Perestroika: For An Ecumenical Science of Politics

The Perestroika movement is a reaction against scholars who wish to turn the study of politics into what Thomas Kuhn called a "normal science." They seek to impose a consensus on epistemological and methodological questions in order to hasten scientific progress. This group of scholars comprises mainly rational choice theorists, formal modelers, and those who do exclusively quantitative research. I refer to them as advocates of "hard science."

There is no reason that deductive theorizing or quantitative research need generate this hegemonic ambition. The postmodernist hegemony of the left that plagues some literature and history departments may be just as suffocating as a hard-scientific hegemony of the right. The problem is the hegemonic project itself, which might serve any approach. To force conformity among us, some hard scientists have corrupted decisionmaking on hiring, promotion, curriculum, and publication. Many seek to indoctrinate graduate students instead of teaching them to think for themselves.

The Perestroika movement's first goal is to defeat this hegemonic project. To do this, we must highlight the limitations of hard-scientific research. But the movement does not aim to banish deductive theory or to put a new orthodoxy in its place. Even hard scientists who embrace intellectual pluralism might join the Perestroika movement.

Why must we stop the hegemonic project of hard science? First, because it threatens academic freedom. Many hard scientists are oblivious to the harm they are doing to young scholars. A recent job applicant to my university had superimposed an ill-fitting rational-choice template on her dissertation. Her advisors had warned her that without it she might not find work, get published, or even organize a thesis committee of the right people. Other graduate students have reported similar stories to the Perestroika forum. Ian Shapiro, Theda Skocpol, and Margaret Keck, among many others, have recently warned graduate students not to view their work instrumentally, urging them to shun what is fashionable and to rely on their own judgment. But what has become of our calling when we must admonish graduate students to write what they think? In the past, no such advice was necessary, but today's hard scientists have convinced many young people that they must sacrifice their intellectual integrity to enter this profession. The rest of us cannot ignore this situation. It is our profession, too, and we are responsible.

A second reason that we must blunt this hegemonic project is that normal science makes for bad science in the study of politics. Viewing its results, the irrationalities of this endeavor overshadow the anticipated progress. No objective person could read Donald Green and Ian Shapiro's *Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory* (Yale 1994) without seeing the dangers that arise when like-minded scholars avoid external scrutiny and interact only with one another. While these scholars supported the publication of each other's research, there was no one among them to point out that the emperor was, at best, scantily clad. The so-called New Institutionalism exemplifies the isolation of the hard-science group. Institutional variables, such as organizational and legal structures, have *always* been paramount in research on bureaucracy, party systems, regimes, and many other empirical subjects. The only way one could declare a New Institutionalism in political science in the mid-1980s is if one had read nothing outside the rational choice tradition for a very long time. This is the blindness that results when, as at the University of Rochester, virtually every job ad has sought a practitioner of rational choice.

A third reason to stop the hard-science project is that its scholarship is increasingly irrelevant to the normative and practical problems of real politics. Moral questions get little attention from today's hard scientists. They have pushed classical political philosophy to the margins of the curriculum. On the practical side, although hard science ostensibly addresses empirical questions, it inevitably degenerates into an unempirical exercise. Except in rare situations, the political action of real, living human beings is not susceptible of rational choice equilibria or any comparably rigorous theoretical formulations. The only way to develop hard-scientific theories of politics, then, is to extirpate the empirical. That is why the currency of hard science is formal modeling, deductive theory, and macro-level quantitative research that analyzes "facts" out of context. Instead of studying human beings as they are, many hard scientists turn their subjects into robots or abstractions, restricting their thoughts and actions for theoretical convenience. The resulting theories teach us as much about real politics as a book of chess openings might teach us about medieval society. When confronted with the lack of empirical support for their theories, hard scientists denounce those who don't understand that the task of social science is to "generalize." But generalize *about what?* Is it our task to understand politics, or to grapple with the logic of imaginary games?

The disparagement of empirical research has brought many evils. Hard scientists have sought to create an artificial division of labor between their self-anointed theoretical elite and area studies experts, who have long been the richest source of empirical political theory. (Never mind that hard science flourishes mainly in that most parochial of areas, American politics—it is truer to say that these folks study a politics practiced only in their minds, a nowhere politics, than it is to describe them as Americanists. The robots don't speak English; they speak Mathematics.) As hard scientists climb the ladder of abstraction, practical policy studies get less space in the curriculum and in top journals. And as empirical issues lose salience, a narrow technicism becomes the main criterion for judging research. It no longer matters whether scholarship enhances our comprehension of politics, but only if it fits into the current methodological or theoretical straitjacket.

