

Problems and Methods in the Study of Politics

Ian Shapiro, Rogers M. Smith and Tarek E. Masoud, eds.

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This important volume recounts a meeting of some of the best minds in political science, but, in the end, it is a meeting in the physical sense (as the volume comes out of a conference held at Yale in 2002) and not really in any intellectual sense. The ostensible goal of the volume is to proffer answers to what the editors call “a fundamental question about the proper place of problems and methods in the study of politics.... Which should political scientists choose first, a problem or a method?” (1). Unfortunately, a good many of the contributors to the volume ask whether this is a question at all. Perhaps unsurprisingly, most of those who reject the question do not have objections to the increased technical and mathematical nature of modern political science. And, equally unsurprising, those who suggest that method has too often come before problem are those who have earlier, and often eloquently, bemoaned the rise of rational choice theory and econometric applications. As an intellectual rapprochement, the work fails. It rather resembles a dinner of extended family, where long-held differences and grievances are kept just under the breath, but as a collection of essays by leading scholars which consider the methodologies and epistemologies of political science, the volume is a smashing success.

The work book is divided into three more or less even sections. The first addresses the “problem-method” divide. Ian Shapiro rehashes familiar arguments about the pursuit of confirmatory cases by method-driven scholars. However, ten years on from *Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), he now does it with both more suppleness and a clearer picture of what a problem-driven political science would actually look like. Rogers Smith goes Shapiro one further by arguing that not only is political science overwrought with method-driven cases, but that the cases selected are outdated and irrelevant to the modern problems we should confront.

In my view, the most compelling chapter in the opening section is John Ferejohn’s “Internal and external explanation.” Internal explanation is the uncovering of the intentions which underlie observed action. External explanation is the desire to elucidate the causal relationships of observed actions. The first forgoes cause for justification, while the second forgoes intention for cause. The unique offer of rational choice, Ferejohn argues, is that it bridges the two explanations by providing a fulsome account of the role of norms in influencing human agency, while not ignoring the external causal processes which shape those norms and the actions taken in the face of them. It is a subtle and coherent case for rational choice, and dovetails nicely into the next section, titled “Redeeming Rational Choice Theory?”

This section is highlighted by two essays. The first is by Gary Cox, the noted voting and elections scholar. “Lies, damn lies, and rational choice analyses,” makes a wholly compelling argument by first demonstrating that nearly all scholars use some variant of a rational actor assumption. He then demonstrates that what sets rational choice apart is its use of game theory as a method, a use which Cox equates to the use of econometrics in observational research. The second, by Margaret Levi, highlights the method of “analytical narratives,” which, she argues, are something of the best of both methodological worlds.

The third section addresses “Possibilities for Pluralism and Convergence.” It is a strange title, given the first essay, which I think to be one of the most important in political science methodology. In “The illusion of learning from observational research,” Green, Gerber and Kaplan throw down a gauntlet, demonstrating

that observational research is wrought with a vexing uncertainty which probably cannot be overcome. Experimentation should take its place.

Three other chapters are of particular note. William Connolly persuasively argues that methodological choices are guided by faith as much as by suitability. Rudra Sil gives a good picture of what this pluralism would look like in practice. The final chapter of the section (and the book) is an account of a roundtable discussion between Robert Dahl, Truman Bewely, Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, and John Mearshemier. It is a meeting of giants.

There is much more in this volume than can be justly reviewed. But what is clearly wanting is any measurable closing of the problem-method divide. One always runs the risk of taking an analogy too far but, given that this volume is dedicated to Gabriel Almond, let me return to the analogy of the dinner table. *Problems and Methods in the Study of Politics* demonstrates that it need not be, as Almond suggested, that political scientists are set to eat apart. Just do not expect there to be any resolution to who slighted whom at a wedding years earlier, to whom an apology is owed and when it should be forthcoming. We are just too big and too complex a family.

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L'action politique des mouvements sociaux d'aujourd'hui : Le déclin du politique comme procès de politisation?

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Le constat d'une fracture du rapport entre l'électorat et les grands partis politiques n'est plus à faire. Des analyses sociopolitiques calculent les taux d'abstention au vote et les expliquent par les désarticulations entre les aspirations des électeurs/électorales et les politiques d'orientation néolibérale adoptées récemment par les partis au pouvoir (Sommier, *Le renouveau des mouvements contestataires à l'heure de la mondialisation*, 2003). On parle de « désenchantement » démocratique (Perrineau, *Le désenchantement démocratique*, 2003). Ce contexte incite d'aucuns à parler de « dépolitisation » d'un électorat qui se tournerait vers les mouvements sociaux afin de trouver une issue à ce marasme. Est-ce la fin de la politique traditionnelle ou un nouveau départ?

Voilà une des questions soulevées par Serge Denis dans son dernier essai. Professeur titulaire et directeur de l'École d'études politiques de l'Université d'Ottawa, Serge Denis se préoccupe particulièrement du mouvement ouvrier en Occident (*Social-démocratie et mouvements ouvriers : la fin de l'histoire ?*) ainsi que de la situation de la social-démocratie et de la gauche au Canada. Dans *L'action politique des mouvements sociaux d'aujourd'hui : Le déclin du politique comme procès de politisation?*, il se propose de démontrer que le contexte général de dépolitisation ouvre une brèche dans la politique qui permettrait d'accéder à une *repolitisation* de ce champ par de nouveaux acteurs. Aux nouveaux mouvements sociaux (NMS) et au mouvement ouvrier (MO) de se saisir de cette avenue et de passer à l'action politique. L'ouvrage présente quelques projections des moyens possibles afin d'arriver à cette fin. Bien que ce passage crucial soit perçu par l'auteur comme étant un aboutissement historique logique – voire inéluctable – il reste que cette transition est loin d'être accomplie.

L'essai de Serge Denis se lit comme un plaidoyer pour une prise en charge de la responsabilité politique des NMS. Les argumentations sont épurées pour laisser place à la description de différentes avenues possibles dans un avenir plus ou moins proche pour les NMS et le MO. L'auteur fait d'abord le point de la situation actuelle des