

III. The Synthesis - Governing and the Real World

We have noted how governing is studied and taught in political science departments, and that is all well and good. After all, this book is most likely being used in a college or university course that introduces you to politics, government, and public policy. However, ours is just one source of knowledge about the subject. There are also the valuable perspectives of, scholars in other disciplines who study governing, the interdisciplinary scholars who use tools from many disciplines, and the political practitioners who work in politics, government, or public policy. In the “real world,” our field of study is not so cut and dry that looking at the political science community alone will suffice. We must include the work of other colleagues in our survey of the field.

A. Cross-disciplinary Research

Not everyone who is interest in governing works or studies in a political science department. We have academic colleagues in other disciplines that make significant contributions to our knowledge about politics, government, and public policy. There are also talented people who work and study in what are called interdisciplinary programs. Whether our colleagues are in sociology or women’s studies, we should not interpret their preference for another style of study as placing them outside of our circle of professional allies and collaborators. They have special contributions to make.

1. Political Sociology. There are noted political scientists who are interested in *socialization*, the process by which each generation passes on its civic knowledge and political values to successor generations. We care about this important aspect of politics despite the fact that it is the sociologist and not the political scientist who is expert on social institutions like the family. Fortunately, there are specialists within sociology who share our interest in political life.

Human society has many institutions such as the family, churches, work groups, and of course governments. In a sense, political science has chosen to break out one set of human institutions, label them the public sector, and study them intensively. Of course, other aspects of human society like child rearing have political implications, hence the study of political socialization. And yet we need the broad scope of the political sociologist if we are to understand and appreciate the social context within which politics, government, and public policy operate. Seymour Martin Lipset's *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*, (1996) and Robert Bellah et al, *Habits of the Heart* (1985) illustrate the rich vein of politically relevant scholarship that sociology has uncovered for us. There are compelling reasons why political scientists and political science students should read the relevant works of political sociologists.

2. Political Psychology. Another set of scholarly issues involves the study of the human mind. People make political decisions using the same physiological and chemical processes that they use to buy a home or drive a car.

We do not have special organs or chemicals that process political information. We therefore need the expertise and creativity of psychologists to study how people think about politics.

The political psychology tradition is a rich one. Harold Lasswell wrote on the workings of political propaganda in the 1920s. The groundbreaking work *The Authoritarian Personality* by Theodore Adorno et al (1950) shed light on the Fascist mind set that plunged the planet into World War II. And Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba surveyed comparative political attitudes in the 1960s. Political scientists and political science students have benefited from these and other effort to help us understand how people mentally relate to politics. The psychosocial studies have served as a foundation for our knowledge of political culture, a pivotal notion for modern political science.

3. Political Anthropology. Anthropologists are the social science specialists in the area of human culture. *Political culture* is the indigenous set of learned *mores* – or what Bellah would call “habits of the heart” – that a people bring to their practice of governing. Anthropologists consider the peoples’ relation to the land, their history, arts, language, and god(s) in trying to describe the beliefs and patterns of behavior that are core to a culture. Political culture is simply one set of orientations, the set pertaining to politics, government, and public policy.

The selection and socialization of traditional leaders has been a subject of anthropological study since publication of Franz Boaz’ study of indigenous

Northern Pacific peoples at the beginning of the 20th Century and Margaret Mead's work in the South Pacific in the 1930s and 1940s. Important work has been done trying to understand political organization in the Mesoamerican cultures of the Mayas, Aztecs, and Incas. And scholars from the less nonindustrialized countries have studied their traditional cultures for clues about how to organize their politics along non-Western lines. The anthropologist and historian Gilberto Freyre's *The Masters and the Slaves* (1933) and *New World in the Tropics* (1959) had a significant influence on writers of social science and social history. We can learn a great deal about the contemporary and ancient human experience with governing from studying the work of the political anthropologists.

Sociology, psychology, and anthropology are separate and distinctive disciplines unto themselves. They each have their own research paradigms, scholarly publications, and conceptual models. They certainly do not need our permission as political scientists to study the aspects of their work that touches on governing. We would best be served by not being territorial or possessive about our subject matter. Rather, we can benefit from reading each other's contributions to knowledge about our shared interests.