Every approach has its uses and limitations. The point here is not that deductive theory or narrowly quantitative work is always inferior to the alternatives. Many political scientists use hard-scientific methods selectively to produce work free of

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the ills described above—in fact, many such scholars have backed the Perestroika movement. The point is that these approaches are not the panacea that their more dogmatic adherents claim them to be, and thus the effort to establish their hegemony is misguided.

Some may question the coupling of deductive theory and quantitative research under the one rubric of "hard science." Quantitative researchers do at least schematically empirical work, whereas most deductive theorists use empirical data only for anecdotal illustration. But it was radical quantifiers, those who analyze all questions with statistics, who first deformed the discipline in the name of hard science. It was they who popularized the study of politics outside of its historical and cultural setting, who made methodology into the core of graduate education while degrading political philosophy and foreign language study, and who spawned the trend toward method-driven rather than problem-driven research.

Thanks to the tyranny of hard science, graduate students today enter political science as if boarding a spaceship in midflight. They are clueless as to its origins because their training slights basic normative and epistemological questions. Their destination lies somewhere in the clouds of "theory." Following an education that emphasizes methodology and research design, the students earn their passports to the clouds in qualifying exams that grill them on multiple regression, most-different-systems analysis, and the small-n problem. Many of the exam-takers have yet to master the history, economics, social structure, and politics of even one "n," but why bother? They will exit the spaceship either at quantitative research, where the computer will provide all the n's they need, or at deductive theory, where they may generalize without any n's at all.

Numbers crunchers created this approach to political education; rational choice theorists thrive on it. Despite their differences, they share the daydream of a hard science of politics. That is why they have formed a ruling coalition in economics departments and aspire to do so in political science. The Perestroika movement thus parallels the movement for a "Post-Autistic Economics" (www.paecon.net), which similarly combats the extreme exponents of quantitative research and rational choice theory.

If the hegemony of hard science is what the Perestroika movement opposes, what vision of political research does it support? Against the flawed conception of normal science, we espouse the ideal of an *ecumenical science*. It is based on three principles: problem-driven research, methodological pluralism, and interdisciplinary inquiry. While normal science identifies itself by its method, ecumenical science will unite scholars of diverse methods and approaches around the study of substantive political problems. The problems include both normative and practical concerns, which we believe are inseparable. The two words "political science" have come to grate against one another under the regime of hard science. The compulsion to forge a grand, elegant scientific canon has produced theories of little relevance to real politics. For us, it is politics first, science second. Where science contributes to knowledge of politics, we embrace it. Where it does not, we have no use for it. We reject the hard-scientific fetish of theory for theory's sake. Good political scientists read history so as to know the limits of theory.

Methodological pluralism is our objective in all matters of hiring, curriculum, and publication. In an ecumenical science, approaches and methods will not be religious commitments but tools whose utility varies with the problem at hand. In our view, scholars who use the same approach or method to examine every political question are not thinking. Those who would impose one approach or method on the discipline are not allowing others to think. While encouraging the flexible use of scientific methods, we do not accept the hard-scientific view that good method is the sine qua non of good research. Even a cursory glance at the best political scholarship belies this notion. Depending on the research problem, good scholarship might demand rational normative discourse, a careful reading of history, knowledge of foreign languages, field work, a judicious examination of primary source materials, and many other elements besides appropriate methods. Even flexible methodology, then, does not guarantee positive results—it is but one aspect of good research.

The greatest task of an ecumenical science of politics is to remove the artificial barriers between disciplines that have long hindered the study of society. Specialization may befit the natural sciences, but their objects of study are distinct. The social sciences and humanities all claim the same object of study: the human being. We have carved up this whole being and removed the parts to our separate "disciplines," each of which pretends to explain actions of the whole person by drawing inferences from its part alone. But when people engage in political action, they do not leave their psychology, history, language, or religion behind. What scholars in other disciplines are learning about human beings is directly relevant to their politics. Already in the 1920s, José Ortega y Gasset bemoaned the lack of "encyclopedic moments" when scholars of society might integrate what they were learning in so many isolated compartments.

