

## Political Science, Disciplinary History and Theoretical Pluralism: A Response to Almond and Eckstein

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. . . M. Comte is very well aware that the Method of a science is not the science itself.

John Stuart Mill

Whoever controls the interpretation of the past in our professional history writing has gone a long way toward controlling the future.

Gabriel Almond

In separate, recent articles appearing in *PS* (Almond 1988, Eckstein 1989) two well-known political scientists engage in a bit of disciplinary history in attempts to clear up what appears to some as a state of confusion resulting from the emerging theoretical pluralism that currently characterizes political science. For those like myself who believe, perhaps somewhat naively, that theoretical self-consciousness is inherently and instrumentally good for the discipline, this theoretical self-reflection is encouraging. It is, however, a little disconcerting how Almond and Eckstein distinguish among the various, often competing perspectives in political science and specifically how those perspectives which Almond and Eckstein characterize as soft and negative respectively are presented. I offer here a complementary synopsis of the history of the discipline, an account that I hope helps to keep open the dialogue among different perspectives (or, to use Professor Almond's metaphor, keeps open the conversation among guests seated at separate dining tables) to which both Almond and Eckstein are committed.

In his categorization of political science perspectives, Almond divides the discipline along two dimensions, a methodological one (soft, hard) and an ideological one (left, right). Almond admits that this taxonomy oversimplifies things a bit, but he suggests the distortion comes not from his characterizations of the extremes but from the fact that these separate schools receive a disproportionate amount of attention, somewhat like boorish dinner guests who

drown out those trying to carry on polite conversation. In the soft-left quadrant Almond places people such as critical theorists, Michael Walzer, as well as several orthodox Marxists such as Perry Anderson and Goran Therborn. Soft-leftism is distinguished by its identity of knowledge with ideology. According to Almond (1988, 830) soft-leftism claims that:

To understand and explain one must have a commitment to an outcome. There is no political science in the positivist sense, that is, a political science separable from ideological commitment. To separate it is a commitment to support the existing historically obsolescent order.

. . . What they all share is a common belief in the unity of theory and practice, in the impossibility of separating science and politics.

Methodologically, Eckstein divides social science into positive and negative theory in an attempt to enlighten "those who seem unfamiliar with the ideas of our founders" (1989, 77) and with what distinguishes positive theory from perspectives critical of positivism. Positive theory, going back to Comte, has embodied a commitment to rigorous, scientific understanding of the world, and, claims Eckstein, to the idea that this kind of understanding could contribute to the gradual, effective improvement of social life (1989, 77). It is to be distinguished from negative thought, which Eckstein characterizes as "theological," "metaphysical," "fetishistic," "mumbo-jumbo," and "pseudo-theoretical" (1989, 77) and therefore insufficient as a basis for political inquiry and social change. Although from this description it would appear that positivism is the more attractive of the two alternatives, Eckstein claims negativism remains in the form of "the continued appeals of high flown obscurantism in the social sciences" (1989, 77). Unfortunately, Eckstein does not specify which approaches fall under the rubric of obscurantism or

mumbo-jumbo. Undoubtedly the operationalization of the term 'obscurantist mumbo-jumbo' will help resolve this confusion.

The terms negative philosophy, negative thinking and negativism can, as Eckstein points out, be traced to Comte. However, their place in Comte's thought is a little different from what Eckstein describes. Comte first uses them to distinguish between two schools of thought opposed to Comte's positivist, scientific, organic reorganization and transformation of modern, and specifically French, society. The first perspective, held by defenders of the old regime, advocated returning to the old Catholic-feudal arrangements as a remedy for France's political and social disarray. The second perspective, negative philosophy, which Comte attributes to the people, is "conceived in a purely critical spirit, incapable of affording any basis for reorganization" (1975, 13). It assumes an essentially hostile relationship between government and society and hence it looks upon government with distrust. Among its faults are:

1. It is insufficiently ambitious in pursuing social change: "it mistakes mere modification of the old system for the system that has to be established" (Comte, 1975, 12).
2. It fails to understand that government must be the agent of organic transformation. Indeed, negative philosophy seeks to limit government to "the maintenance of public tranquility" (1975, 13).
3. It fails to understand the necessity of uniform thinking in an organic society (1975, 13 and *passim*).
4. It fails to understand that the "savants" of positivism are "alone competent to form the new organic doctrine, they are exclusively invested with the moral force essential to secure its recognition" (1975, 26-27).

