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## Reality in Political Science

By ALAN WOLFE

If you were not one of them, you might think that political scientists follow political events, propose hypotheses designed to explain them, and collect data to test those hypotheses. Alas, or so argues Yale University's Ian Shapiro in his new book, *The Flight From Reality in the Human Sciences* (Princeton University Press, 2005), that is not always, not even often, the case. In most of the social sciences and humanities, but especially in political science, Shapiro writes, subject matter does not drive methodology; in all too many cases, method comes first, and subject matter is chosen to conform to it.

Shapiro is not alone in his critique of the discipline. Another new book — *Perestroika! The Raucous Rebellion in Political Science* (Yale University Press, 2005), edited by the University of California at Irvine's Kristen Renwick Monroe — discusses the spontaneous effort that, in 2000, began to criticize the discipline for its unreadable and irrelevant journals, closed leadership structure, and, as the anonymous e-mail message that launched the movement put it, domination by "poor game theorists."

If Shapiro and adherents of Perestroika are right, something is seriously amiss in the academic study of politics. How can a discipline presumably interested in understanding human behavior offer much insight if the real world of politics is treated as an afterthought?

It was not always thus. Leading political scientists of the post-World War II period typically anchored their research in political reality. V.O. Key Jr.'s *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (Knopf, 1949) was a classic in that regard; Key not only brought to life the sights and sounds of Alabama courthouses, he tied the South's peculiar political style to its preoccupation with race and dealt masterfully with the implications of one-party government for democratic rule.

Equally magisterial was Robert A. Dahl's *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City* (Yale University Press, 1961). In a case study of politics in New Haven, Conn., Dahl provided both a "thick description" of urban renewal and a major challenge to those who insisted that democracy was a sham because a "ruling class" made the major decisions. The American South no longer bears any resemblance to the one described by Key, yet his book remains in print and is widely used in college courses. Similarly the pluralism Dahl discovered in New Haven may no longer exist; even Dahl himself came to feel that American democracy was not as open to all as he had suggested. His book, however, is also still assigned across the country.

The discipline of political science today contains more than its fair share of scholars who, like Key and Dahl, put reality first; my personal short list would include, among others, John J. DiIulio, Jacob S. Hacker, Jennifer L. Hochschild, Jane J. Mansbridge, Robert D. Putnam, James C. Scott, Theda Skocpol, and James Q. Wilson. Yet as well known as those scholars may be outside the discipline, they tend not to publish their work in academic journals, which are more devoted to hypothesis testing and model building than to analyzing real-world political institutions; a search through JSTOR, an online archive, reveals that only one of them, Skocpol, published a substantive article — beyond reviews or, in Wilson's case, a presidential address to the association — in *The American Political Science Review*, the discipline's flagship journal, between 1990 and 2001.

Less well known to the public are political scientists like Bernard Grofman, Keith Krehbiel, and Peter C. Ordeshook. Between them, they published eight articles in the political-science journal between 1990 and 2001. They are proponents of rational-choice theory, an approach that owes much to economics. Assuming that human beings are purposeful creatures who try to maximize their utility in any given situation, rational-choice theorists show, for example, how congressmen behave to improve their chances for re-election, or how voters sort through the messages sent their way. To its adherents, the theory offers political science the opportunity to become a true science based on a universal understanding of human behavior and girded by the rigor that accompanies deductive reasoning and

mathematical formalism.

Sanford F. Schram disagrees. In his essay in Monroe's book, he argues that rational-choice theory misuses the idea of science for which it presumably speaks. Human beings, in his view, adapt to the local circumstances around them. Any science of behavior must avoid universal laws and paradigms borrowed from the natural sciences and emphasize the role of contingency and context in human affairs.

