

In Defense of Diverse Forms of Knowledge

The question, “What kind of political science would you like to see in the next 10 years?” raises several problems: Should I consult my self-serving or my communitarian self in framing an answer? Should I say what practices I would prefer? Or should I recommend what directions the profession should take? More generally, should we be talking about the organization of political science? Or should we refer to the profession’s current epistemological conundrums? In his *Science as a Vocation*, Max Weber first addresses the structure and economic incentives of German university careers, then turns to more philosophical questions: What is “science”? What meanings and usages does “science” convey? What questions can it answer? (Answer: it cannot tell us how to live.) Is it cumulative? Or is Thomas Kuhn right about the noncumulative nature of scientific revolutions? Focusing on the epistemological issues, I’ll try to avoid the monopolistic question, “What direction should the profession take?” in favor of the pluralist question, “What variety of knowledge regimes would I like the profession to enable?”

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I’d like to imagine an APSA that was called the American Political *Studies* Association, leaving open the question of science. Of course science could mean the equivalent of the inclusive German noun, *Wissenschaft*, which carries the cultural baggage of rigorous and systematized knowledge regimes without implying the particular method of seventeenth-century natural sciences. But in its American context and in this historical moment, science most often conveys enthusiasm about applying the methods and perspectives of the deductive, mathematical, physical sciences to the social sciences. It is a transfer to which many of my colleagues are not committed. I am myself committed only with a series of modifications that I won’t elaborate here.

With Rogers Smith, I imagine a study of governance and politics driven by problems rather than methods.

With many of my colleagues in American institutional studies I would like to supplement American social science’s insistent presentism with the causal power and meaning frames history supplies.

With Russell Hardin, I’d like departments and an APSA organizational culture friendly to disciplinary border crossers, border transgressors, although I may go a little farther than Russell has in mind.

I’d like a profession hospitable to women and minorities, not so much for their representational claims but for their effect on knowledge regimes, on questions asked and categories constructed.

I’d like a less ethnocentric profession, more receptive to the rest beyond the west, again not for their representational claims but because of the intellectual routine-busting, normal-paradigm-breaking effect of cultural differences and other forms of life.

When I speak of the importance of problems as the driving mechanism, I don’t mean issues stripped of their context and their multiple meaning frames. Actors don’t always understand each other’s motivations, and frequently misperceive the other and her context. Actors often offer self-contradictory articulations of their interests, and alternate between impulsiveness and intentionality; they execute remedies that produce unanticipated consequences. The result is that I suspect abstraction and parsimony, preferring local and personal knowledge, thick description and complexity to capture the frequent irrationality of causality.

Let me elaborate. I try to imagine a science and an association that is safe for intellectual border crossers, that does not draw too narrow the circumference line of the discipline and makes its perimeter walls permeable. Border crossing supports innovation and creativity. People who work on the border are apt to acquire a conceptual creole. If they are unlucky, that creole may end up being ignored as a deviation, an imperfect dialect, of true speech. But if they are lucky, it may win recognition as a new language, a fresh perspective at least and a whole methodology at most.

I would like to see a political science in which words such as, “She’s a historian,” “He’s a journalist,” and “That’s an anecdote,” do not carry a negative valence, but designate a valid methodological choice. “Historian” would refer instead to scholars who include the diachronic in their explanations of causality; “journalist” to writers concerned with normative issues that matter to communities and politics. “Anecdotes” are the bearers of metaphors and narratives that explain as well as represent and illustrate wider realities.

When I imagine a political science that has room for a strong historical dimension, I have in mind approaches that counter or supplement the pervasive presentism of much of the discipline. By historical dimension I don’t mean using history as a passive mother lode to be mined for exemplars of universal verities. What I have in mind are particularities that illustrate the heterogeneity and complexity of the human experience. Historical analysis and comparison

help us to denaturalize our own experience and to naturalize ways of organizing truth or forming institutions that seem unfamiliar, thereby refreshing and invigorating our institutional and normative imagination. History may help us revisit the paths not taken and imagine alternative forms of life. It suggests, for example, that the interaction of sovereign nation-states is a recent sport in the vastness of history, not an eternal verity but a time-bound construction that may be overwhelmed by global processes.

My preference for border crossing arises from my interest in a particular kind of comparative politics. My choice of direction in political science was shaped by a historical moment—decolonization after World War II, starting with Indian independence in 1947. The moment opened up untrodden ground in the politics of what were called, in the context of the cold war positioning of the 1950s, third world countries. My particular ground was Indian politics. This led me in the direction of a certain kind of teaching and research.

You can't teach a class on Indian politics at an American college or university the way you can teach a class on American politics. Even in this day of diminished rigor in American high schools, you can assume that most students have heard of Thomas Jefferson and Martin Luther King; that they are aware that they live in an increasingly multiethnic society; know what is meant by the frontier and that it mattered; recognize the Fourth of July and Abraham Lincoln's birthday and the oval office are significant. Those who teach and write about American politics rely on the tacit knowledge that results from immersion in a home place. Those who teach and write about the comparative politics of countries beyond the Atlantic basin homeland cannot rely on tacit knowledge and often have to confront disorienting stereotypes of the distant other.