Comte was convinced that this negative philosophy, "this dogma of the moral sovereignty of each individual" (1975, 14), had reached a dead-end. But the organic transformation he proposed was itself founded on the type of secular theological, organic view of society that some contemporary thinkers might refer to as mumbo-jumbo. This new society

would be led by a scientific priesthood of humanity with its own positivist catechism, positivist calendar, and approved positivist library (Comte, 1975, 461-476) to insure against the liberty of conscience and the malicious dogma of moral sovereignty of the individual.

Despite the subsequent sober rejection of Comte's positivist ideal of the good society (see Mill 1961, Hayek 1952), the vocabulary of negativism continued to be used by positivist social scientists and philosophers to characterize the alternatives to positivism. In his seminal work *Positivism* (1951), Richard von Mises uses the positivist-negativist dichotomy to distinguish between those approaches which continue to have faith in the capacity of reason to unveil the truth about the world and those alternatives which place some other capacity (faith, emotion, intuition) in a privileged position vis-à-vis reason. According to von Mises, examples of the latter are existentialism and Bergsonian vitalism (1951, 57-68).

Eventually, the idea that reason holds a privileged position vis-à-vis other forms of human experience in the pursuit of knowledge evolved within positivism into a methodological definition of reason and legitimate scientific inquiry (Eckstein, 1971, pp. 8-10). Within political science, of course, this methodological definition of the discipline signified the convergence of three separate but closely related movements: positivism, empiricism, and behavioralism. This methodologically defined reason was to provide the foundations for political inquiry.

However, just as the positivist (and foundationalist) triumph within political science was being proclaimed, the emergence of post-empiricist, post-positivist philosophy of science in the works of Thomas Kuhn (1962, 1977), Paul Feyerabend (1975), Stephen Toulmin (1961) and most recently Richard Rorty (1979) fueled a new critical perspective on any narrow methodological definition of the foundations of science and knowledge. This new perspective focused on a number of shortcomings it claimed to detect in contemporary positivism as well as other forms of foundationalism. Two of the more important concerned the

relationship between theory and evidence and the criteria by which competing theories are judged. First, it argued that the accepted claim that valid, reliable scientific theory corresponds to an independent reality is an oversimplification of the relationship between knowledge and the world it claims to represent. Rather, paradigms help to delimit what counts as phenomena (and therefore in need of explanation), what counts as natural (and not in need of explanation), and what counts as evidence. Since evidence is theory imbued, theory will be underdetermined by evidence. Consequently, falsification as a rock bottom test of the validity of a theory is brought into question. In addition, Kuhn's account of the growth of anomalies and how scientific theories succeed one another challenged the conventional wisdom that one theory succeeds another because it explains the world better.

The problems with the traditional philosophy of science raised by Kuhn and others led post-empiricist philosophers of science to a new account of science. Mary Hesse (1980, 170-171) summarizes the new view of the natural sciences that emerges from post-empiricism, changes that can be used to describe the post-empiricist, post-positivist view of the social sciences as well:

1. In natural science data are not detachable from theory, for what count as data are determined in light of theoretical interpretation, and the facts themselves have to be reconstructed in the light of interpretation.
2. In natural science theories are not models externally compared to nature in a hypothetico-deductive schema, they are the way the facts themselves are seen.
3. In natural science the lawlike relations asserted of experience are internal, because what counts as facts are constituted by what the theory says about their interrelations with one another.
4. The language of natural science is irreducibly metaphorical and inexact, and formalizable only at the cost of distortion of the historical dynamics of scientific development and of the imagina-

tive constructions in terms of which nature is interpreted by science.

