisexual studies. In these cases, we may lose important knowledge if we insist on the same methodological rigor as we do in fields in which scholars have been studying the same subject matter, in the same way, for decades or more.

What about the question of methodological distribution? Even if we are satisfied with our own claims about the value of particular methodologies, we cannot assume that we have answered the question of methodological distribution by making these claims, since the question of methodological distribution is a matter of figuring out both how to open up intellectual possibilities

and how to organize a group of scholars so that they can be intellectually productive. Currently, many in the profession assume that the organization of a discipline should rest solely on our own opinions about valuable models of intellectual inquiry, or, in other words, that we should organize departments solely on the basis of our sense of what disciplines are right. But, as I suggest very briefly here, even our best arguments for a particular methodology rest in part on our own, methodologically loaded, understanding of the subject matter in question. Hence, we cannot be convinced of their value for all.

Finally, as even Pierce, Dewey, and other early "methodologists" realized, the question of how to organize a community of inquirers productively is not completely independent of social and political considerations. Indeed, the organization of such a community requires understanding, among other things, the role of tolerance, minority rights, and inclusiveness in the bringing together of inquirers who take different subject matters seriously, as well as the nature of group dynamics in general. Moreover, it does so even if the stated goal is purely intellectual, i.e., the pursuit of knowledge, rather than also that of empowering particular individuals who, say, because of their gender or cultural background, prefer methodologies other than those that now prevail in the majority of political science departments as now organized.