

First Things First in Methodology

The aborigine who sports a top hat while stirring a witching brew is laughable. But so is the primitive in the social sciences who caps himself with some odd or end of advanced technique.

Perhaps it is factor analysis or calculus, laboriously learned late in life. Or it may be a set of courses in scaling, testing, and questionnaire construction. Or it may be "methods of group observation," or "model-building," or the construction of index numbers, perhaps even game theory, econometrics, or sociometry. All of these are intended to bring, and certainly contribute something to, proficiency in the "new political science." Therefore, all too often, the ambitious, if callow, scholar leaps for the "new methodology."

Two troubles ensue. Political data do not and cannot lend themselves easily, and rarely lend themselves completely, to management by the new techniques. Also, more fundamental and more generally useful skills are left to chance attainment. Yet the major faults of political research, writing, and teaching begin with failures in the older and more universal methodology of social science.

In the first place, all students of government should be able to understand and use the concepts of epistemology and semantics. The meaning of meaning is a crucial question in the critique of world history; it is also important in the coining of questions in a political poll.

A great many more young sophisticates have read a text on statistical methods than have read Cohen and Nagel's *Introduction to Logic and Scientific Method*. Yet logic has a larger place in our science than statistics. For instance, the ability to translate from one classification system to another and to build new classifications is an essential skill. Often a classification can be statistically executed, but the statistics themselves are an evolution from logic.

Another vital area of political methodology is the choice of subjects to study and the creation of hypotheses about them. Here many behavioral scholars are weakest. They would be hard put to explain why they would choose to study one rather than another of any pair of subjects taken at random from the infinite population. By the same token, many political scientists and their students rely upon no explicit means of evaluating the relevance of data or of determining whether they are important or applicable in the context of a proposition. Nor can they form and mold hypotheses as tools of inquiry. They cannot even draft propositions of the "true-false" type (which are a better test of the examiner than of the person being tested).

Still other misfortunes come from our neglect of orderliness and style. If book publishers were not so polite or mercenary, they would boycott social scientists. Most publications read as if people were to be forced to read them (partly true), or to read them not at all (also true).

Surely there must be a department or college so bold as to insist upon its students acquiring these fundamental tools of political thought and research. We need a deep inquiry into the methodological aspirations, failures, and needs of political study, if we are to raise a superior new generation of experts on government. The study must begin at the beginning, must be idealistic, must go down into the grammar school and high school, where the social studies, no less than the natural studies, begin. Unless we appreciate how innocently savage are the minds of our adult graduate students in political science, we will continue to expect something great of them if they will "take a course or two in statistics." If we *do* appreciate their predicament, we can lay a solid methodological foundation for political science that will formally introduce the old techniques to the new, and unite them wholesomely.

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