5. Meanings in natural science are determined by theory; they are understood by theoretical coherence rather than by correspondence to fact.

This does not imply complete relativism or incommensurability between paradigms or competing theories. Nor does it denigrate reason. It does imply that we need to analyze the specific rationality that helps constitute a paradigm (Bernstein, 1983). In addition it suggests that the rationality and rhetorical dimensions of any particular paradigm or theory might be illuminated by the critical, self-conscious dialogue with competing theoretical perspectives. Moreover, it brings our attention to the rhetorical dimension of social inquiry (and science in general), challenging the dichotomy between reason and rhetoric. Finally, it suggests that there is an inherent evaluative dimension to social inquiry whether the social investigator considers himself committed to a specific social value or not. This does not mean that theory and practice or theory and activism are identical, nor that inquiry is subservient to some ideological goal. It does mean that social theorists need to become aware of the connections between theory and practice, explanation and evaluation.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, the post-empiricist, post-positivist view does not suggest that political scientists ought to refrain from working within the boundaries of a specific paradigm or theory. What it does suggest is that the study of political life cannot be defined in terms of any single method and that social science put greater emphasis on critically examining the foundations of both specific theories and the modern foundations of social and political science in general. These are among the tasks that Wolin (1972, 63) identifies with political theory, that Horkheimer (1972, 188-243) calls critical theory, and that Foucault (1972, 215-237), in a more radical form, intends by genealogy. If this post-empiricist, post-positivist, post-foundationalist account of inquiry is correct, or even

defensible, and if the implications sketched here are compelling, it suggests that the categorization of theoretical perspectives into hard and soft and the characterization of non-positivists as negativist (with its historical connotations) are misleading, are barriers to serious discussion between alternatives, and ought to be abandoned. For those terms are tied to a period when the rationality of political inquiry was considered to be less problematic and faith in the hard-positivist mode of analysis less questioned and less questionable.

The current potential for theoretical pluralism in political science holds the promise of lively debate among competing theoretical perspectives. The development of that theoretical pluralism would undoubtedly open up new terrain, generate new issues, and recast old ones. Political science would be impoverished if this potential were unintentionally short-circuited by the adherence to a vocabulary that inaccurately pre-defines the issues and falsely prejudices the alternatives.

### Note

1. I should point out here that post-empiricism does not necessarily entail a rejection

of foundations per se. But most post-empiricists/post-positivists have accepted post-foundationalism as well. Hence, I have focused on a version of post-empiricism/post-positivism that *does* have an anti-foundationalist thrust to it.

It should also be clear that on this reading post-positivism is incompatible with the orthodox versions of Marxism with which Almond groups it.

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## Rational Choice Theories and Politics: A Research Agenda and a Moral Question

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Recently, there has been much discussion in the profession about why rational choice theorists do what they do. Gabriel A. Almond (1988a, 835) is troubled by the way many of them preempt "the badge of professionalism and (by) their demotion of the rest of us to a prescientific status." David McKay (1988, 1054) wonders why there are so many rational choice theorists in the United States and not in Europe.

Authors such as Almond and McKay take the behavior of rational choice theorists as dependent variable, the phenomenon they wish to

explain. In the present essay I reverse the question, making the behavior of rational choice theorists my independent variable. I am interested in the question of how the teaching of rational choice theories to our students influences their political views and perhaps in the long term the political culture at large. This is a special question within a much broader problem, namely how teaching political science influences the political life of a country. My general point is that we need theories to explain how the teaching of our theories affect political reality. It is

not sufficient for political scientists to explain political life, we must also consider how these explanations, through our teaching, affect political life. But why focus on rational choice theories? As the essay will quickly reveal, its writing has been driven by a specific worry. But I hope that the example of rational choice theories will allow me to make a more general point.

Within rational choice theories my worry focuses on a specific subgroup whom I label, for the lack of a better term, hard-line rational choice theorists. They assume that voters and