Shapiro is vehement on this point: "The scientific outlook requires a commitment to discovering what is actually going on in a given situation without prejudging what that is," he writes. Rational-choice theory already knows what it wants to prove. It is therefore "little more than thinly disguised curve-fitting"; the purpose of a typical rational-choice article is not to explain reality, but to find often-ingenious ways to twist reality to fit its predetermined assumptions.

A typical example of curve-fitting cited by Shapiro involves voting behavior. Given how little chance one voter has of influencing an election's outcome, it is irrational to vote. Yet many people vote anyway. The fact that they do suggests that rational calculation plays little role. Yet rational-choice theorists constantly look for calculable explanations of why people show up at the polls. Ordeshook, for example, along with William Riker, has argued that citizens feel a duty to vote, which they factor into their calculus. Shapiro sees little value in such speculation. A reality-driven science, in his view, would try to discover why some people vote and others do not. Only a methods-driven approach would instead debate what kinds of acts are rational and what kind are not.

But if rational-choice theory rarely makes good science, it has spread to many of the discipline's most prestigious doctoral programs. For the critics in the Perestroika movement, method-driven research is only part of the problem facing the discipline. *The American Political Science Review* is biased in favor of mathematically based scholarship, claim David S. Pion-Berlin and Dan Cleary in the Monroe volume. Graduate education too often insists on the superiority of the same techniques, other contributors say. Many charge that rigorous debate within the profession about what kind of

research is most appropriate has been hindered by the fact that the political-science association suffers from a lack of internal democracy.

Both the association and its journal have been changing, critics concede. The association now sponsors a new journal, *Perspectives on Politics*, that tries to deal with current issues in the real world, and some of the methodological bias in the *Review* has abated in recent years. Still, one comes away from Monroe's book with a lingering feeling that the success of rational-choice theory may have more to do with how rewards are offered and careers shaped than with philosophies of science and the validity of methodologies.

Although Shapiro's book deals primarily with debates over scientific method, it also focuses from time to time on mundane matters like careers. In a chapter called "Gross Concepts in Political Argument," Shapiro notes that political theorists of many persuasions, in ways not dissimilar from rational-choice adherents, try to fit all reality into one huge explanatory concept. Such efforts are open to criticism because reality is complicated and rarely can be so reduced. Yet political scientists thrive on the resulting disputes. "The endless opposition of gross concepts might not be designed to serve academic careers," Shapiro writes, "but we may say without overstatement that it is in our collective professional interest that there be the relatively autonomous discourse of political theory which endures mainly by feeding off its own controversies because we depend on it for our livelihood."

Putting reality first would not only make political science more interesting, it would also make it more scientific. There is, in Shapiro's view, nothing wrong with the ambition to predict (although, he quickly adds, one should not make a fetish out of it). Suppose, for example, we want to predict whether negotiations between historically hostile parties will produce an accord, or fail and result in war. Rather than search for universal laws, we are better off examining a concrete case — for example, the negotiations that brought Nelson Mandela to power in South Africa — and then seeing whether the conditions there are similar or different from those in, say, Northern Ireland or the Middle East. The real world contains a great deal of uncertainty, which makes perfect prediction

impossible. But it also offers enough regularity to permit modest generalization, especially if we are willing to acknowledge the possibility of error and to revise our expectations accordingly.

Political scientists are not that different from politicians, Shapiro concludes. Taking one grand idea and trying to stuff as much into it as you can — the reigning way of doing political science — bears an uncomfortable resemblance to developing a political ideology and interpreting everything in the world through it — the dominant way of doing politics. Perhaps both political scientists and politicians can learn something from Shapiro's thoughtful reflections on the state of his discipline.

Reality, in a word, is something of a tonic, as both Shapiro's and Monroe's books remind us; it tempers perfectionism, broadens understanding, and appreciates nuance. Someday politicians may decide that ideological warfare is not the best way to do politics, and may return to more traditional methods involving bipartisanship and compromise. If that happens, one can only hope that political scientists will decide to join them and go back to an era in which understanding reality was more important than advancing one's pet methodology.

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