Teaching Indian politics, or Southeast Asian agrarian relations, or the ideologies or economies of East Asian, African, or Middle East countries entices you into border crossings that engage the knowledge and methods of anthropology, sociology, and history. Bob Jervis emphasizes that one reason political scientists have low impact on the policy world and lay publics is problems of communication. The most important single form of communica-

tion that we as political scientists engage in is shaped more by generalists than specialists, by the men and women who teach political science to small liberal arts college classes or classes in huge amphitheatres at state universities. Our impact as teachers of political science at both graduate and undergraduate levels

may be greater and more lasting than in the policy arenas on which Jervis focuses. It is to advance that form of communication and its impact that comparativists who teach Indian or Middle Eastern politics are obliged to become disciplinary polymaths.

There are more reasons for border crossing. Field research in locales with different cultures and languages poses difficult communications problems. How do you suitably translate the concept, relationship, or identity marker that you

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seek to measure to confirm or disconfirm a hypothesis? The hypothesis may have developed out of Western social or political theory; the concept wears a western costume. By translation I refer not merely to the formal linguistic act of equating words across two languages; I refer to the problem of conceptual equivalence. How does one translate into Hindi, Korean, or Arabic concepts such as community, civicness, association, loyalty, or commitment while conveying the subtle transformation in meaning wrought by the concept's new cultural location? The problem is severe in the case of cross-national surveys designed to construct global data sets. A concept such as

association, for example, has acquired heavy cultural baggage on its Toquevillian journey through France, England, and America. Few concepts travel well because few are transparently commensurable. Meanings need to be culturally contextualized by scholarship before a concept is let loose for the heady sport of cross-national comparison. Such contextualizing requires the devices of participant observancy and exegesis, native to anthropology and cultural studies. Hence the attractions of border crossing.

Some comparativists think the task of cross-cultural comparison is more straightforward. To paraphrase Richard Boone's view of his gun: have concept, will travel. My formulation of the challenge to comparativists is not shared by those who believe universal categories cutting across cultures are relatively unproblematic.

I said I would like to see a profession that is women and minority friendly—not just for purposes of rainbow coalition



building but because political science knowledge will profit from the varied perspectives women and minorities produce. Women and minorities themselves are not homogeneous categories and do not generate homogeneous voices. Even so, as generic categories they occupy either subaltern positions or alternative cultural spaces or both. Their perspectives from below or outside have shaped different kinds of knowledge than that produced by established or hegemonic social groups in the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries. Many of the strategies of evidence and argument used in constructivist versions of identity politics issue from these sources.

My position with respect to the relationship between women and minorities and knowledge regimes suggests that I accept the Mannheimian or Foucauldian position that power shapes how and what we do. I do, to an extent. In that part of the profession where I spend most of my time, the comparative politics of non-Western areas, Edward Said, or at least the early Edward Said, argued that Orientalist knowledge—the knowledge the West developed as it cast its gaze upon the East—had been compromised by its imperial past, contaminated by its power relations to the East. By contrast, the eyes of the East are said to be without scales as it gazes upon itself. Its knowledge of itself somehow escapes mediation. Similarly, in the name of authenticity, some American social scientists would hold that you must be an African American to write about African Americans, a Latino to write about Latinos.

I hold to a qualified version of the arguments about power, authenticity, and knowledge regimes. I do not take the view, heatedly urged by some writers on multiculturalism and identity politics, that you must be a witch to write about witches.

First, I assume that the technical nature of good empirical data and the interpretations it enables have some autonomy of the researcher's power and identity situation. The researcher is influenced, not fully determined. The disciplinary epistemology in which data is produced and certified provides standards of research that may function as a counterforce to the interests generated by power.

Another reason you don't have to be a witch to study witches, or a woman to study women, is that good scholars are infiltrated by the subject of investigation. Empathy and imagination enables them to enter into the lives of those they study. Scholars often select their subjects because of explicit or implicit affinity. Part of being a card-carrying area scholar, or student of women or of Latinos, is that your epistemic stance is reshaped by the culture on which you work. That is, the non-witches who study witches may have begun with some affinity for the qualities of witches. Such affinities may be further strengthened by the experience of research. Those who take a determinedly deductive and a priori view of explanation by bringing their categories ready-made, and who wear earplugs to assure that noise from the field will not disrupt them, can make themselves immune.

I began by arguing that there are intellectual as much as representative justifications for having a discipline friendly to women and minorities, and that different locations in the power structure produce different perspectives. Despite the qualifications I have just rehearsed, I still feel that a political science that wants to produce valid knowledge needs many knowledge regimes, and the different voices that women and minorities are bringing.