Political science once stood at the crossroads of history and philosophy and it has been the most eclectic social science. Restored to that pivotal position, it will be uniquely well situated to become the ecumenical science whose task it will be to reintegrate the study of human beings. The result will not be one or a few grand theories, but we can achieve integration on a more modest scale by assembling diverse groups of scholars to work on key political problems.

To put our three principles of problem-driven research, methodological pluralism, and interdisciplinary inquiry into practice, we must reform graduate education and forge a new relationship between political science and other fields of scholarship. What is to be done?

1. We must restore political philosophy to a central place in political studies so that the ends of political life once again become our common focus. Hard-scientific methodology has displaced political philosophy as the core requirement in the graduate curriculum. The result has been a narrow conception of "science" and the proliferation of research whose purpose is to test-drive some method or approach rather than to increase our knowledge of politics. (It is no wonder that undergraduate enrollments have plummeted in step with the hegemony of hard science.) The revitalization of political philosophy will unite us around a common normative discourse, and methodology

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will once again become a means, and not the end, of our work.

2. We must expand methodological training beyond the realms of deductive theory and quantitative research to encompass qualitative research methods.

3. We must pursue innovative strategies to reorganize research around the study of substantive problems. These might include the earmarking of faculty lines for subjects rather than subfields (the Yale model) or the temporary organization of faculty clusters around topics of novel interest or importance, such as gender and politics, immigration and civil rights, or politics and genetics. We should treat the standard subfields as administrative expedients, not as barriers to the creative organization of research.

4. As one more step towards reinvigorating problem-driven research, we must reverse the decline of policy studies. It will be disastrous for political science if policy research continues to migrate to schools of public administration in the way that practical economic studies have fled economics departments for the business schools. If one compares the size of economics departments and business schools in today's academy, the cost of reducing a social science to sterile theoretical endeavors is obvious.

5. We must revamp our professional associations and journals to emphasize political substance and catholicism with respect to methods and approaches. As the most prestigious outlet for political research, the *American Political Science Review* needs reform. On professional bodies, we must facilitate the full participation of women, ethnic minorities, foreign scholars, and the faculty of liberal arts colleges, all of whom have special contributions to make to the ecumenism we hope to foster.

6. We must renew our commitment to study the politics of different parts of the world. Cross-cultural comparisons may be the ideal basis for empirical political theory, but cross-cultural research is not acultural research. Comparative politics will become impossible if we ape economics in its repudiation of foreign area studies. We must stop the practice of allowing statistics courses to substitute for foreign language requirements in our graduate programs. Above all, we must increase our faculty with expertise on the non-Western world. We cannot allow research on non-Western areas to ebb and flow with the level of external funding, lest we revert to the dark ages when "politics" meant the politics of a few, rich, western nations.

7. We must promote interdisciplinary research, not just by singing its praises, but by educating the next generation of scholars to do it. As urged by the Gulbenkian Commission (*Open the Social Sciences*, Stanford 1996), we must promote graduate training that combines political science not only with the other social sciences and the humanities, but also with the physical sciences. We advocate the spread of joint degree programs and the practice of encouraging our Ph.D. students to earn master's degrees in other disciplines. The words *department* and *discipline* will be the least sacred entries in the ecumenical glossary. We advocate an "un-discipline-d" political science.

William Riker was fond of saying that political science was a sinking ship, and rational choice theory was the only tugboat that might bring it to port. It is truer to say that Riker's disciples have acted as pirates out to hijack political science to a rather barren island. Their piracy is doomed to failure. The study of politics will never become a normal science except at the point of a gun. The many interests involved in political life guarantee that every concept and every approach will be contested. Let us celebrate this diversity, not suppress it. It makes our academic community a more interesting place to live. It produces better scholarship than could any closed circle of true believers. And it may enable us to play a pivotal historical role by integrating once more the study of human beings in an ecumenical science of politics.