B. Interdisciplinary Studies

Just as it is the case that not everyone interested in governing wants to work in the same discipline, others do not wish to work alone. Rather, they

prefer to teach and study in academic programs that are *interdisciplinary*, i.e., that bring scholars together from several disciplines. Members of the interdisciplinary project or program of study share a focus rather than a method. They seek *synergy*, the ability to stimulate new creative insights through collaboration. Ultimately, the interdisciplinarians may choose to offer their own interdisciplinary courses and degrees, form their own professional associations, host stand alone regional and national conferences, publish their own interdisciplinary journals, and make connections with people in both the traditional disciplines and fused disciplines around the world.

1. Ethnic Studies. Historically, the social sciences either ignored racial minorities or treated them with disdain. People of color were not viewed objectively but rather had to endure the insulting or patronizing stereotypes that European and white American scholars projected on them. It is therefore not surprising that historically black colleges and the small pockets of minority faculty members and students in predominantly white institutions have sought a measure of separation. Black studies programs, Latino studies programs, and other academic organizations based on ethnicity have developed in an effort to understand people within their own, non-European context. In terms of political science, they seek to give voice to a more complete and objective perspective on how different ethnic groups perceive governing.

Ethnic studies programs are often cross-disciplinary and/or interdisciplinary studies. They pool the resources of minority faculty members

and thereby enjoy the many benefits of collaboration that we have noted above. Together, the faculty members also are more enabled as advocates for ethnic studies. Colleges and universities often support these programs and assist them attract donor funding, research grants, specialized journals, and the other accoutrements of academic organization. Students may take some courses in such a program or choose to major in it where that option exists.

2. Women's Studies. The same logic that led to the creation of ethnic studies programs has resulted in the founding of women's studies programs. Women scholars and women research subjects were often not treated fairly by a political science profession dominated by European and white American males. In response, women in our field have brought the insights of feminist scholarship to the study of political science. Removing the research blinders to seeing the role of women in governing plus nudging the discipline toward liberation from sexist language, models, and stereotypes offer important new avenues of exploration.

Women's studies bring scholars from different disciplines together. They represent academic interests from linguistics to literature to the social sciences. Women's studies programs on college and university campuses typically have their own coordinators, offer courses in a variety of departments, and sponsor majors and minors in gender studies. Of course, not all of the students who take advantage of these opportunities are women. Male students often can benefit from the insights of feminist scholarship, and they sometimes even recognize the

fact. Women's studies programs are giving voice to important new perspectives and opening up the profession to greater sensitivity and creativity.

3. International Studies. We no longer live in an insular world. Events in one part of the world typically have profound effects half way around the globe. Political science therefore has paid increasing attention to international affairs and it has internationalized many of the fields that once were thought of in purely domestic terms.

Many sociologists, economists, geographers, linguists, and literary scholars share our interest in international studies. A truly cosmopolitan study could hardly be parochial in its outlook and methods. Instead, we often work in cross-disciplinary teams under the interdisciplinary banner of "international studies."

International studies programs operate under a number of different organizational arrangements. Some political science departments have incorporated new language into their titles and have become departments of "politics and international studies." Other colleges and universities have created interdisciplinary international studies programs with their own stand-alone courses and degree programs. Many interesting activities such as the Model United Nations and the Model Organization for African Unity simulations are often associated with these programs. Ultimately, the world may become small enough that all courses of study are international in scope. But until that time,

international studies programs synthesize many interesting and valuable perspectives on public affairs.

C. Praxis - The Unity of Theory and Practice

There is an interesting concept called *praxis* that has been studied and used as methodology by the Critical Theorists. The person seeking *praxis* juxtaposes theory on the one hand and practical experience on the other when considering a particular issue in politics, government, or public policy. A solid understanding of the issue requires that one perceive its theoretical meaning *and* its practical implications. The two are not in competition with one another. In fact, they represent a kind of completeness or unity. Neither the academic scholar part of our mind nor the practical political part of our mind working in isolation can appreciate an issue's real significance. A contemporary Chinese saying suggests, "We must learn to walk on both legs."

1. Practical Politics. The skills of the person who studies governing and those of the person who actually plays the game are quite different. You should therefore not be surprised to learn that politicians are not always political scholars, and political scholars are even more rarely politicians. Most politicians are people who crave the action of moving in governing circles. On the other hand, many political scientists find politics, government, and/or public policy fascinating but do not yearn to be a player themselves. So, whose knowledge is more reliable? Should we trust the musings of political pundits, or should we

pour over the tomes of scholars' works? Or is there a middle ground – a form of praxis -- where academic political scientists can benefit from a measure of practical experience without being seduced by it?

Political scientists often interview political leaders, study their correspondence, and otherwise try to place themselves “in the shoes” of those who govern. Some political scientists also do contract work such as surveys and policy analyses for politicians, governments, or policy advocates. Political science students are encouraged to take internships in non-profit organizations and government agencies. Others are active in campus politics. Moreover, both professors and students have at least some opportunities to experience politics firsthand.

It would be odd if we all wanted to study governing but had no empathy for the practitioners. Although we should not be apologists for politicians, we will be expected to describe and interpret governing to others. How does it feel to be under constant media scrutiny? Why do legislators feel torn between interest group constituents and the average voter/taxpayer constituents back home? What must it be like to sit on a constitutional court and hand out unpopular decisions? It is hard for the totally inexperienced person to answer such questions. Along the way to wisdom about governing, we need to balance our “book knowledge” with some practical experiences.

2. Think Tanks. Not all political scientists and political science graduates work in government. And obviously they do not all stay in universities. Instead,

some of us find our way into professional research or advocacy careers. One might call this broad range of private organizations *think tanks*, professional policy study organizations that are funded by government or interest group grants, sales of research products, or membership dues and donations.

Some employees of think tanks are former government officials who have retired – or been retired by the voters – from public service. Others are applied researchers or policy advocates who have had some significant academic training but prefer private employment. The stock and trade of think tanks is expertise; they deal in highly specialized information. Who would be expected to know more about the needs of the learning disabled than would the National Association for Mental Retardation? Should we not turn to the International Red Cross for worldwide data on disaster relief? Of course these organizations advocate certain policies in addition to providing information. But the political scientists and the political science graduates on their payrolls would be especially qualified to help in the analytic, think tank work of the group. Again, we see the unity of theory and practice at work, but this time in careers that are neither practitioner nor academic roles.

Working for an organization that does advocacy as well as social science raises questions about objectivity. Can we be objective in understanding society's problems while being committed to solving them? Can we define the problem while trying to be a part of the solution? These are by no means easy questions to answer. And yet many of us come to political science because we

care about environmental protection or social justice or family values. If we are only “hired guns” who are expected to justify group positions, then we may have professionally prostituted ourselves. But if our think tank masters or clients can live with and learn from our hard-nosed realism, then maybe we can be content with our voices being only one part of the mix in decision-making. We are the “expert on tap, not on top.” Ultimately private organizations will take stands and “use” us and our work. Only professionals who can live with that should work in such environments.

Consider the practical and the scholarly, the action and the knowledge. Can we find praxis, a point of unity from which we can appreciate both? There is no greater challenge for the political scientist or political science graduate. Some of us will opt for become what we study; we will become players. Others of us will shun the “real world” and be content to study governing from without. And yet there are great psychic rewards for feeling comfortable with one foot in each of the two worlds. Perhaps we can function within the political world and not be absorbed into it. Maybe we can study politics, government, and public policy without being naive or irrelevant. Those who can find the balance often enjoy great success in the profession.

D. The Quest –Reality and Relevance

You are not surprised to learn that political science is a practical study that examines important real world phenomena. The news media blare out

information about one crisis after another. Entertainment media dramatize our search for peace, justice, and security. Even our music is loaded with political messages. For those of us who are tuned in, the world is obviously an often-troubled place. And when some people govern the lives of others, there are serious stakes involved. It is really important that we try to make sense out of politics, government, and public policy.