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Opening More Doors

I don't know Ronald Libby. But his letter to the editor in the June 2001 *PS* certainly speaks for me. I have been a member of APSA for nearly 10 years. I joined while studying for my M.A. in political science at The George Washington University. I was lucky to have studied under several excellent scholars like Jeff Henig. I loved reading about politics and political theory and evaluating what I learned in the classroom in terms of what I learned as a journalist covering state politics. Despite my enjoyable experience, I soon concluded that I could never pursue my doctorate and my dream of a teaching career in the field. The deeper I delved into the field the more I realized that political science, at least American politics, was all about numbers. While I thought politics was profoundly interesting, I found statistics and statistical analysis boring. I was no good at statistics (and had no interest in becoming more adept at the subject). As I talked to scholars at different schools, more than one professor told me that the key to mastering political science was understanding statistics. Another professor told me that it was possible to make it by learning just a little statistics, but acting like you knew a lot about the subject. But I could not tell a chi-square from a square dance.

Ronald Libby's views on the current state of scholarship, as illustrated by what is published in *APSR*, probably reflect the thoughts of thousands in the field. His statement that APSA has elevated "mindless number crunching to the realm of penultimate scholarship in the profession" is right on the mark. Political science has become nothing more than statistical analysis of volumes of data. Whether the analysis is correct depends largely, indeed often exclusively, on the researcher's understanding of statistics. And that is not what makes political science interesting or particularly helpful to society.

As Libby points out, this scholarly mindset has marginalized the field. He is absolutely correct. Policy makers, journalists, and informed citizens have no interest in what most

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of our modern political scientists have to say about politics. That alone should give everyone in the profession pause to. At the same time, I cannot help to think about how many people, like myself, with a real interest in teaching and writing about politics gave up because the thought of finding Pi values so that 1/2(xy) + 3/4(ty) – P = 2P-rq left them numb. By the way, the equation is gibberish; but few people would know that.

As a journalist and editorial writer I cover state tax and budget policy. Electoral, legislative, and interest group politics all shape state tax policy. For example, Jim Gilmore and Christine Todd Whitman rode tax issues to victory in their gubernatorial races. Direct democracy (e.g. Proposition 13) has changed the way politicians and the public think about taxes. Corporations press legislators for tax breaks with the promise of economic development and campaign contributions. And many interest groups, from veterans to senior citizens, lobby lawmakers for tax laws that benefit their members. No amount of statistical analysis could explain the complicated process of state tax politics. So it is not surprising that while politics is all encompassing in the field, political scientists are largely nonexistent—at least as far as policy makers and the press are concerned.

My hat's off to Professor Libby and others who believe that learning and knowing about politics is more than a game of numbers.

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State Tax Notes

Editor's Note
The following abstract was left out of the June 2001 issue of *PS*. The full article is available as part of the online symposium "Outside Money" via PS*Online*.

The 2000 Missouri Senate Race

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The Senate race in Missouri pitted incumbent Republican Senator John Ashcroft (first elected in 1994), against Democratic Governor Mel Carnahan. Missouri's Senate election began as a high-intensity race, but ended with the surprising election of a candidate who died in the course of the campaign. However, Missouri was an active place for interest group and party money, even after the death of Senate candidate Mel Carnahan (D).

Carnahan was killed in a plane crash three weeks before the election. At this time, TV ads pertaining to the Senate race from both the candidates and interest groups were pulled. Ashcroft suspended his campaign. With extensive media coverage, the state celebrated the career and reputation of the late governor.

Approximately one week later, the newly sworn-in Governor Roger Wilson announced that he would appoint the Governor's widow, Jean Carnahan, to the Senate should Carnahan win the majority of the votes. When Mrs. Carnahan announced she would accept the appointment, Ashcroft was forced into the difficult position of having to campaign against a widow. Ashcroft's ads changed, emphasizing his experience, an implicit contrast to Mrs. Carnahan. After her husband's death, Mrs. Carnahan aired only one sixty-second spot, paid for by his campaign fund, in which she urged voters to keep her husband's legacy alive.

As for interest group efforts in the Senate race, broadcast ads, mail and other efforts were halted or moved into other states or Missouri Congressional races. Democratic Party and interest group mail invoked the memory of Carnahan. Most Republican Party and interest group mail did not mention Carnahan after the crash.

Ultimately, Carnahan topped Ashcroft in a close election, with Carnahan winning 50.5 percent of the vote and Ashcroft 48.4 percent.

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